

## Son of illiterate peasants defeats political royalty in Peru election



*Newly Elected President of Peru Pedro Castillo waves at supporters.*

By Mitra Taj and Julie Turkewitz  
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**Lima:** His parents were peasant farmers who never learned to read. As a child, he walked hours to school, before becoming a teacher himself. Then, two months ago, he burst onto Peru's political scene as an anti-establishment candidate with a captivating call to the ballot box: "No more poor people in a rich country."

And on Monday night (Tuesday AEST), nearly a month since the second round of the presidential election, officials declared Pedro Castillo, 51, the next president of Peru. In a very close vote, he defeated Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of a right-wing former president and herself a towering symbol of the Peruvian elite.

Castillo's victory, however narrow the margin, is the clearest repudiation of the country's establishment in 30 years. It is also the third straight loss for Fujimori.

Castillo, a socialist, will become Peru's first left-wing president in more than a generation, and the first to have lived most of his life as a "campesino" — or peasant — in a poor Andean region.

The announcement of his victory came after a lengthy effort by Fujimori to have about 200,000 votes tossed out in areas where Castillo won by a landslide, an action that would have disenfranchised many poor and Indigenous Peruvians.

In the end, the election authorities dismissed all requests by Fujimori's party to discount ballots from an official tally that put Castillo about 40,000 votes ahead.

"Votes from the highest mountain and farthest corner of the country are worth the same as votes from San Isidro and Miraflores," Castillo told throngs of supporters last month, referring to two upscale districts in Lima.



*Supporters of Pedro Castillo celebrate after he was declared president-elect of Peru.*

"No more making fun of workers, peasant leaders or teachers. Today, we must teach the youth, the children, that we are all equal before the law."

Many of Castillo's supporters said they had voted for him in the hope that he would reform the neo-liberal economic system put in place by Fujimori's father, Alberto Fujimori, which delivered economic growth and tamed inflation but failed to help millions of poor people.

The painful disparity became more glaring still when the pandemic struck. The coronavirus has ravaged Peru, which has the highest documented per capita COVID-19 death toll in the world. Nearly 10 per cent of its population has been pushed into poverty in the past year.

Castillo faces enormous challenges. Corruption and political vendettas have convulsed the nation in recent years, and the country has cycled through four presidents and two congresses in the past five years.

Perhaps most critically, Castillo, who has never held office, lacks the political experience and popularity that buoyed other left-wing leaders who took power in South America and would allow him to deliver ambitious reforms.

Castillo has promised to overhaul the political and economic system to address poverty and inequality and to replace the constitution with one that would increase the state's role in the economy.

Castillo grew up in Peru's northern highlands, and as a young man, he cleaned hotel rooms in Lima. After attending university in a city in northern Peru, he chose to move back to the same highland province where he grew up to run a school without running water or a sewage system.

As a candidate, Castillo travelled the country widely to hear from voters, often carrying a giant pencil under his arm to remind them of his promise to ensure equal access to quality education.

Castillo, who will take office on July 28, the 200th anniversary of Peru's independence from Spain, has portrayed himself as a clean start for a country with a long history of cronyism and corruption.

"Let's end this bicentennial, which has had a lot of problems along the way, and open the door so the next bicentennial is full of hope, with a future and a vision for a country in which we all enjoy and eat from the bread of the country," Castillo told a plaza full of supporters last month. "Let's take back Peru for Peruvians."

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