

Peru needs a miracle

Darkness had fallen over Lima. The clouds of gritty dust that perpetually swirl through Peru's capital dimmed the feeble street lights into an eerie glow. The car in which I was being driven stopped in front of the office of my next interview, Luis Alva Castro, Peru's then-prime minister and a losing candidate in last Sunday's presidential elections.

"Senor," said the aide who was escorting me, "take off your watch and put it into your shirt." I was flabbergasted. Why? "Because, senor, we may be attacked and robbed on the steps of the prime minister's office."

Nowhere in Peru is safe these days. Guerrillas of the Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path, lobbed mortar shells at the office of President Alan Garcia shortly after I met with him. Hotel lobbies are sandbagged and filled with guards toting sub-machineguns. Sendero terrorists routinely toss sticks of dynamite into popular restaurants or bomb power lines, blacking out Lima for hours or even days.

Lima has 4.5 million people. Half are unemployed and live in shanty towns. Their growing desperation and frightful poverty makes even the prime minister's office unsafe. Outside of Lima, the situation is even worse. Up in the cold, arid altiplano of the snow-capped Andes, millions of Indians who don't even speak Spanish subsist on a diet of potatoes and coca leaves. Peru, one of the world's poorest nations, has only half the gross national product per capita of Mexico.

Last Sunday's elections, it was hoped, would begin to change all this. The favored candidate, Mario Vargas Llosa, a witty, charming man and one of Latin America's best-known novelists, ran on a platform of Thatcherism. He promised to slash Peru's monstrous bureaucracy, bring back free enterprise to the heavily socialized nation, and restore confidence of foreign investors.

Llosa, a former Marxist turned conservative, seemed to be the only candidate capable of rescuing Peru's dying economy and doing something about the fanatical Maoists of Sendero Luminoso, who have killed upward of 18,000 in recent years in

ERIC MARGOLIS



both urban terrorism and fighting in the remote Andes.

Peru is also the world's leading exporter of coca, which is turned into cocaine in Colombia. Llosa promised to co-operate with the U.S. in a vague program to get farmers to switch to other crops.

Just when Llosa seemed poised to win a clear majority and sweep away the left-leaning Aprista party of Alan Garcia and Alva Castro, and do in the communists to boot, up popped the unknown Alberto Fujimori, a first-generation Peruvian whose parents came from Japan. In a stunning upset, Llosa and Fujimori came out even. A runoff election will now be necessary.

"Fuji, who?" everyone asked. Fujimori, an agricultural engineer, has no party apparatus to speak of and is almost as conservative as Llosa. His brilliant contribution to modern politics was to campaign in traditional Japanese robes.

This bizarre apparition obviously moved Peru's Indians, who are almost all illiterate, to emulate New Guinea's cargo cults. During World War II, New Guinea's stone age primitives noted that all sorts of goodies arrived in Allied cargo aircraft. After the war, they erected models of airplanes and prayed to them so the goodies would once again magically arrive.

One must suspect that many credulous Peruvian voters believed that electing the berobed Fujimori would somehow produce a monsoon of yen and a vast inflow of rich Japanese. Maybe Fujimori reminded them of some ancient Inca deity. Who knows?

Comic as this may be, Peru desperately needs a strong, free-market government. Chances are high that Llosa, a person of short patience and erratic moods, might resign and sulk off to his library. Or that Fujimori may join the Llosa camp. The real problem, though, is that wretched Peru may be beyond salvation, no matter who wins the next election.

The economy is in ruins and the government up to its ears in debt. Worse, the great majority of the population, Peru's Indians, seem incapable of being touched by the modern world. You see them, small, wizened people in old greasy hats, their skins smeared with dirt, standing immobile, half-stunned, chewing coca, their watery eyes fixed on something far away that lowlanders cannot see.

The wild socialist policies of previous Peruvian governments left them unaffected; free market capitalism will probably have little more influence. They simply live in a different world, a different dimension.

Peru needs a miracle. Either another Great Inca or boatloads of Japanese investors coming to invest their big yen with El Presidente Fujimori.

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