

Peruvian communist leader dies after three decades in prison

written by Greg Butterfield
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Peruvian authorities displayed Abimael Guzmán to the media in a cage after his capture in 1992. He delivered a defiant speech.

Peruvian authorities reported Sept. 11 the death of Dr. Abimael Guzmán Reynoso, better known by his nom de guerre Presidente Gonzalo. The leader of the Communist Party of Peru-Sendero Luminoso (PCP-SL) had been imprisoned in near-total isolation for almost three decades since his capture in 1992. He was 86.

From 1980 until the mid-1990s, the Maoist PCP-SL, better known as the Shining Path in the U.S., waged a revolutionary guerrilla war against the Peruvian capitalist oligarchy and its imperialist masters in Washington and Wall Street. A parallel guerrilla struggle was fought by the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), a pro-Cuba Marxist-Leninist movement.

Hundreds of PCP-SL and MRTA supporters have spent decades behind bars in harsh conditions, often subject to torture, after being convicted on charges of “terrorism” in secret military courts under far-right dictator Alberto Fujimori in the 1990s.

A handful of “high-profile” political prisoners — including Guzman and [MRTA leader Victory Polay](#) — are jailed in the military fortress at Callao naval base, known for its brutal conditions, especially in the winter months.

In 1992, then-President Fujimori, with the full and enthusiastic backing of the CIA and the U.S. political establishment, carried out an “auto-coup” to consolidate power and suppress the guerrilla movements which had amassed enormous support among the rural masses and in the shanty towns surrounding the capital, Lima.

The guerrillas drew their main support from the Indigenous peasantry of the Andes, especially women, who played leading roles in the movement; 50% of the guerrilla fighters and 40% of the commanders were women. The facts are documented in the work of revolutionary anthropologist Carol Andreas, including her book, [“When Women Rebel: The Rise of Popular Feminism in Peru.”](#)

Alarmed by the scope of the uprising and its popularity, the U.S. sent Pentagon

“advisers,” assassination squads, weapons and millions of dollars in military aid to dictator Fujimori under the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations.



Elena Yparraguirre and Abimael Guzmán protest at court hearing in 2012.

Refusal to turn over body

Saluting Guzman’s contributions, the [National Democratic Front of the Philippines](#) stated: “In the course of attacking the revolutionary struggle of the Peruvian workers and people, U.S. imperialism and the Peruvian ruling classes waged a massive campaign of demonization against PCP-SL and Comrade Gonzalo. When he was captured in 1992, he was presented to the big capitalist media in a cage, wearing a black-and-white striped prisoner’s uniform. Like the lion that he is, he roared loudly in that cage, calling on the PCP-SL and the Peruvian workers and people to continue the struggle.

“The campaign of demonization against him and the PCP-SL has continued throughout Comrade Gonzalo’s 29 years of cruel imprisonment and is reaching crescendo in the wake of his death. The workers and peoples of the world are called upon to be critical-minded and discerning in evaluating the widespread black propaganda against the said party and revolutionary leader.”

Peruvian prison authorities have refused repeated requests from Guzmán’s wife, comrade and fellow political prisoner Elena Yparraguirre to allow her to see his body and make final arrangements. On Aug. 24, [Yparraguirre wrote a letter](#) appealing for treatment for his failing health.

[Resumen Latinoamericano reported](#) Sept. 14: “What is happening in Peru with the remains of the Senderista leader Abimael Guzmán has surpassed all the limits of infamy. Not satisfied with having kept him 29 years in prison in total isolation, now the political class, the oligarchy, the narcofujimorismo [right-wing forces that profit from illegal drug trafficking] and not a few ‘leftists’ fan the fire of the public lynching of the corpse, and applaud the decision of the prosecution not to hand him over to his wife and make it disappear by cremating it. All in the name of ‘peace and security.’”

“The remains of the PCP-SL leader will be declared in legal abandonment, so that the State can incinerate it and disappear the ashes. ‘This will prevent them from paying tribute to him,’ said an official spokesman. ... The Public Ministry, through the Institute of Legal Medicine, will determine the final destination of Guzmán’s remains, in accordance with current regulations ‘that allow for the preservation of social peace.’”

The [National Committee of Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War of Peru](#), which represents the PCP-SL prisoners, has published appeals from Yparraguirre, Guzmán’s family and international political movements demanding that his wife’s rights to receive his remains be respected.

Yparraguirre and other political prisoners have gone on a hunger strike to press this demand.

The real terrorists: Fujimori and U.S.

During his presidency from 1990 to 2000, Alberto Fujimori directed a reign of terror against leftists, students, labor union members, Indigenous communities, women and the poor — as he carried out vicious austerity measures ordered by Wall Street and the International Monetary Fund.

In early 1992, Fujimori and his military/police allies carried out a so-called auto-coup, suspending the constitution, dismissing congress and the courts, and implementing martial law throughout the country.

