Electoral Authoritarianism in Peru: How Fujimori Was Able To Act Outside Nominal Democratic Rules

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Introduction

Alberto Fujimori’s regime in Peru provides a unique look at a rare case in which elected leaders are able to act in an authoritarian manner. What allowed for Fujimori to act successfully as an authoritarian, which Weyland refers to as a paradox of success, is a fascinating topic of discussion (Weyland 2000, 496). There are several schools of thought that look at how this was able to happen. Two competing theories specifically will be examined in this paper. Ultimately I will seek to establish how Fujimori was able to act in authoritarian manner. The first school of thought presents the idea that because crises in Peru were devastating Fujimori was elected as a delegate more than a representative. By this approach Fujimori was able to act in whatever manner he pleased, and his successful solution of the crises only strengthened his political power (O’Donnell 1994, 56; Weyland 2000, 482-3). The second view is that the parties in Peru enjoyed little confidence from the people, allowing Fujimori to work against them successfully. This perspective puts the blame the actions of the main political leaders, who were held responsible for the crises by much of the population, at the time for allowing Fujimori to act as he did (Tanaka 2005, 262-3; Conaghan 2006, 33-35). I will show that the weakness of the political party system is what allowed Fujimori to act as an authoritarian.

Historical Background

Alberto Fujimori, the son of two Japanese immigrants to Peru, held less than one percent support in public opinion polls in March 1990. In April 1990, a mere six weeks later, Fujimori was very close behind the winner of the first round of the Peruvian presidential election. He then buried his opponent, who was previously the vast favorite, in a landslide victory in the run-off election on June 10, 1990 (Schmidt 1996, 321).
Fujimori ran his campaign in a very centrist manner in order to garner support from both sides of the political spectrum. As Tanaka notes, the economic and terrorist threats “made possible in 1990 the emergence of an authoritarian leader with an anti-politics discourse” (Tanaka 2005, 262). This rhetoric, along with his Japanese heritage, made him appealing to voters in Peru, who “longed for a clean break with the past” (Schmidt 1996, 321). In his second year in office Fujimori performed an autogolpe, or self-coup, which involved him dissolving the legislature and suspending the constitution.

Fujimori was re-elected in 1995, and, surprisingly, again in 2000. As Barr notes, Fujimori’s neo-populist regime was credited with ‘saving’ Peru from hyperinflation and the threat of the guerilla terrorist group, Sendero Luminoso, or The Shining Path, as well as restructuring the economy to a neoliberal model and appealing successfully to international financial interests. Fujimori’s approval over his entire tenure in the presidency averaged 54.3%. This number includes a period when inflation reached four digits (Barr 2003, 1162).

By the time Fujimori relinquished the presidency, his tenure as head-of-state had been the second longest in the history of Latin America, behind only Fidel Castro. His regime was characterized by “massive human rights violations, rigged elections and wholesale corruption.” Fujimori’s right hand man, Vladimir Montesinos, carried out a lot of these behind-the-scenes dealings. Montesinos carried out the majority of the corrupt dealings going on in the regime, and ultimately led Fujimori to give up his presidency. Eventually a 56 minute long videotape informed the public of the corruption going on behind the scenes of the regime, showing Montesinos paying two envelopes of $15,000 apiece to an opposition legislator in exchange for his returned allegiance to Fujimori’s
The first school of thought regarding Fujimori’s ability to act as an authoritarian leader presents his success as stemming from his election as a delegate in a time of severe crisis and his solution of crises. Crisis theories can be used to explain a variety of different outcomes. In this case it is used to explain how Fujimori was able to act authoritatively. People in Peru were tired of failed economic expansion packages from the parties of the 1980s and the deaths accompanying the Sendero Luminoso. O’Donnell argues that “the deep social and economic crisis that [Peru] inherited from [its] authoritarian predecessors reinforces certain practices and conceptions about the proper exercise of political authority that lead in the direction of delegative, not representative democracy” (O’Donnell 1994, 56). He says that a delegated president typically presents himself as above the parties, is seen as a paternal figure for the nation, and is socially authorized to govern as he thinks best (O’Donnell 1994, 60). O’Donnell notes Peru when he talks about delegative democracy, which is accurate because Fujimori embodies a delegated president neatly. His campaign was run as being superior to the parties the country was tired of. As O’Donnell notes, the legislature is usually the only thing in the way of a delegated president and that president usually does whatever he can to diminish that legislature’s power over him (O’Donnell 1994, 56). Fujimori did just that by dissolving the legislature in his 1992 autogolpe.

The other component of this school of thought deals with crises. Specifically it refers to two crises. The first was the massive hyperinflation Peru was suffering at the time of Fujimori’s election. The second was the threat caused by the violent guerilla
insurgency called the *Sendero Luminoso*. Fujimori successfully took care of each of these, despite the lack of success by political parties before him.

Inflation in Peru prior to Fujimori taking office was devastating, reaching unprecedented levels and crippling public support for the government. Ventura states that “annual inflation rates in Peru seldom fell below 50 percent, and between 1988 and 1990, inflation rates skyrocketed uncontrollably, peaking in 1990 with annual inflation rates upwards of 10,000 percent” (Ventura 2000). The election of Fujimori saw a variety of economic reforms. As Gouge notes, during the election Fujimori was the least economically neo-liberal candidate. Upon his election, however, this became a total reversal, as Fujimori enacted what has been called “Fujishock.” These neo-liberal reforms that followed were vast and executed quickly, including reforms such as cutting social spending, privatization, and raising the price of petrol (Gouge 2003, 363). The reforms had expansively positive impacts on the economy. Between the IMF’s approval, the privatization of industries, and the inflation falling, capital flowed into Peru in large quantities, leading to a massive stock market boom. By 1994 Peru was the region’s fastest-growing economy (Gouge 2003, 364).

