

PPK

by James Como (August 2016)



On October 3, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (PPK) will turn seventy-eight. On Thursday, July 28th, Peruvian Independence Day, he was sworn in as President of the republic. That it took so long for Peruvians to recognize the gold in their midst speaks to the . . . anomalous . . . nature of Peruvian socio-political intelligence; that they finally did promises hope. During a five-year term (no second consecutive term allowed) very much good can be done: administratively, economically, (infra-) structurally and even culturally. But socio-politically? In that respect Peruvians trend towards ideologically-bound, racially-motivated, politically in-the-weeds, semi-entropic knuckleheadedness. They especially distrust cosmopolitan high-achievers.

PPK is a former investment banker and member of the World Bank and the IMF, an Oxford and Princeton graduate, a member of three Peruvians administrations in four different capacities, and a multi-lingual musician of considerable skill. His mother, of Swiss-French extraction, and his father, a Polish Jew, fled Germany in the thirties. Maxim Hans Kuczynski became a pathologist of considerable note, so much so that he was invited to Peru to reform its San Pablo leprosarium in the jungle, where PPK spent much of his youth helping his father – hands-on help.

In 2010 he finished third in the race for the presidential palace, his use of social media and popularity among young Peruvians surprising everyone; this April he finished second (with 21%, in a field of some dozen candidates), forcing a run-off against Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of the imprisoned former president. He won that with 50.12% of the vote. That's how close it was, and it should not have been. (A legitimate concern over the decline in public safety drove many middle-class voters to Fujimori: they believe that PPK came late, and perfunctorily, to the issue.)

Married to a Peruvian for nearly fifty years, I have lived in and traveled extensively in and around the country since 1967. Earlier this year I visited briefly during the first-round campaign, when I was reminded of something Anwar Sadat said so many years ago, that he seemed tall because he was surrounded by pygmies. PPK was surrounded by pygmies, but he (as was Sadat) is also tall. He told Peruvians that the infra-structure must be built and re-built, corruption must be eliminated, that schools should teach English (as well as German, Chinese and Quechua, the most commonly-spoken indigenous language), and that – amidst growing prosperity and diminishing poverty – the wide-spread lack of proper nutrition and potable water were catastrophic afflictions, not to mention embarrassments. Moreover, taxes must be reduced and foreign investment invited, because Peru cannot advance on its own.

Some of this is old porridge indeed. I heard it most prominently over twenty-five years ago, when I covered the presidential election which featured the candidacy of Mario Vargas Llosa. I had always been struck by the entrepreneurial spirit of astonishingly hard-working Peruvians, which Vargas Llosa – and his advisor and then-friend Hernando de Soto, the ground-breaking economist and author of *The Other Path*, in opposition to the Shining Path – understood. He would lose to Alberto Fujimori.

What PPK understands well, along with so many Peruvians, is not only that spirit but that 1/ capital plus labor equals wealth and that 2/ wealth is not enough to assure evenly dispersed prosperity, general well-being and cultural nourishment.

In his 40-minute inaugural address, given before the Peruvian congress (some of whose members refused to stand or to applaud when he entered and departed: the *Fujimoristas* – not the Left-wing block of parties – are notoriously bitter

people, but that's another story) PPK was variously moved, calm, challenging, infectiously optimistic, solemn, and grateful, especially in his appreciation of the great Fernando Belaunde Terry, the former president who, with an unrelentingly congenial manner, restored democracy to Peru in 1980, and of his place in the tides Peruvian history and identity. He remains a profoundly modest man.

During his address PPK unprecedentedly asked certain ministers to stand, as he charged them with specific tasks: commentators would say, "we now know their faces." In summary form he listed his highest priorities to assure his own accountability, promising to go about the country personally, even to the most remote villages, to "persuade and educate" his fellow citizens with respect to his policies. (On a personal note he remembered Iquitos, located in the depths of the jungle where he had spent his youth and promised a road to that interior.) He drove home three other priorities: 1/ the inclusion of arts education in public school curricula, 2/ the enhancement of, and the people's ready accessibility to, public health facilities and social services, and 3/ a war on corruption, for which he will request special powers.

He noted that the end of his term would coincide with the bicentennial of Peruvian independence, and at the end of his address he emphasized that he was not asking for any commitment to a particular president or party – these come and go – but to the country itself. His wish, he said, is to fulfill the dream of the founders of the republic: "I repeat here the founding belief of our *patria*: 'one republic, firm and happy in its unity.' *Viva el Perú!*"

At the very center of South America, and on the Pacific Rim, Peru should matter to us, and this man matters to Peru. I, for one, can only hope that the pygmies don't get him.

Over the past thirty years, James Como has written on Peru for *Worldview*, *National Review*, and *The New Criterion*. His latest book is [here](#).

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