

Who is afraid of Pedro Castillo?

Via [Viento Sur](#)

What happened in the Peruvian elections is perhaps the closest thing to the “storm in the Andes” announced by Luis E. Valcárcel in a now classic book with a prologue by José Carlos Mariátegui. Attracted by the idea of “myth”, Mariátegui ended up writing: “And it does not matter that for some it is the facts that create the prophecy and for others it is the prophecy that creates the facts”.

What happened last June 6 is certainly not an indigenous uprising as imagined by Valcárcel, nor one as imagined by Mariátegui, as the midwife of socialism. But it was an electoral uprising of deep Andean Peru, whose effects covered the whole country.

Pedro Castillo Terrones is far from being a messiah, but he appeared in the electoral contest “out of nowhere”, as if he were one. With Sunday’s results, he is about to become the most unlikely president. Not because he is an outsider -the country is full of them since the “Chinese” Alberto Fujimori took power in 1990, after defeating Mario Vargas Llosa-, but because of his class origin: he is a peasant from Cajamarca tied to the land who, without ever abandoning this link with the mountain, overcame various difficulties and became a rural teacher; in the presidential debates he closed his speeches with the catchphrase “a teacher’s word”.

From the teaching profession, Castillo jumped to the national stage in 2017, with a combative teachers’ strike against the union leadership itself. A recent documentary, precisely titled “El profesor”, gives several clues about his own person, his family and his environment. Unlike Valcárcel,

whose indigenism was inserted in the dispute of elites – the Andean Cuzco and the “white” Lima – Castillo comes from a much more marginal north in terms of Peruvian geopolitics. His identity is more “provincial” and peasant than strictly indigenous. From there he conquered the southern Andean electorate and also attracted, although to a lesser extent, the popular vote in Lima.

That is why, when Keiko Fujimori accepted the challenge of going to debate in the town of Chota and said with disgust “I had to come all the way here”, the phrase remained as one of the setbacks of her campaign. Castillo had managed to take politics out of Lima and take it to the distant and isolated corners of the country, which he traveled one by one in his campaign with a giant pencil in his hands.

Castillo’s irruption in the first round -with almost 19% of the votes- generated a real hysteria in the well-to-do sectors of the capital. And in keeping with the current fashion of zombie anti-communism, it was expressed in a generalized “No to communism”, even manifested with giant posters in the streets. There was no shortage of racism either. Peru seems to be less shy about expressing it in public than neighboring Ecuador or Bolivia.

For example, the “polemic” journalist Beto Ortiz kicked out Perú Libre deputy Zaira Arias from his TV set, showing that “political correctness” did not reach sectors of the Lima elites. He then called her a “greengrocer” and later disguised himself as an Indian -with his usual histrionics- to sardonically welcome Pedro Castillo’s “new Peru”.

Castillo’s candidacy was also a constant victim of “terruqueo” (accusation of links with terrorism) for his union alliances during the teachers’ strike and, without previous experience in the electoral arena, of his own stumbles in interviews.

As Alberto Vergara wrote in the New York Times: “Those who

made the most treacherous use of the politics of fear were those in the pro-Fujimori camp, the upper classes and the big media. Businessmen threatened to fire their workers if Castillo won; ordinary citizens promised to put their domestic servants out of work if they opted for Peru Libre; the streets were filled with invasive signs paid for by businessmen warning of an imminent communist invasion". Even Mario Vargas Llosa abandoned his traditional anti-Fujimorismo -for which he had even called to vote for Ollanta Humala in 2011- and decided to give a chance to a candidate with the last name of Fujimori.

Castillo is far from coming from a communist culture. He was active for several years in local politics under the acronym of Perú Posible, the party of former president Alejandro Toledo, and although he ran for Perú Libre, he is not an organic of this party, which was originally born as Perú Libertario. Peru Libre defines itself as "Marxist-Leninist-Mariateguist", but many of its candidates deny being "communists".

The party leader, Vladimir Cerron, defined the movement that lined up behind Castillo as a "provincial left", opposed to the "caviar" left in Lima. Castillo is a "compatible evangelical" Catholic: his wife and daughter are active participants in the evangelical Church of the Nazarene and he himself joins in their prayers. In the campaign he repeatedly positioned himself against abortion or egalitarian marriage, although today several of his technicians and advisors come from the urban left led by Verónica Mendoza, with progressive social visions. It will be necessary to see the coexistence of tendencies in the future government of Castillo, which is not expected to be easy.

Castillo also defines himself as a "rondero", in reference to the peasant patrols created in Cajamarca in the 70's to confront cattle rustling and which were later replicated in the country in the 80's to confront the Shining Path

guerrilla, and often function as an authority in the countryside.

The uncertainty of a future Castillo government does not have to do, precisely, with the constitution of a communist experience of any nature whatsoever. A "Venezuelanization" as announced by his detractors also seems very improbable. The Armed Forces do not seem easily subsumable, the parliamentary weight of Castilism is scarce, the economic elites are more resistant than in a purely oil country like Venezuela and the structuring of the social movement does not anticipate a "revolutionary nationalism" of the Chavist or Cuban type.

The declarations of "profe Castillo" show a certain plebeian-type contempt for institutions, little clarity about the governmental course and visions about the repression of crime that promote the extension of "rondera justice" to the rest of Peru (which often imposes various types of punishments to those who commit crimes) but also include hard-handed speeches, as was seen in the electoral debates.

The presence in the government of the "other left" -urban and cosmopolitan- may function as a virtuous balance between the progressive and the popular, although it will also be a source of internal tensions. Some compare Castillo to Evo Morales. There are undoubtedly shared symbologies and histories. But there are also differences. One is purely anecdotal: instead of exaggerating his achievements in a meritocratic key, Morales claims not to have finished high school (although some of his teachers claim otherwise). The other is more important for government purposes: the former Bolivian president arrived at the Palacio Quemado in 2006 after eight years as head of the parliamentary bloc of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) and the experience of a presidential campaign in 2002, in addition to having behind him a confederation of social movements with strong territorial weight, articulated in the MAS. Castillo has, for now, a party that is not his own and a still diffuse social/electoral support.

The "white fear" of Castillo is linked, more than to a real danger of communism, to the perspective of losing power in a country where the elites had avoided the turn to the left in the region and co-opted those who won with reformist programs such as Ollanta Humala. To put it in a more "old-fashioned" way: the "white fear" is a fear of a weakening of gamonalismo, as the system of power built by the landowners before the agrarian reform was called in Peru, and which lasted in other ways and forms in the country. Nobody knows if the elites will also be able to co-opt Castillo, but in this case there is a deeper class abyss than in the past and the scenario is more generally less predictable. The "Castillo surprise" is too recent and in many senses he is an unknown even for those who will be his collaborators.

Possibly the electoral storm will herald others to come if the elites want to continue governing as they have become accustomed to do.