

Perú: The Right Amount of Theft¹

The victory by Keiko would again place in power the hard-line nucleus of Fujimorism, a cohort of journalists, business executives, and hoodlum politicians

By Jorge Eduardo Benavides²

Translation by William Little© (2011)

A few days ago a letter signed by a group of Peruvian writers and intellectuals was published in various news media. The distinguished group, including Mario Vargas Llosa, Alfredo Bryce Echenique and myself, came out in favor of voting for Ollanta Humala, the candidate for the Presidency of the Republic who will face Keiko Fujimori in the second round of voting on June 5th. Let it be said that none of the signers thinks that Humala is an ideal choice, nor does he raise our enthusiasm; rather, many of us harbor serious doubts about the trustworthiness of his candidacy.

So then, why are we supporting him? Because, as is the case for many Peruvians in these times, we believe we have no other alternative, since voting for Keiko Fujimori is tantamount to granting legitimacy to a Government of hers that is not only corrupt but also decidedly autocratic as was her father's, and that in all probability, should Fujimori's daughter win, would be no more than a continuation of his.

One could argue here, as many have already done throughout the election campaign, that she is not to blame for her father's crimes and felonies and that it would be unjust to condemn her for the excesses and violent abuses that Fujimorism committed during the dark years in which he governed. But that is a weak observation, and, at best, it smacks of dangerous benevolence, for we cannot forget that Keiko Fujimori was the nation's first lady during that government as well as an active collaborator of his. In addition, she was the principal driving force behind the idea of granting a pardon to Alberto Fujimori, who currently is serving a sentence for human rights crimes, just as is Vladimiro Montesinos, the sinister consultant who poisoned our political lives with his bribes and assassinations.

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² Jorge Eduardo Benavides is the author of a collection of short stories and five novels, one of which is *Un millón de soles*, published in Spain by Alfaguara, 2008. He was born in Arequipa, Perú, in 1964. His works are centered on both post-Magical Realism and urban realism. Among major influences on him are those of Julio Cortázar and Mario Vargas Llosa. In fact, he signed the letter to which he refers in this essay with Vargas Llosa. From 1991-2002, he lived on Tenerife, one of the Canary Islands, Spain. For a partial explanation of why he lived outside Perú during these years, consult the page on Perú among the [Cultures and Nations](#) link for this textbook.

Then, around this shady twosome that ran our country by waving the flag of corruption and committing every kind of crime with total impunity, was an aligned cohort, like a swarm of flies flittering around giddily in a sewer, of journalists, businessmen, and hoodlum politicians who even today still constitute Fujimorism's hard core, which the daughter of the jailed ex-president intends to lead back into power.

And worst of all, in that dark period in our recent history, a dangerous idea took root in our society, the idea that governments are basically corrupt, that robbery, cheating, and roguishness are required tools for survival and success and, in short, that the definition of pragmatism is simple: efficiency without scruples.

I can find no better example of all this than what happened to me a year back during a short visit I made to Lima. With a taxi driver I was discussing our country's situation vis-à-vis the election campaign that was just beginning to rev up. Countering my arguments about the corruption that undergirded the Fujimori regime, the taxi driver, a devoted defender of that ominous president, in the course of our chat, admitted reluctantly that, yes, Fujimori "had stolen." But then he quickly added an apparently irrefutable moral qualification: "Fujimori was a thief, but he only stole the right amount."

The moral laxity in that sentence is, unfortunately, the substratum at the base of those who speak of Fujimori's successes while forgetting the attacks, violations, embezzlement, bribes, and assassinations that gave fuel to that machine and easily forgetting that the need for integrity is not a simple romantic matter in the face of immediate day-to-day demands, but rather it is an indispensable element of prosperity and progress. Furthermore, the absence of integrity for the sake of immediate benefit is a time bomb that sooner or later will explode in everyone's face.

I do not doubt, of course, that there are Peruvians of good faith for whom Keiko Fujimori is a legitimate choice, but I truly fear that the great majority simply has opted to shut their eyes to corruption, assassination, and injustice and to favor the argument that known evil is better than unknown good.

In addition, unfortunately, not even Ollanta Humala is the good yet to be known, since his aggressive populist campaign—apparently softened recently by electoral winds that would threaten to consign him to oblivion—his demagogic leftism, and his barracks ideology seem to have been gestated in the rented bowels of the most profound Chavism and therefore they are a true threat to everything what was achieved in the last decade of economic growth and institutional strengthening in Perú.

The communication media that yearn for Fujimorism have taken advantage of this situation by neglecting to mention that Hugo Chávez thought of Fujimori as a model when he closed down the Congress and he dispatched democracy in a blink of the eye. And they forget that the relationship between the two autocrats was cordial and full of mutual understanding. It

suffices to recall that Fujimori's government is the one that offered asylum in 1992 to the coup-d'état rebels who tried to overthrow President Carlos Andrés Pérez. And that Hugo Chávez granted asylum to Vladimiro Montesinos when the latter fled our country pursued by Peruvian authorities even though he was forced to hand him over given the magnitude of the scandal that ended with the Fujimori government falling, the latter choosing to flee to Japan.

Nevertheless, fear that it might be Humala himself who could follow Chávez's path and turn 180 degrees in the direction trod by the last two governments, thus throwing us into dangerous left-wing neo-populism, is the principal card in the deck against his candidacy. And it would be a mistake not to keep that in mind.

Nevertheless, there are at least three things that make us trust that Humala will not be the next Chávez: first, our current Perú with healed wounds and economic growth—to which we must urgently add prosperity that touches every corner of the country if we wish to continue healing and growing—is not the same as a Venezuela strangled by the inefficiency and stupidity of a political class that is so harmful that it threw its voters into the arms of a dictator.

Second, by the same model, the Venezuelan autocrat is experiencing his worst hours, eroded as much by his corruption and ineffectiveness as by his excesses and blustering, which are features of a puny light opera tyrant rather than of a serious chief executive or even of an honest revolutionary. Nowadays very few people care a whit about him, for during recent years he has only earned disrepute among even those who in the beginning defended him most.

And finally but not least importantly, our current society is infinitely more participatory, more connected by social media, and fully awakened from the sluggishness it suffered for so long. We are now able to mobilize and organize against dictatorships and bad governments, as we have already seen, by adopting a vigilant attitude in the face of the excesses of power. That is the spirit that, like so many colleagues, has made me sign a letter in favor of Humala, a candidate I am suspicious of, but whom I recognize as the only choice for stopping with impunity a return to Fujimorism. It is not about choosing between two possible bad governments; it is about not electing the one who only gave abundant evidence of felonious criminality.

Can we not vote for either of them in order not to participate in this sordid matter, as some friends whom I respect and appreciate are asserting very legitimately while even paying the fine for not voting? (In Perú voting is mandatory.) That could be. But I think that if there are few times when ideal circumstances exist for constructing a country, then, in this case perhaps we are voting for not destroying what ought to be the main active pursuit of a nation: its sense of decency. To vote for Humala perhaps is suicide. But in any case it would be a legitimate suicide in self defense.