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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The December general strike in Arequipa has greatly intensified the political interest and activity in this country. Not only did it push opposition demands - which had theretofore been voiced only by a few - into the national limelight, it changed the prospects for a calm election with predictable results next June. Despite his oft-quoted statement of "My work must go on", President Odría is faced with the possibility of seeing an opposition party or coalition of parties take over the government next July twenty-eighth. No one with whom I have talked in Arequipa or Lima will hazard a guess as to the name of the next President, let alone his supporting party. Lima's walls and lamp posts are plastered with handbills put up by several parties, and loudspeaker-equipped cars cruise the streets in an attempt to whip up enthusiasm and support. Despite all this activity, however, there have been no repetitions of the violence which marked the night of December twenty-first in Arequipa. Political parties are content to insult each other on theatre stages and in the newspapers, and recent rallies which have been organized by the pro- and anti-government groups have been orderly and well run.

It is true that the Arequipa strike destroyed many of the present President's hopes of handing to his chosen successor the framework of his sound and farseeing economic and social programs; but it is also true that if free and honest elections are held next June, the voters may conceivably make their decision in favor of his policies. Who are the voters? They are the rich families of coast and sierra, the businessmen in the large cities, the taxi and truck drivers. They are the small store owners, the teachers, lawyers and the innumerable clerks and white collar workers. They are white, mestizo, Chinese, Negro and - a small group of them - educated Indians. Voting is mandatory in Perú, and those who break the law by staying away from the polls are liable to find themselves punished by being refused the rights of travelling in the country, marrying, matriculating in a university or holding any public office whatsoever. Those persons who can neither read nor write are exempted from the suffrage, which is another way of saying that the large majority of Indians - the Quechua and Aymara living in the isolation of the high mountains - have no voice in the creating and the control of their government. It can be argued that the literacy law is a practical one for Perú, excluding as it does a people who know next to nothing about western customs and who have little desire to accept western culture. But it can also be argued that restriction of the suffrage to the literate minority merely continues an economically and politically unhealthy state of affairs in which all hope of bringing the backward portions of the populace into the national life disappears.

Since the days of the first viceroys, the Peruvian people have been accustomed to the rule of the few over the many. The caudillos, the absolute lords of the vast encomiendas and haciendas of colonial Perú, formed the basis on which the political theory of the day was built. Their tenants were their slaves and subjects, their armies and their police forces. The exalted class of landowners made its own laws and worshipped its own social idols. One man's friendship for or loyalty to another was purely personal, based on the noble and manly qualities which the individual possessed. There were no popularly elected committees to govern over the affairs of the districts and provinces. Instead, the mighty caudillo, by reason of his might, ruled his lands, declared war on his neighbors, married off his subjects, jailed those whom he deemed criminals, and in short behaved like a monarch. Spain was too far away to touch him at first, and the viceroys in Lima were often too weak to send their troops against him. When the Peruvian State succeeded in gathering up most of the power in the country, it did so by defeating and confiscating the armies and arms of the landowners, thus becoming the mightiest caudillo of them all. Even in recent years when the need for powerful armed forces to defend the national borders had all but disappeared, the State maintained an army, navy and air force whose size was all out of proportion with the country's budget. Where economy called for the reduction of the services, pride and the belief in manly might disregarded the plea.

The middle classes were small and powerless in the colonial epoch, and the lower classes accepted their roles of serfs and servants. They were interested in the affairs of government only when those affairs effected them personally - when some new tax or levy was announced. Opposition to the powerful leaders came from those who belonged to their own social class; the gente met with their friends to decide whether to assassinate a rival, engage in a bit of graft or replace a difficult provincial authority with one of their followers. Under the above conditions, it is obvious that the capable, intelligent men in and out of government could do little to improve the political practices of the day.

When the Republic of Perú came into being after the end of the wars of independence in 1821 - a struggle which was decidedly not popular with some of the country's leading families - it was faced with the thorny problem of how to build a democratic form of government which would withstand the attacks of regionalism and the autocratically minded landlords. The spirit of patriotism, buoyed up by the defeat of the Spaniards, called for a democratic nation, but under the surface, caudillismo was as strong as ever. The constitution of the baby republic set up a system of checks and balances between executive, legislative and judicial branches, but the paper laws were powerless to stop the uprisings (popular and otherwise) which occurred in the nineteenth century and which threatened to destroy the democratic processes of national elections. In the twentieth century the State had matured sufficiently to bear the brunt of the 1914, 1919, 1930, 1933 and 1948 revolts without crumbling, although the pressure of the violence often forced it to retreat into the past. During most of the 1821-1956 period, and especially after one of the above forced retreats, the machinery of the State operated on the most personal of planes. Small groups of close friends formulated the laws and policies which in America and other countries arose from the convention halls and cloakrooms of well organized political

parties.

