

PERU: Chaotic start could mean constant political crisis under Castillo

The belated addition of the former World Bank economist Pedro Francke to President Pedro Castillo's cabinet late on 30 July represents a positive development following a tumultuous couple of days. Francke had initially balked at serving under Castillo's pick for prime minister (PCM), Guido Bellido. However, Castillo seems to have convinced Francke to reconsider. Francke immediately committed to "responsible" economic changes, respect for private property, and a clear separation between his ministry (MEF) and the governing *Peru Libre* (PL) party. The problem is that the plus of Francke's return to the fold is eclipsed by the Bellido appointment and its implications, together with what the past few days say about Castillo's motivations and methods.

To say that Castillo got off to a bad start with his cabinet appointments is a major understatement. The unveiling was delayed; there are only two women in the line-up; Bellido's appointment is deeply controversial; and Francke initially dropped out. It is Bellido that is in the eye of the storm. A congressman from the PL, Bellido is close to the hard-left party boss Vladimir Cerron; faces an investigation for defending the Shining Path (SL) terrorist organization; supports the regime in Cuba; and holds homophobic and misogynistic views. The SL-related investigation against Bellido means that he is barred from participating on the congressional defense or intelligence commissions but – in the event that he is ratified as PCM by Congress – he would have access to classified intelligence reports.

The constitution stipulates that Congress must approve with a simple majority (66) a new cabinet and (PCM) within 30 days of its nomination. The PL plus its new ally, Together for Peru (JPP), total 42 out of 130 seats. Either the appointment was, therefore, an incredibly maladroit and amateurish move that Castillo failed to properly consider or – the more likely scenario – Castillo and Cerron are planning to goad Congress into voting down the Bellido-led cabinet in order to improve their chances of advancing a constitutional reform. The constitution effectively operates a two-strike rule under which if Congress strikes down two votes of confidence, the executive is empowered to dissolve the legislature. In May, Cerron floated the idea of overcoming congressional resistance to a constitutional re-write by submitting issues to votes of confidence and then dissolving Congress if it proved necessary.

If this was indeed the plan, it is deeply confrontational and all but scuppers efforts to reach out to moderates; for example, the Purple Party (PM), which was gearing up to support the government after Castillo's pragmatic shift following the June run-off election, has categorically refused to endorse Bellido as PCM. The two key questions now are a) whether Castillo makes any changes to his cabinet in light of congressional opposition and b) how coordinated opposition parties in Congress are in their strategies to counter the new president and Cerron. Some in Congress argue that they must not "take the bait" over Bellido because the more important issue is to block a constitutional re-write; they advocate censure votes against individual ministers. Meanwhile, hardline Castillo opponents are already doing the impeachment math. Castillo's flouting of rules governing the reporting of public officials' meetings and/or his nomination of Bellido could be grounds for an impeachment vote. Either way, political instability appears unavoidable.

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