

Peruvians demand extradition of ex-president Fujimori

By Cesar Uco
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Thousands of angry workers, students and human rights advocates marched in Lima last week demanding the extradition of former president Alberto Fujimori from Chile. If returned to Perú, Fujimori would face trial on 22 criminal charges of corruption and human rights abuses. The charges carry sentences of up to 30 years in jail and \$29 million in fines.

Fujimori arrived in Santiago, Chile on November 7 and was arrested soon after as the Chilean courts yielded to the Peruvian government's demands for his detention.

After a decade in power, Fujimori deserted the Peruvian presidency in October 2000 amid accusations of corruption and abuse of power. He fled to Japan, where he was granted citizenship and lived under the protection of right-wing politicians.

In March 2003, Interpol issued an international warrant for his arrest on charges of murder and kidnapping in Perú. Included in the charges were the ex-president's leading role in the activities of the death squad known as Grupo Colina, responsible for the massacres of La Cantuta and Barrios Altos at the beginning of his presidency in 1991-92.

Relatives of death squad victims have traveled to Chile to pressure the Chilean government to extradite Fujimori to Perú. "We want the victims' voice to be heard," said Alejandro Silva, a representative of the Lima-based National Coordinator of Human Rights, which organized the trip.

Immediately after Fujimori's arrest, Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo promised on national television that his government would not allow the ex-president to escape. Toledo has sent a high level delegation to Chile led by Interior Minister Rómulo Pizarro to work on Fujimori's extradition. The Peruvian government has 60 days to present its case.

It remains unclear why Fujimori ended his voluntary exile in Japan.

His partisans say that Fujimori decided to fly to Chile to be close to Perú and begin preparations to run for president in 2006—despite being banned from running until 2011 under current Peruvian law.

After his arrest, Fujimori declared: "It is my aim to temporarily stay in Chile as part of a return to Perú to keep a promise to a large part of the people of Perú." Even at the end, when his regime was besieged by charges of corruption, he retained a base of support for his policies of authoritarianism and right-wing populism. There were also pro-Fujimori demonstrations in Lima after he arrived in Chile.

Some, however, think Japan pressured him to leave. According to Ernesto Velit, an independent political analyst in Lima, Fujimori's had become a liability to his protectors.

"I believe he's been forced to by the Japanese government because Japan doesn't want to be criticized by an international court for not

handing him over," Velit said. After several years of Japan denying calls for extradition, the Peruvian government was about to move the case to the International Court in The Hague.

Fujimori's spokesman Carlos Raffo said: "His detention has been a calculated risk. That is why he is taking it so calmly."

According to the BBC, "it is not clear if arrest warrants issued by Interpol are legally binding in Chile." His attorney, César Nakasaki, said Fujimori was counting on Chile's Supreme Court to block his extradition, as it had done for other leaders, such as former president of Argentina, Carlos Menem.

On Monday, the Chilean Supreme Court denied an appeal for Fujimori's release from prison. At the same time the Supreme Court in Perú approved a set of charges based on corruption and abuse of power upon which to seek extradition.

Analysts believe that Fujimori may have chosen this moment to go to Chile in order to exploit a heated sovereignty dispute between Perú and Chile over territorial waters in the Pacific Ocean.

As part of his "calculated risk," Fujimori must also have weighed the delicate political situation in Perú itself.

With a president in disgrace, an angry population unhappy with the high unemployment and collapsing wages, and an army increasingly disquieted by human rights trials, Fujimori may have believed that his presence in Chile could turn the political tide in his favor.

Perú's political life is presently dominated by several trials against former army generals and the head of national intelligence, Vladimiro Montesinos, for assassinations and massacres committed during Fujimori's presidency.

In April 1992, nearly two years after his election as president, Fujimori disbanded Congress, suspended the constitution and assumed dictatorial powers. With the help of his right-hand man, Montesinos, he quickly moved to build a police state.

By means of bribes and intimidation, he exercised full control over the judiciary and the media. At the same time, he gave the army a free hand in repressing the Maoist guerrilla organization, Shining Path.

This inaugurated one of the bloodiest phases of the 20-year armed conflict between the army and Shining Path, which saw the killing of nearly 70,000 people, most of them Quechua-speaking Inca peasants living in the poorest regions of the country.

The trials threaten to expose the mass killings and the systematic violation of human rights committed during the protracted dirty war between the army and Shining Path.

The most prominent legal proceeding, known as the "mega-trial," began against the death squad Grupo Colina last August.

The main accused are Montesinos, former general Nicolás Herzoza Ríos, who headed the army when the crimes were committed, and

Santiago Martín Rivas, a lower-ranking officer responsible for carrying out kidnappings, torture and murder against those suspected of being Shining Path members or sympathizers.

Following the defeat of Shining Path, a triumphant Fujimori wanted to give Hermoza Ríos the rank of field marshal, calling him the "victorious general."

