

Peru Overview

- [Environment](#)
- [Peoples](#)
- [History](#)
- [Governance](#)
- [Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples](#)

Environment

Peru is located on the Pacific coast of South America. It borders Ecuador and Colombia to the north, Brazil and Bolivia to the east and Chile to the south. Geographically, it has three distinct regions: a narrow coastal strip, the wide Andean mountain range and the Amazon rainforest. The coastal strip is mainly desert. The Andean region has wet and dry seasons, although the eastern Andes generally receive much more rainfall than the western slopes. Peru is divided up into 25 departments: in five of these (in the Andes) - Apurimac, Ayacucho, Cuzco, Huancavelica and Puno - indigenous Peruvians constitute a numerical majority.

Peoples

Main languages: Spanish, Quechua, Aymara, other indigenous languages

Main religions: Christianity (majority Roman Catholic and a growing number of evangelical Protestants), indigenous religions

Indigenous peoples include Achuar, Aguaruna, Ashaninka, Shipibo, Huambisa, Quechua and Aymara, who together comprise 45 per cent of the population.^[1] Other minority groups include Afro-Peruvians, Chinese and Japanese (3%).^[2]

There are 51 indigenous peoples in Peru. By far the most numerous are the highland Quechua. About 4.5 million Peruvians speak Quechua and 8 million identify themselves as Quechua.^[3] The Aymara population of some 500,000^[4] is concentrated in the southern highland region near Puno. Lowland indigenous groups include the Achuar, Aguaruna, Ashaninka, Huambisa, Quechua and Shipibo.

Despite the historical lack of a 'national' indigenous movement in Peru and a notable emphasis on class identity among peasant communities in Peru, highland organizations have recently come together to form the increasingly ethnically minded Coordinadora Nacional de Comunidades Afectados por la Minería (CONACAMI).

Native leaders in the Amazon (from Aguaruna, Huambisa, Ashaninka, Shipibo-Conibo, Amuesha and Cocama-Cocamilla communities) formed their own ethnic federations as early as the 1970s. In recent years they have focused their efforts on protesting against oil company invasion and demanding government recognition of their territorial rights. According to the Asociación Inter-étnica para el

Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana (AIDSESEP), created in 1980, Aguaruna communities have successfully reclaimed land invaded by settlers for production of cocoa and coffee.

Since the late 1990s umbrella organizations such as the Conferencia Permanente de los Pueblos Indígenas del Perú (Permanent Coordinator of Indigenous Peoples in Peru, COPPIP) have been established to unite Andean and Amazonian interests under one ethnic banner. In contrast to national and pan-national ethnic movements in Ecuador, indigenous activism is less visible in Peru, but it is no less present and manifests itself in multiple ways.

Peruvians of African descent tend to be concentrated in the southern coastal regions. In response to their experience of poverty, marginalization and racism, they have recently created organizations such as the Asociación pro Derechos Humanos del Negro and Asociación Palenque, which fights for the full achievement of equal rights.

Peru was among the first Latin American republics to establish diplomatic relations with the Japanese empire, in 1877, and issued a decree authorizing the immigration of contract labourers in 1898. Manual labour at sugar plantations and mills was the principal work. By the 1980s, Peruvians of Japanese descent totalled 48,000, the majority of whom lived in Lima. In 1990 a Japanese agronomist, Alberto Fujimori, became president. Many Japanese are owners or operators of small shops and bars, and they have made a significant contribution to the Peruvian economy. Today they constitute one of the country's most influential (both economically and politically) ethnic minorities.

History

In 1969 General Juan Velasco's radical military government initiated a far-reaching agrarian reform programme, with the objective of breaking up the hacienda system in Peru. However, the reform had more impact on the coastal region than the highlands, and, when undertaken in the highland regions, it largely involved the installation of state-run farms rather than the direct restitution of lands to indigenous and peasant communities. This helped to create rather than appease social conflict: a number of illegal land invasions took place during the period due to the lack of a state presence in the Andean and Amazonian regions. As a result, grassroots *rondas campesinas* (civil defence patrols) were formed in northern Peru to combat the local thefts, delinquency and land invasions after agrarian reform. The lack of state presence in rural areas is still a problem in Peru. *Rondas campesinas* continue to exist in northern Peru, while their relationship to the state (police and the military) remains ambivalent. In more recent years there has been a systematic abandonment of rural areas: in 1981 the rural population was 34.8 per cent of the total Peruvian population; in 1993 29.9 per cent; in 1997 28.3 per cent.

The Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces, led initially by Velasco, incorporated indigenous symbols into its identity. It recognized Quechua as an official language in areas with a high proportion of indigenous people (1976), promoted bilingual education and issued legislation to protect the rights of native and peasant communities in highland and lowland regions (1974). In 1987 the Peruvian Congress introduced a new agrarian law which threatened to expropriate 'unused' communal land in the highlands and make it available for business and development. The clause was withdrawn, however, after a major protest by national farming organizations and international support groups.

In 1980 the Maoist guerrilla group Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) burst onto the national political scene, burning ballot boxes and hanging dead dogs from lampposts. It originated in the province of Ayacucho but gradually spread to other regions, forcing the government to declare a state of emergency in more than half of the country. Initially many indigenous peasants supported Sendero, which appealed to excluded Andean populations as a grassroots ethnic movement, but its economic and political

ideology disregarded and sought to destroy distinctive features of Andean life. Indigenous communities became increasingly wary of the organization's arbitrary violent methods. Despite the capture of Abimael Guzmán, Sendero remains active, although it no longer poses a significant threat to the Peruvian state: in total, the conflict between this guerrilla group and the Peruvian state authorities has claimed between 40,000 and 60,000 lives. Indigenous people have suffered the most; 75 per cent of the victims were Quechua-speakers and approximately 600,000 Quechua *campesinos* were displaced, fleeing from the conflict zones to the misery belts around Peru's major cities. Forty per cent of the violence took place in the Andean Department of Ayacucho; 68 per cent of people killed had no secondary education, 80 per cent of those killed were men and 54 per cent were married with families, leaving thousands of children orphaned.

