

# Peru's Struggle for Justice and Equality

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My years of ministry in Peru changed my life. I have always said when you come to work in Peru, the Peruvian people will steal your heart, and they will never give it back. This is so true. How delighted I was then in January 2023 to be invited back to Peru to give some biblical and theological workshops for a number of weeks to local people.

Today, Peru is making international headlines due to the many protests and civil unrest that have gripped the country since December 2022. I am writing this short article which I hope will enable people to understand some of the issues confronting the people of Peru in their struggle for justice and equality at this critical time and about which I learned more in January.

Peru is a land of striking contrasts: natural beauty, diversity of peoples, cultures and natural resources. It is also a land of conflict, oppression and persecution, the roots of which stem from the time the country was colonized over 500 years ago. The country is highly centralised and inequality is rife. At times it may seem that the country is devoid of opportunity for ordinary people. Lima, the capital, is where most of the decision making takes place, but Lima is not Peru. Peru is probably the only country in the world where the last 5 presidents ended up in jail found guilty of either human rights abuses or corruption.

In early December 2022, the former president, Pedro Castillo, who was elected in 2021, was forced out of office after he attempted to temporarily suspend congress in an effort to avoid impeachment for "moral incapacity" – a charge stemming from multiple corruption allegations. He tried to leave the country but failed. He is now in prison in Lima, awaiting trial for an attempted coup and facing corruption charges.

Prior to becoming President, Pedro Castillo was the leader of a teacher's union in a poor rural part of Peru. The people were hoping that urgent problems afflicting the poor both in the high Andes and in coastal shanty towns, would be addressed. Issues such as racism, inequality, destructive mining practices, deforestation of the amazon region, abject poverty, educational reform, giving a voice to the rural people are some of the issues that needed to be addressed in the country. The hopes of the rural community rested on the first indigenous President. Unfortunately, this was not to be. Pedro Castillo has been replaced by the vice-President Dina Boluarte, his former running mate, a *campesina* and a member of his own party. The majority of the people throughout the country have refused to accept her as president as she has been appointed to the position.

The people are calling for new elections, both for President and members of the Congress. They are also calling for a new Peruvian constitution. As a result, protests have broken out across the country since December 2022 and are ongoing. These protests and demonstrations have led to roads being blocked and intermittently stalled several airports in the tourist cities of Cusco and Arequipa in Southern Peru. Tourism has dropped away with the "indefinite" closure of Machu Picchu. Violence has broken out during some of the most the persistent demonstrations in the south of the country and to date 60 people have lost their lives amid accusations that the police and army used excessive force. The people vary in ages between 14 – 62 years of age. One policeman lost his life. The single deadliest day of violence saw 17 deaths in the southern city of Juliaca, Puno. Demonstrators say they will not rest until "President" Dina Boluarte, steps down and early elections are called.

The Peruvian bishops during their AGM in January, issued a statement which drew criticism from the protestors, who felt the bishops did not understand the situation on the ground nor "feel their pain." Cardinal Pedro Barreto and Archbishop Carlos Castillo were perceived as being on the side of the new Government. Dina Boluarte, misquoted Cardinal Berreto, but unfortunately, he did not come out and challenge her. The Archbishop of Lima was photographed alongside Dina Boluarte. He was also criticised by many for remaining silent when the armed forces invaded his Alma Mater, San Marcos University in Lima, where protestors from the south of country were staying. The police arrested 200 people, mainly young students. The National Human Rights Coordinator has said that female students who were arrested were stripped naked and sexually mistreated while in captivity. Due to pressure from human rights organisations all but one of the protestors were released the following day. The net result is that for the majority of the people the bishops now have lost their independent voice, which was always well respected and well received by the Peruvian people.

In contrast, the Apostolic Nuncio Paolo Rocco Gualtieri, during his greeting to President Dina Boluarte on the occasion of the New Year 2023, highlighted inequality as the primary cause of the protests that lay at the heart of the crisis that

has erupted in Peru. He stated that "a privileged sector of society pretends to enjoy all that the world offers, as if the poor did not exist, this at some point has consequences (...) Ignoring the existence and the rights of others, sooner or later provokes some form of unexpected violence, such as what we are witnessing these days." He also condemned violence from both sides. He went further and warned of the need to address the causes that generate violence, in order to neutralize it, by always making the force of law prevail, never the law of force.

Dina Boluarte has been very economical with the truth in her press conferences. Without any evidence, she brands the protesters, the vast majority being rural people and students, as "terrorists," "communists," "violent, subversives" "pro Sendero Luminoso," (Shining Path terrorists). On the 28<sup>th</sup> February, the UN High Commission for Human Rights, based in Geneva, sent a document to the Peruvian authorities which enumerated the long list of denunciations about killings, disappearances and arbitrary detentions, demanding urgent clarification. According to the Instituto Estudios Peruano 77% of the population disapproves of Dina Boluarte (69% in Lima and 86% in the regions of Southern Andes). The people's problems are not being solved," said Óscar Cáceres, the mayor of Juliaca.

The president was once again called into question on March 6<sup>th</sup> when six soldiers drowned in the Llave River in Puno having been ordered to cross the river by foot by their platoon leader. According to the Ministry of Defence, the soldiers crossed the river because they were under attack by people hurling rocks at them. On the contrary, this has been proven to be untrue by survivors who said they were obliged by their commander to cross the river. In fact, the people in the area assisted in hauling the out the corpses from the river and in trying to resuscitate survivors.

The centuries of exclusion, racism and inequality in the country have to be addressed. Truth telling and vigilance to ensure human rights are upheld need to be in place if democracy is to prevail. Peruvian people are resilient and, in the past, have proven that they can find a way out of what can be perceived to be no way. We in the international community need to support the people of Peru in their quest for justice, both by our prayers as well as reading and listening to credible sources when we follow what is happening in the country. While the situation is complex and difficult, we, like the Peruvian people, can never lose hope that a more just and equal Peru is possible.