A total of 57 officers and members of Fujimori's regime are accused of machine-gunning 15 people, including an 8-year old girl, at a party in Barrios Altos near downtown Lima (November 1991); the kidnapping and disappearance of 10 peasants in the Santa valley located in the Andes north of Lima (May 1992); the kidnapping and disappearance of journalist Pedro Yauri in Huacho, a coastal town 100 miles north of the capital (July 1992); and the cold-blooded kidnapping, torture and assassination of nine students and a professor at La Cantuta University (July 1992).

Several indicted members of Grupo Colina have named Fujimori and Montesinos as having approved at least two of these crimes—the massacres at Barrios Altos and La Cantuta.

Evidence is piling up implicating the Fujimori government in organizing the killings. The courts are in possession of 37 documents demonstrating that the Grupo Colina was part of the National Intelligence System under Montesinos and was formed by putting together the most experienced army personnel. Members of Grupo Colina, who spoke in exchange for lesser sentences, corroborated this evidence.

Fujimori's return to Perú would certainly exacerbate the growing tensions between the government and a military that is showing signs of growing distress over how far the revelations of its crimes may go.

Last August, the Supreme Council of Military Justice (SCMJ) declared the Grupo Colina trial illegal on the grounds that the accused had already been tried and found guilty by a court martial in 1994. The sentences were subsequently commuted by Fujimori himself under the General Amnesty Law passed in 1995, absolving the military of all culpability in the war against Shining Path.

In a further act of defiance, the army recently announced the promotion to colonel of Máximo Humberto Cáceda Pedemonte, an officer accused of having participated in the Barrios Altos massacre.

The pressure on the military command is expected to intensify with a new trial against former general Luis Pérez Documet that began on October 26 in the Huancayo Court. Pérez, who Hermoza Ríos named head of the Political-Military Front (PMF) in the Mantaro region in the central Andes, is accused of having kidnapped and tortured Luis Ramírez, a student at the Universidad del Centro, in 1992.

Also, Pérez Documet and other officers of Mantaro's PMF are being investigated for the detention and disappearance of 62 college students between 1990 and 1993. Forty-two cases of kidnapping were reported while Pérez Document was the PMF commander in the region.

The importance of the Luis Ramírez case is that he is the only student who survived the torture and managed to escape from the army garrison where he and others were held.

Institute of Legal Defense lawyer, Carlos Rivera, said the trial against Documet will prove that the kidnapping of his client (Ramírez) was part of a systematic practice carried out by the military under orders of Pérez Documet.

Ramirez has received four threats against his life to dissuade him from testifying against Pérez Document. It is widely believe that the threats came from military circles.

In another act of defiance, Pérez Document disregarded the court's

order to show up for questioning, preferring instead to go into hiding. The court issued an order for his arrest.

Meanwhile, President Toledo's popularity is less than 20 percent, and no political party has managed to come up with a viable candidate for the April 2006 presidential election.

In recent years, accusations of corruption, illegal use of funds and abuse of power have been leveled against leading members of virtually every party contemplating a run for the presidency.

Given the growing tension within the military over these trials and the profound crisis of democratic rule under the Toledo regime, Fujimori could put himself forward as the only alternative to the political crisis and even a potential military coup.

As a virtually unknown candidate in the 1990 presidential election, Fujimori exploited the population's resentment against the upper crust of Peruvian society and postured as a representative of the "common man."

Memories of his victory in 1990 over the favored candidate of the Peruvian oligarchy, well-known novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, based on a right-wing populist campaign that exploited the bitter resentment of the Peruvian "cholos" and Indians towards the mainly white ruling class, are still fresh in the minds of many Peruvians.

For many of these people, the economic situation under President Toledo has become unbearable. Throughout his term in office, Toledo's government has been besieged by massive protest marches of industrial workers, municipal workers, bus drivers, schoolteachers and doctors.

The growing wave of strikes and 24-hour stoppages that paralyzed major cities in the past years, are an expression of the anger and desperation of large sectors of the Peruvian middle and working class.

In addition to the generals who ran the army and the bankers and industrialists who benefited from the massive privatizations of Fujimori's regime, there are more politically backward sections of the middle class and even more oppressed layers who think that life was better with "El Chino," as Fujimori was called (though he is of Japanese descent) and credit him with "putting an end to terrorism."

For many more Peruvians, however, he is remembered for implementing the International Monetary Fund-inspired "structural adjustment" programs that led to sweeping privatizations of state industries and the destruction of jobs. Many are also conscious of the brutal crimes carried out in the name of repressing "terrorism."

One recent poll showed that if Fujimori were allowed to run in the 2006 election, he would make it into a run-off against the candidate of the right-wing National Unity Party, Lourdes Flores. The poll gave Flores 25 percent of the vote and Fujimori 17 percent.

At the same time, the poll showed that 65 percent of Peruvians opposed allowing Fujimori to stand as a candidate, and 70 percent believed the ex-president guilty of the crimes with which he has been charged.

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