With well over a century of uprisings, self-centered political leaders and the constant struggle between democracy and autocracy under his belt, the average educated Peruvian is apt to regard the field of politics as an area to be entered only when personal pride and/or patriotic sentiment demands that action be taken. In some cases the lust for power and money is sufficient to make a politician out of a military man, teacher or lawyer. But the majority of my friends have told me that no matter what their own personal beliefs might be, they prefer to leave politics to the politicians and those brave souls who are not afraid of getting burnt. When it comes to voting, my friends are inclined to cast their ballots for their friends, for friends of friends, for members of "good" families, provided that the candidates command their admiration as individuals in their own right. Because of this personalistic and at times very regionalistic approach to elections, political philosophy and party platforms have found barren soil in Perú. When a given regime inspires hatred among the Peruvians instead of the omnipresent distrust, opposition leaders usually form a loosely organized party whose chief purpose is to work out ways of defeating the men in power, either by election or revolution. Little thought is given to the construction of positive policies which would benefit the country if and when the opposition group succeeds in ensconcing themselves in the Palace of Government in Lima. In event of success or in event of the disappearance of the motivating force which has given the group the support of a section of the populace, the party usually withers and dies. What is left of it is incorporated into various government offices, and a new group of opposition parties springs into being.

The voters themselves have helped in the growth of the numerous, temporary splinter groups during the history of the Republic. From the colonial period to the present, literate Peruvians have followed one leader of their choice instead of a well knit political organization. Moreover, in their innate individualism they are inclined to shy away from the close association with large groups of people, the elbow-rubbing, time consuming work in the committee rooms which is the basis of operations of our two huge political parties. Such work impinges on what many Peruvians think is an unalienable right - the right to withdraw from society and retire to the sanctity of family or self whenever the individual feels himself in danger of losing his identity as a man. The organizations which mean so much to U.S. political and economic life would have been anathema to the early Spaniards, and Spanish heritage is by no means dead in modern Perú. Although twentieth century contact with new ideas and methods has served to break down the old prejudices against getting one's hands dirty or associating with the lower classes, there are still many Peruvians who consider themselves above the sweat and hard labor involved in building a strong political party. Popular organizations such as the Rotary Club and the Lions International (membership in which is considered an honor in the towns we have visited) are bringing about a new conception of group activities in the country, but still the old disease of social claustrophobia persists. As a result, Perú continues to be debilitated by the lack of large, permanent partisan parties.

Another factor contributing to the lack of well organized national political groups is the extreme regionalism to be found in Perú. Arequipa is perhaps the supreme example of this regionalism. During the

general strike, the leader of the Partido Restaurador in the city was labeled "a traitor to Arequipa" (WHM-28). In the eyes of its citizens, the White City is more of a republic than a provincial capital. To a lesser degree, the same thing can be said of Cuzco. Although I am acquainted only with the cities of southern Perú, I have been told that Trujillo and other northern urban centers inspire more patriotism among their inhabitants than does the country as a whole. This lack of a national ideal, a national patriotism, hinders the formation of nationwide political organizations; rivalry between Lima and the provincial cities is such that in the past factional bickerings in the various areas have produced a host of discontented splinter groups.

In the June elections the factors which I have mentioned here will inevitably play a large part. But unless events take a violent turn in the next four months, the overweening individualism and regionalism may well be pushed aside by a rapidly developing popular desire to do away with the traditional governmental check reins and inaugurate a program of complete political liberty. I do not propose to discuss whether the country is or is not ready for such a move. In this introduction to politics in Perú, I have deliberately refrained from going into the political issues involved in the coming elections. The point is, however, that political interest seems to be at an all-time high, perhaps because of the increasing power of the middle class, and perhaps because the sound economic policies of the present regime have created an atmosphere in which the importance of national affairs is suddenly dawning in the minds of people who heretofore have been concerned only with keeping themselves and their families alive. In any case, President Odría has not tightened controls on press and public gatherings, and I feel that in the future I will be able to report on the political developments in Perú in complete freedom.

Sincerely,

*William H. MacLeish*  
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