Pat Merloe
Peru's Elections and Democratic Transition, 2000-2001
Transcript

Hi, this is Pat Merloe. From 1993 to 2022, I oversaw the electoral integrity support programs for NDI, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. That included assisting citizen election monitoring, election reform activity, international election observation, international norms building, covering hundreds of elections, which took me on more than 200 trips to at least 65 countries.

Those experiences, as you would imagine, touched on significant elections, including one that I'll focus on today, Peru's authoritarian fraud to democratic transition elections of 2000 and 2001. The case provides valuable insights even for today. One side of that equation were carefully orchestrated authoritarian circumstances that illuminate the illiberal playbook. On the other side were exceptional efforts by citizen organizations, democratic reformers, and average citizens with remarkable cooperation and support from international actors that together illustrate how autocracy was overcome.

My involvement included, among other things, nine trips to Peru from 1999 through 2001 as part of a joint 18-month-long international election observation mission by NDI and The Carter Center, and as part of NDI's assistance to Peruvian nonpartisan election monitors. The late Gerardo Le Chevallier, then NDI's director for Latin America, and Chuck Costello, then director of The Carter Center's democracy programs, were on all nine of those trips.

Plus, we were in continuous communication with our in-country teams and various experts on Peru located in Lima and elsewhere, including Washington, DC. We collaborated with Transparencia, Peru's preeminent election monitoring organization, and with the Organization of American States (OAS) International Election Monitoring Mission, which was led by Guatemala's former foreign minister, Eduardo Stein, who played a pivotal role in the election crisis.

We were also in close communication with Peruvian government officials, election authorities, electoral contestants, and a broad array of civil society actors, as well as the diplomatic community. We produced 10 rather comprehensive statements, an overall report on the 2000 elections, and a report on the 2001 elections, all of which contained analysis and recommendations, as you would imagine. I was intimately involved in developing each of those documents and their presentation.

Our efforts were funded by USAID and were greatly bolstered by the participation at times of several former presidents of Latin American countries, former US President Jimmy Carter, and former US Secretary of State and then NDI board chair, Madeleine Albright. That support, again, as you would imagine, undoubtedly contributed to our direct contacts with President Fujimori, members of his cabinet, and others in officialdom, as well as helping to attract considerable

attention in the media and public attention, which we also directed to Peruvian election monitors.

As a brief background, though, it's important and worth recalling that Peru's turbulent political history included four more or less non-controversial elections immediately prior to 1999. The 1990 election brought the surprise victory of then outsider Alberto Fujimori, who rode popular discontent with Peru's political parties due to a high record of inflation, notable corruption, and domestic terrorism.

In '92, after two years of tension with Peru's Congress, Fujimori infamously suspended the country's constitution and dissolved Congress and the court system in what's been dubbed a self-coup or autogolpe. A controversial '93 referendum approved a new constitution that greatly aggrandized presidential power, but it limited the president to two terms in office. In '95, Fujimori easily won a second term, but he became increasingly autocratic with severe rights violations and corrupt arrangements that took place under his leadership and that of his former security chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, who many saw as the power behind the presidential throne.

The '95 victory set up a potential constitutional crisis as Fujimori focused on being reelected to a third term in 2000. Congress passed a dubious law saying that his 1990 election did not count against the country's two-term limit, and a series of machinations successfully sustained that maneuver. Thus, the path was cleared for Fujimori to enter the 2000 election playing field, which was steeply slanted in his favor.

However, events did not work out in accordance with his and Montesinos' plans.

As noted in our reports, having captured Congress, the courts, election authorities, along with the military and security apparatus, the Fujimori cabal focused on gaining control of the news media through forced ownership changes, economic coercion, and allowing threats against journalists to take place with impunity, subverting press freedoms.

Those conditions led the OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression to issue a March 2000 report calling the conditions, quote, "a serious obstacle" for normal elections. Opposition candidates also complained of harassment and threats, violent counter-demonstrations and electricity cuts at their rallies, pressures by the state tax agency against them and their supporters, and assaults by criminals that went unaddressed by authorities.

Like the candidates and journalists, nonpartisan election monitors, including Transparencia and even the official ombudsman's office, the Defensoría del Pueblo, were subjected to harassment, vilification and threats of retaliatory legal actions.

The military and security forces actively engaged with the Peru 2000 campaign in various ways, including notoriously inscribing on mountainsides in military bases the Peru 2000 slogan in gargantuan letters for the cities and villages below to see. I can attest that the colossal Peru

2000 slogan that was inscribed at the military installation above Lima couldn't be missed even if you were nearsighted.

On March 24, 16 days before the April 9 election, our third NDI Carter Center pre-election assessment noted, quote, "The conditions for a fair electoral campaign have not been established. Irreparable damage to the integrity of the election process has already been done, but improvements can and should be made because the candidates and parties are competing, citizens are participating in the process, and an electoral outcome is not assured." Transparencia's April 3 statement was similar.