Fujimori attacked head on to stop a serious “frontal assault” from the *Sendero Luminoso*, among other terrorist groups. As Weyland notes, through “bold and painful countermeasures,” specifically faceless courts, the government was able to control the threat (Weyland 2000, 484). This campaign against terrorism was also allowed by the absence of the oppositional legislature. According to Gregory, Fujimori’s rise to authoritarian status following the *autogolpe* “precipitated a campaign of murder and abduction against those thought to be enemies of the state, without having any legal
Just ten years after authoritarian rule representative democracy was not yet institutionalized in Peru. Since major crises had accompanied the transition to democracy in the 1980s authoritarian rule was probably not entirely ruled out entering into Fujimori’s term. According to this view these crises caused the people of Peru to take a step back in the direction of authoritarianism, and yet not entirely revert back to its ways. Delegative democracy was the middle ground between representative democracy and authoritarianism. As a delegated president, however, Fujimori still had the political power to act however he wanted. O’Donnell describes this power, saying in this situation “the president been authorized to govern as he (or she) thinks best” (O’Donnell 1994, 60). Fujimori’s successful solution of the crises only bolstered his popular support, as can be seen by looking at his approval ratings over the time that the crises were solved. They never dipped below 58%, and they reached levels as high as 80% (Weyland 2000, 484).

Weak Political Parties

The second school of thought discussed in this paper attributes Fujimori’s ability to act as an authoritarian to the weakness and lack of public support for the political parties in Peru. As Levitsky and Cameron argue “the deep structural crisis of the 1980s weakened established parties and created an opening for antipolitical establishment outsiders” (Levitsky and Cameron 2003, 2). The unsolved crises of the 1980s under Peruvian political parties can be held accountable for Fujimori’s rise to power in this case.

When Fujimori’s regime rose to power, he executed his self-coup on the Peruvian
legislature. Because of the vast lack of support for political parties, who held most of the
seats in the legislature, the country viewed this as a positive accomplishment by Fujimori
and his approval ratings soared. As Conaghan notes, the strong popular support seen
after the autogolpe reflects the massive distaste for the ruling politicians and parties
(Conaghan 2006, 33-35). When the legislature was reformed Fujimori was a highly
regarded politician and more independents were able to ride his coattails into the
legislature. As a result of these events political parties shifted their goals towards gaining
back seats in the legislature and lost sight of long-term goals. As Fujimori’s regime
became more authoritarian nothing was done to challenge its ways. Political parties did
not offer any horizontal accountability (Levitsky and Cameron 2003, 2). Fujimori was
too successful in the polls, and it was a bad political decision to line up against him in the
political arena.

Levitsky and Cameron also argue that as Fujimori’s non-partisan regime developed
over time, political parties left their traditional party based political model and campaigns
became more candidate centered. They attribute this as a cause of the failure to mobilize
against Fujimori’s regime (Levitsky and Cameron 2003, 2). This inability to mobilize,
coupled with the success Fujimori received after removing the established political elite,
which opened the door for free policy-making, led Fujimori to nearly unchecked power to
rule.

Conclusion

In the end I’m not entirely convinced that either one of the two theories can entirely
explain Fujimori’s ability to act as an authoritarian. The Delegative democracy model
works in some ways. In terms of what the public’s view of him was when they elected
him it makes sense. Since he was seen as sort of a solution to the political elite that was not getting the job done it seems likely that they would have elected him in the delegative mindset. With such massive distaste for the political elite, the public was likely inclined to have a regime that was not interested in working alongside the legislature made up almost entirely of the elite. Fujimori’s *autogolpe* is certainly explained nicely by this model, as he dictatorially removed the legislature from power.

I don’t think the weakness of political parties of the time completely explains the situation either. This model is useful for explaining how he was able to get elected and reelected. He was different, and he was not seen as part of the establishment. His separation from establishment alone provided enough momentum to hold office. I don’t think this model adequately informs us why he was able to act as an authoritarian however. It tells us the setup to him acting in an authoritarian manner but it lacks in explaining why he was able to act in such a way after he was in power and still keep a high approval rating.

The answer lies somewhere in the middle of two theories. Peru had only recently transformed into a democratic system when Fujimori was elected, and the concept had not had a chance to fully grow in the minds of the people. Major crises hit Peru in the 1980s, and when major political party candidates could not get them taken care of people doubted their ability to lead. They were used to the fast changes of authoritarian rule from previous regimes. The public then turned to the political outsider Alberto Fujimori and elected him with every intention of letting him do whatever was necessary to fix the country’s problems. When Fujimori took office we quickly saw this public expectation of his regime when he performed the *autogolpe*. As Weyland points out “in massively
backing the coup, Peruvians essentially converted Fujimori into a "democratic dictator," delegating extraordinary power to him in a context of profound crisis (Weyland 2000, 487).” After the coup Fujimori had free reign to do whatever he wanted with no checks standing in his way. I think this is the best way to account for Fujimori’s ability to rule in an authoritarian manner. The nation was not used to the concept of representative democracy, but rather to authoritarian rule, so taking a small step backward towards authoritarianism was not a large stretch. They allowed and supported Fujimori to rule in a sort of hybrid authoritarian and democratic government.