Governance

Peasant community laws (*Leyes de comunidades campesinas*) were created in the 1970s as a result of agrarian reform. These laws granted residents of the new, autonomous 'peasant communities' collective rights to govern a geographically identified area of land as Peruvian citizens. Existing groups united with others to acquire deeds to land within a single community. Despite such advances, land conflict is still a major problem today.

Many national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) assisted Peru's indigenous groups in the demarcation and titling of their lands. Indigenous communities themselves have also become more politically organized, uniting with other minority groups to pressure the government about its economic and social policies. The use of fear and terror in counter-insurgency has diminished since Guzmán's capture (1992) and several important advances have been made in the area of indigenous rights legislation. The Peruvian Constitution of 1993 declares the state's duty to protect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the nation. It also acknowledges the right of indigenous communities to practise customary law. In April 1997, Congress passed a new law criminalizing racial discrimination, and since then there has been an important debate about the representation of indigenous peoples and other minority groups in the media. Black civil rights groups have also presented many cases of racial prejudice in the job application process in Peru.

However, there are still many problems. Sendero Luminoso continues to pose a threat in several areas, as does the violence surrounding the cocaine traffic. President Fujimori (1990-2000) reduced the status of the international treaties concerning human rights and rolled back indigenous land rights by removing the inalienability and indivisibility of indigenous communal lands. Seeking to encourage foreign investment and increase the exploitation of Peru's natural resources, he granted a large number of licences to forestry and oil companies, which have had a particularly negative impact on indigenous communities living in the Amazon basin. Indigenous claims to reject interventions of oil and mining companies on their lands have often failed because of a contradiction in the Peruvian legal system. While the subsoil currently belongs to Peru's national heritage, which the Peruvian state can grant transnational corporations access to for the purposes of extracting oil and minerals, peasant communities hold legal rights to the surface layer and therefore the right to restrict outside access to this land. The Peruvian state has recently dismissed indigenous claims to prevent foreign interventions, however, stating that they are not applicable in such cases. In Peru, royalty payments made by transnational corporations to benefit nearby communities affected by their mining activities are negotiated at around 1-3 per cent, while some larger mining companies have negotiated to pay no royalties at all. These figures fall below international standards.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

The Peruvian Constitution does not guarantee bilingual education, but the government has created a Bilingual Education Unit in the Ministry of Education (1997). Through this division the state works closely with international and national NGOs in promoting bilingual intercultural education. While this move is seen as a great advance by many indigenous rights organizations, it has been contested, even rejected, by many indigenous people, who claim that they need better education in Spanish in order to overcome the discriminatory practices of mainstream Peruvian society.

Due to a reform instituted for the regional elections of 2002, which sought to increase indigenous peoples' participation in national politics, party list quotas now require that 15 per cent of candidates be indigenous. And in 2004 President Alejandro Toledo - who drew extensively on his own indigenous roots in his electoral campaign - created the Instituto Nacional de Desarrollo de los Pueblos Andinos, Amazónicas y Afro-Peruanos (INDEPA). This promotes government policies on the rights of minority groups, coordinating between the government and indigenous organizations. It is made up of NGOs, representatives from different ministries and delegates elected by indigenous and Afro-Peruvian communities. In conjunction with such government initiatives, indigenous leaders have been working on proposals for constitutional reforms addressing the question of collective rights, but the majority of such proposals have not been transformed into effective legislation.

In the lowlands, apart from the activities of the guerrilla groups Tupac Amaru and Sendero Luminoso, the most significant issues are the Camisea Natural Gas Project and oil politics. These have had a tremendous effect on indigenous peoples, and have led to desperate campaigning by indigenous organizations and a major international effort on their behalf. The interests of logging and oil companies are in direct conflict with efforts to increase indigenous peoples' access to and control over the natural resources found in territories in which they have traditionally lived and subsisted.

In 2006, the Achuar managed to secure an agreement with Pluspetrol against further oil development on their lands, and in May 2007 the Achuar communities filed a class action suit against Occidental Petroleum Corp, claiming oil production has damaged their health and even killed a young indigenous boy after he drank water contaminated by Occidental's operations in the area. According to Amazon Watch, for 30 years the company has been discharging more than 1 million barrels a day of untreated toxic waste directly into the rainforest. As a result, the Achuar have unsafe levels of a range of toxins, including lead and cadmium, in their bodies. The toxic dumping has also poisoned the fish and game in the area.

Logging is another major problem for lowland indigenous communities, especially in Madre de Dios. As the world's largest exporter of mahogany wood, in June 2007 Peru came under sharp attack at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) for setting unsustainable export quotas and for failing to stop the activities of poachers in its national parks and forest reserves where indigenous communities live. Peru has since agreed to reduce its quota from 13,000 cubic meters of mahogany to less than 5,000, or about 1,200 trees per year. It also reaffirmed its pledge to protect indigenous tribes.

There is also the issue of mining. Rio Blanco mining project is a landmark case that will open up the way for the creation of a future 'mining district' in northern Peru, an area with no previous history of mining.

[1] CIA, *World Factbook*, 2006.

[2] CIA, *World Factbook*, 2006.

[3] Estimates from Van Cott, D.L. (ed.), *From Movements to Parties in Latin America: The Evolution of Ethnic Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

[4] *Ibid.*