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"The Curse of Pizarro's Chair..."

Photo, courtesy of: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cr5jpvv06e1o>

Dear Friends,

The phrase "*Pizarro's Chair*" is deeply embedded in Peruvian political culture and refers to the office of the presidency. It stems from the centuries-old history of the Government Palace in Lima, which is built on the exact site where Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro founded his government house in 1535.

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Because the executive seat has continuously operated from the same geographic location through the Spanish conquest, the viceroyalty era, and the modern republic, the palace itself is officially nicknamed "*La Casa de Pizarro*" (Pizarro's House). Pizarro ruled Peru through absolute, violent authority. Referring to the modern executive office as "Pizarro's Chair" subtly links modern presidential power to the archaic, absolute, and centralist ruler who founded the state. Pizarro met a bloody end when he was violently assassinated inside his own palace by rivals in 1541. Journalists frequently reference "*The Curse of Pizarro's Chair*" to draw a

dark historical parallel to how modern Peruvian heads of state are systematically ruined, imprisoned, or driven to suicide after taking office. On July 28, Keiko Fujimori—the daughter of the country's infamous 1990s strongman—becomes the 67th Peruvian president and ascends to that high office after four attempts to get there. The red and white presidential sash has long resembled less an emblem of democratic honor and more a precursor to a prison uniform. For decades, the Pizarro's Chair has seemed cursed, systematically devouring its occupants in a relentless cycle of greed, institutional warfare, and betrayal. As a new administration



The Preseidentil Palace, Lima, Peru: La Casa de Pizarro.



A. Fujimori. Photo, courtesy of: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/sep/14/transformative-for-better-and-for-worse->

takes the helm, the nation is forced to ask a sobering question: is there any genuine ground for optimism, or are we simply witnessing the next chapter of an ongoing tragedy? To understand the depth of the skepticism greeting the new president, one must first look at the wreckage left behind by her predecessors. The common thread binding most of Peru's modern leaders is Odebrecht, a mammoth Brazilian construction conglomerate (now rebranded as Novonor). Odebrecht weaponized a corporate bribery department, systematically buying off Latin American heads of state in exchange for lucrative public infrastructure contracts. Let us examine how the Peruvian presidency became steeped in infamy.

Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000): He was the architect of Peru's modern political landscape and the new president's father. After orchestrating a "self-coup" in 1992 to dissolve parliament, his regime used death squads (the Colina Group) to massacre civilians, embezzled millions in public funds, and wiretapped political opponents. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison for human rights abuses and corruption. He passed away in September 2024 shortly after receiving a controversial humanitarian pardon.



The Metro, Courtesy of https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lima_and_Callao_Metro

Alejandro Toledo (2001–2006): rose to power on an anti-corruption wave following Fujimori's collapse and he became the first major domino to fall in the Odebrecht dragnet. He was found guilty of accepting \$35 million in bribes from the Brazilian firm in exchange for the highway contract connecting Peru and Brazil. After fleeing to the United States and enduring a lengthy extradition battle, Toledo was extradited and, in October 2024, was sentenced to twenty years and six months in prison.

Alan García (1985–1990, 2006–2011): had the gift of the gab. He was a masterful orator who served two distinct terms. His second administration was deeply entangled in Odebrecht kickbacks related to the construction of the Lima Metro system. In April 2019, as

heavily armed police officers knocked on his door to execute a preliminary arrest warrant, García retreated to his bedroom and committed suicide by shooting himself in the head.

Ollanta Humala (2011–2016): is a former army officer who ran on a leftist nationalist platform. Prosecutors successfully proved that he and his wife, Nadine Heredia, illegally accepted \$3 million from Odebrecht alongside illicit campaign funding from Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Following periods of pre-trial detention, Humala made history in April 2025 by being sentenced to fifteen years in prison for money laundering.

Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (2016–2018): known as PPK, is a Wall Street veteran and economist who promised technocratic transparency. He was caught in a massive conflict of interest when evidence emerged that his private consulting firms (Westfield Capital) had received hundreds of thousands of dollars from Odebrecht while he was serving as a government minister under Toledo. He was forced to resign in 2018 to avoid a humiliating impeachment. He spent years under house arrest. (In an unexpected twist in May 2026, Keiko Fujimori publicly

apologized to a legally cleared PPK for the aggressive parliamentary warfare her party waged against him.



Pedro Castillo (2021–2022): was a rural schoolteacher who symbolized a protest vote against the traditional political elite. Facing multiple burgeoning corruption investigations just sixteen months into his term, Castillo attempted a reckless, televised "self-coup" by trying to illegally dissolve Congress and rule by decree. His own security forces and Congress abandoned him within hours. He was swiftly impeached, arrested, and remains in the same specialized prison built for disgraced heads of state.

Keiko Fujimori does not enter the government palace with a clean slate either. She has spent the last decade dodging the exact same legal minefield that destroyed her predecessors. For years, Peruvian prosecutors pursued her in the high-profile "*Cocktails*" case. She was accused of leading a criminal enterprise within her party, Fuerza Popular, to launder millions in illicit campaign contributions—including \$1.2 million from Odebrecht—for her 2011 and 2016 presidential bids. The case subjected her to three separate stints of preventive detention. However, her path to the presidency was cleared by a series of dramatic judicial strokes. In late 2025, Peru's Constitutional Court dismissed the money-laundering charges, ruling that the specific statutes could not be applied retroactively to her earlier campaigns. While she celebrates these rulings as vindication against "*political persecution*," critics view it as a masterclass in exploiting institutional loopholes.

If history is a guide, the greatest threat to a new president is a hostile, fragmented Congress. Over the last decade, the legislature has weaponized a vague constitutional clause called "*permanent moral incapacity*" to impeach presidents like baseball players striking out. Peruvians have watched six different presidents cycle through the palace in less than eight years. This legislative dysfunction has alienated the population. Continuous political infighting has triggered massive, frequently bloody street protests. The deep structural divide between the affluent political elite in Lima and the impoverished, neglected rural provinces remains a volatile powder keg ready to ignite at any moment. If the new president hopes to foster any sense of optimism, she must urgently pivot from political survival to addressing a country gripped by a security crisis. Violent extortion rackets have metastasized across Peru. Small business owners, bus drivers, and local entrepreneurs face daily death threats if they do not pay protection money. Urban transport networks are regularly paralyzed by strikes as workers demand protection from assassinations. Exploiting Peru's prolonged political instability and post-pandemic economic vulnerability, sophisticated foreign criminal syndicates—most notably Venezuela's notorious Tren de Aragua—have deeply embedded themselves in urban centers, driving violent crime rates to unprecedented heights. Perhaps the heaviest lift will be institutional. According to regional data, nearly 90% of Peruvians believe their politicians are thoroughly corrupt. The executive branch has lost its moral authority. The only ground for optimism lies in the grim reality that Peru has finally hit rock bottom. If the new administration utilizes its legislative leverage not to settle old scores, but to enact strict anti-crime policies and restore basic public safety, it has an opportunity to slowly rebuild public trust. However, in a country where the road from the Government Palace to the Barbadillo prison facility is so heavily trodden, the incoming president is acutely aware of the stakes.

In Peru, the transition from head of state to inmate is just one political crisis away.

~ Fr. Simon Cadwallader



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