I can recall being asked at a Lima press conference about that seemingly paradoxical sentence, and our responding that a race car can be damaged on the track and still cross the finish line, even possibly win. However, it remained unclear whether the will of Peru's voters could be freely expressed, accurately counted, and honored. I couldn't have predicted more surprises that were ahead in that respect.

I'll forego the election administration details, except to note that the National Election Processes Office, ONPE, failed to conduct a successful simulation of the data collection and voter tabulation system. That raised suspicions of manipulation and fears that Fujimori would be falsely deemed to have won a majority on April 9, thus avoiding a runoff with his main opponent.

The OAS requested an electronic window to monitor the tabulation in real time but was denied, and tensions rose on election night as the seeming system haltingly moved towards Fujimori's 50% mark. Election polls and Transparencia's analysis of a statistical sample of actual polling station results indicated that Fujimori did not receive more than 48.8% of the votes, thus indicating that a runoff was required.

Yet the ONPE's results kept creeping closer to Fujimori surpassing 50%, and demonstrators took to the streets as the results were delayed. Transparencia's projection of what an accurate presidential result should be within a very slim margin of error, known as a PVT or quick count, was based on reports of trained observers deployed to a representative sample of polling stations throughout the country.

It carried a decisive weight with both the public and international community due to Transparencia having verified Fujimori's 1995 win, the soundness of its pre-election reports, and the impeccable reputations of its board members. NDI had provided technical assistance to Transparencia's results tabulation, and our joint mission had full confidence in that exercise. We communicated that confidence to interested Peruvian and international actors.

And I personally had gained a great deal of respect for Transparencia's leadership, having spent considerable time with them and having had the opportunity to carefully review the count verification findings. NDI and the Carter Center observation team, as well as representatives of several embassies, attended Transparencia's press conference, where its vote results projection

was announced. That acted as a deterrent to anonymous threats aimed at preventing the announcement.

Understanding the stakes, Transparencia's board members courageously declared that their projections showed a presidential runoff should be called. Under considerable scrutiny as a consequence of all of this, the ONPE stopped shy of Fujimori crossing 50%, but it did not announce the official results until 19 days after the vote. It showed Fujimori with 49.87% and Alejandro Toledo with 40.24.

During the runoff period, our observer mission joined the OAS, Transparencia, and others to little avail in emphasizing several practical immediate improvements that could be implemented.

The Defensa Rio del Pueblo, Transparencia, and dozens of Peruvian organizations supported a postponement of the runoff to implement the needed improvements. And on May 18th, Toledo announced that he would not participate in the runoff unless it was briefly postponed.

The problematic simulation of ONPE's vote tabulation system led the OAS observation mission chief, Eduardo Stein, to call for a 10-day runoff delay. The ONPE rejected the call under pressure from the presidential palace.

That resulted in a unique moment in election observation history.

Eduardo Stein informed us while in Washington that he would not return to Peru for the polls, and that the OAS mission would not observe the May 28th runoff. Because of the untrustworthy tabulation system, the lack of a contested election, and the severe deficiencies in the electoral environment, the NDI Carter Center leadership also decided not to deploy observers for those polls. The Defensoria del Pueblo, Transparencia, and the European Union, which had not observed the April vote but had decided to do so for May 28th, also withdrew their observers.

That was an unprecedented, unified action against blessing electoral illegitimacy.

The May 28th poll, with its wide-open opportunities for vote and tabulation manipulations, provided a questionable mandate for Fujimori's third term. He garnered only 51.2% of the vote, with almost 30% of the ballots being void and about 17% going for Toledo. Peruvians are legally required to vote, and Toledo's call for a boycott may explain the high rate of individual ballots.

Large demonstrations broke out, no surprise on that, across many cities and towns, continuing through the July 28th swearing-in of Fujimori to a tenuous third term that would last less than four months. The protests were met by heavy police counteractions, creating a crisis atmosphere.

Civil society, Defensoria del Pueblo, and international actors, including us, offered recommendations and support for reform dialogue during the immediate post-election period,

and the government convened a reform commission but took no significant steps to deescalate the crisis.

The OAS, however, took extraordinary measures, leveraging the credibility won in Peru by its election observation mission. At its June 2000 General Assembly meeting, the OAS mandated a high-level mission, including Secretary General César Gaviria and Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, to engage with Peruvian stakeholders in an urgent dialogue on democratic reforms. That process resulted in 29 recommendations in several categories, including elections, which became transition guideposts as the Fujimori government fell.

Our joint observation mission helped President Carter deliver an open letter to OAS ambassadors prior to the General Assembly, calling for urgent action to address Peru's crisis. And we and other observers provided recommendations that were used in the dialogue.

