

Peru: Fujimori cries electoral fraud – and unleashes torrent of racism

Claims of rightwing candidate, trailing Pedro Castillo in the polls, emboldens far right, who have vowed not to accept result



A Pedro Castillo supporter in Lima. With 100% of the official vote counted, leftist Castillo had 50.12% – and advantage of about 44,000 votes over his far-right rival.

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The prospect of the son of illiterate Andean peasants becoming president as his rival cries fraud has shaken Peru's entrenched class system and its fragile democracy, letting loose a torrent of racism in the bicentennial year of the country's independence.

With 100% of the official vote counted, leftist Pedro Castillo had 50.12% – and advantage of about 44,000 votes over his far-right rival Keiko Fujimori. But Fujimori has claimed fraud, challenging about 500,000 votes, calling for half to be annulled, and obliging officials at Peru's electoral board to reexamine ballots – despite the lack of evidence of wrongdoing.

Two weeks after the election, which national and international observers said was transparent, the stance of Keiko Fujimori – the daughter of jailed 1990s autocrat Alberto Fujimori – has emboldened the far right, who have vowed not to accept the election results.

In a move which illustrates the skewed playing field, Fujimori has recruited Lima's most expensive law firms to quash 200,000 votes, almost all from poor Andean regions which voted overwhelmingly for Castillo.

"The tension has reached a breaking point," said José Ragas, a Peruvian historian at Chile's Catholic University. "The Lima elite is not just trying to keep power – it's not just that they don't want to recognise the victory of Pedro Castillo – but they are trying to cancel the rural vote."

The election has unleashed expressions of racism that go beyond the discrimination against Japanese-descended Alberto Fujimori who took office in 1990 and Alejandro Toledo, a US-educated Andean, who governed Peru from 2001 to 2006.

In one ugly but not unusual case, the online news site Sudaca published a private text messages between middle-class white men in Lima who discussed how people from the highlands should "die of hunger" and called for the return of Alberto Fujimori's alleged forced sterilisations which mostly targeted indigenous women.

Other social media memes characterised Castillo as a donkey or said Andeans were too ignorant to be allowed to vote. They echo old "racist and classist attitudes ingrained in the national and social debate," said Ragas. But social media has given such comments a much bigger audience, he said.

Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, slammed such expressions of racial hatred. "I repudiate hate speech and discrimination in all its forms, as it is unacceptable in any democratic society," she said in a statement last week, as she called on Peruvians to accept the election result.

As officials at Peru's electoral board work overtime to reinspect the disputed ballots, social media and partisan news broadcasters have helped spread fake news stirring up the spectre of totalitarian rule, violence and even mass expropriations if Castillo is declared the winner amid rumblings of coup plots among the far-right.

Apparently inspired by Donald Trump's refusal to accept defeat at the US elections, Fujimori has led a string of marches against "fraud" telling supporters at one rally: "The election will be flipped, dear friends."

The three-time presidential candidate has already spent more than a year in pre-trial detention, accused of receiving more than \$17m in illegal campaign funds and heading a criminal organisation, and could face a 30-year jail term if convicted. She denies the allegations.

On Friday, Peru's interim president Francisco Sagasti slammed as "unacceptable" a letter signed by nearly a hundred retired military officers urging the armed forces not to recognise Castillo if he takes office. "They want to incite top commanders of the Army, Navy, and Air force to break the rule of law," he said in an address to the nation.

As tension – fanned by fake news – grows, José Miguel Vivanco, Executive Director for the Americas, at Human Rights Watch, called on "all Peruvians – especially the

candidates, the public servants and the members of the security forces” to “respect the electoral results which the authorities announce.”