Just 48 days after Fujimori began his third term, a video was leaked to the public documenting Vladimiro Montesinos bribing an opposition congressional representative to switch sides. Two days later, Fujimori announced that new elections would be held in a short time, and he would not be a candidate. Plus, he announced that he would deactivate the intelligence service and corruption allegations would be investigated. That extraordinary step and announcement didn't do much to save him. The video and over 1,000 similar so-called Vladi videos emerged, showing Montesinos' bribery and other coercion tactics.

That closely followed another scandal implicating him in trafficking arms to the FARC (Fuerza Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), Colombia's main guerrilla group. Under the weight of these scandals and lacking a significant democratic mandate, the Fujimori government collapsed.

The opposition gained congressional control in October, and Fujimori's first vice president resigned. On November 21, 2000, during a visit to Japan, Fujimori attempted to resign by fax, but Congress rejected it and removed him as being, quote, "morally incapable." His second vice president then resigned, clearing the way for the new president of Congress and reformer Valentin Paniagua to assume the presidency.

Extraconstitutional elections were set for April 8, 2001, with a runoff if needed on June 3. President Paniagua announced that he would not stand in those elections and led an extraordinary democratic transition process through the next several months.

The transition brought an almost miraculous turnaround in electoral credibility, as well as democratic reforms in other areas, many of which had been proposed by the OAS dialogue.

That included rehabilitating government agencies and security forces. Election authorities were revamped. For example, 75% of ONPE personnel were replaced, a new tabulation software was installed and transparently tested, and election assistance was provided by the OAS, IFES, and other international sources. Seven of the eight presidential candidates signed a pact of civility

that was sponsored by civil society organizations, and the Defensoria del Pueblo opened an office for the defense of the voter. Plus, national and international election observers were encouraged to monitor the full election process.

While the compressed timeframe and the degraded public confidence from the last election posed significant challenges, citizen interest in the 2001 elections and in potential reforms was intense. International and national observers found the pre-election period generally met standards for credible elections, which helped build public confidence.

Jimmy Carter led our first election day observation, and we reported positive findings. And Madeleine Albright led our runoff observation, which also reported positively.

The April 8, 2001, election day took place without significant problems noted in the previous year, and ONPE's tabulation system worked well as independently verified by Transparencia's statistical projection and by exit polls. The official result showed Alejandro Toledo and former Peruvian President Alan Garcia advancing to the June 3 runoff.

The runoff and voting and counting process went smoothly. Transparencia's statistical exercise again verified the credibility of the result. Toledo won the presidency with 53%, and Garcia accepted the outcome.

An important by-product of that extended period was that USAID and other funders realized the value of long-term, comprehensive international election observation in Peru's case, which helped to establish that and their support for the practice elsewhere. The critical role of nonpartisan election observation was driven home once again in Peru.

The expressions of appreciation for the contributions of international election observers came from a broad spectrum of political society, which was gratifying. Personal anecdotes in that respect that I recall include a taxi driver in Lima recognizing me from our various press conferences and refusing to accept payment for the fare because of our efforts.

I also recall President-elect Toledo asking me to attend his inauguration, which I politely declined and added that we would be back to help Transparencia and others to hold his government accountable, too. That brought a big smile from him with a reply, "But of course."

Toledo was succeeded by Alan Garcia and then Humala. All three of them served full terms. But since then, Peru has had nine presidents in 10 years. The truncated presidential tenures largely resulted from Congress's contentious use of its vague impeachment power to subordinate the executive and judicial branches.

Fujimorism and anti-Fujimorism persist in Peruvian politics as key factors in its political instability. Parties based around personalities have not delivered for the general population. That created disenchantment with elections, which was reflected in the June 2026 runoff's 28% abstention rate from voting, despite the legal requirement to vote. In the 2026 first round, the

combination of blank and null ballots outnumbered the tally for the highest ranking of the more than 30 presidential candidates.

The 2026 runoff pitted Keiko Fujimori, Alberto's daughter, and former three-time unsuccessful presidential runoff candidate, against a left-leaning member of Congress, Roberto Sánchez. Fujimori eked out a 50.135% runoff victory and will face the challenge of sharp political polarization after running a hardlined campaign.

Alberto Fujimori and Vladimiro Montesinos systematically executed their version of the authoritarian playbook while massive numbers of Peruvians acting as election monitors, civic organizers and educators, rule-of-law advocates, responsible journalists, protesters, election workers, and voters brought an end to the corrupt cabal's rule. The international community's support for them and democratic principles significantly contributed.

Yet, Peru's example also demonstrates that without carrying through on democratic reforms, including routing out corruption and combating polarization, improvements in electoral integrity are insufficient. That shows that if democracy does not improve the lives of citizens, instability and the appeal of anti-democratic governments will remain strong.