Little more than a month later, he ordered the massacre of more than 400 political prisoners at Canto Grande prison outside Lima.

U.S. military special forces intervened directly in the civil war under the guise of the “war on drugs.” Washington’s intelligence agencies participated in the capture of revolutionary leaders.

Peruvian industries nationalized under left-leaning military governments in the 1960s and 1970s were sold off at cut-rate prices to Western and Japanese monopolies in exchange for massive military aid from both Republican and Democratic U.S. administrations.

Thousands of political activists and suspected sympathizers were imprisoned. They were convicted by military courts where judges wore hoods to hide their identities and where defendants had no right to defend themselves. Many prisoners were tortured. Thousands more were simply “disappeared.”

Death squads targeted Indigenous villages in the Andes and impoverished shanty

towns around Lima from which the guerrilla movements drew support. Mass graves are still being uncovered today.

Fujimori also enacted a forced sterilization program against 300,000 Indigenous and poor women between 1996 and 2000, based on an earlier U.S. program in Puerto Rico.

In April 1997, Fujimori ordered the massacre of MRTA guerrillas who had occupied the Japanese Embassy in Lima to draw attention to the plight of political prisoners.

Kid-gloves for dictator

Nearly a decade after leaving office, in 2009, Fujimori was finally sentenced to 25 years in prison for crimes against humanity for ordering two death squad massacres. He served less than half his sentence before being given a presidential pardon on Christmas Eve 2018. This was done in exchange for his supporters in Congress blocking then-President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski's impeachment for corruption.

The pardon set off a wave of outraged protests in Peru and around the world, and soon forced the withdrawal of the pardon and [re-imprisonment of Fujimori](#). This was an important antecedent to the movement that swept trade union leader Pedro Castillo into the presidency of Peru this year.

It goes without saying that dictator Fujimori, even in prison, is treated with kid gloves compared with the revolutionaries who fought his regime. He remains politically powerful and influential.

His daughter Keiko Fujimori, a leader of the Peruvian right wing, was Castillo's main challenger in the presidential elections, and attempted for months afterward to prevent his taking office. Had she succeeded, her father would be free and residing in the presidential palace once more.

Fujimori and his imperialist backers are truly genocidal figures. The outcry casting Guzman and his supporters — who led an uprising against oppression — as even worse than Fujimori is beyond hypocritical.

Contradictions and struggle

It's true that Gonzalo and the PCP-SL leadership were extremely sectarian. They refused to work with the legally recognized left movements and often acted hostile to them, even violently so. They refused to form a united front with the MRTA in their military struggle against the Fujimori dictatorship. They also were openly hostile to Cuba and other socialist countries.

These were very real shortcomings of the strategy, tactics and ideology of the PCP-SL and soured many Peruvian and Latin American leftists on their struggle to this day.

But meeting sectarianism with sectarianism in the midst of a mass revolutionary movement is no solution. And certainly, abandoning class-war prisoners to the tender mercies of the ruling class after a defeat is inexcusable.

As Marxist leader [Sam Marcy wrote](#), “In a revolution, just as in a workers’ strike, the first and most important element to consider is the determination of which side to support. In the course of a strike there may be any number of formal violations of the democratic rights of those who promote crossing of the picket line, but as long as the strike is on, every worker is duty bound to support it.”

Marco Valbuena, writing for the [Communist Party of the Philippines \(CPP\)](#), noted: “Comrade Gonzalo was emphatic about the indispensable role of the Communist Party, the people’s army and the united front, especially with the peasantry and the most progressive elements of the intelligentsia. He, however, made an overestimation by 1990 of the strength of the people’s army and the potential for

urban uprisings.

“The PCP was also unable to use the united front to split the ranks of the middle bourgeoisie and reactionaries. It was only after Comrade Gonzalo’s capture that his party tried to avail of the full scale of the united front policy and tactics.”

Swimming against the tide

However great were Guzman’s errors, two objective factors were much more responsible for the defeat of the movement.

First, the guerrilla struggle of the PCP-SL and MRTA took place at a most difficult moment for the international class struggle.

These movements reached their height during the early 1990s, just as the world communist movement was suffering its worst-ever setbacks due to the counterrevolution in the USSR and Eastern Europe.

The Peruvian guerrillas were truly swimming against the tide. They boldly raised the red flag of revolution and communism at a time when many others were hauling it down. Their refusal to give up was an inspiration to many workers and oppressed peoples around the world.

Nevertheless, they were unable to overcome the global counterrevolutionary tidal wave that damaged and dispersed class-struggle movements everywhere. What was important, in the long run, was that they resisted.

The second factor in the defeat was the massive intervention of U.S. imperialism, and to a lesser extent Japan and other imperialist powers, to prop up Fujimori’s dictatorship and aid in suppressing the guerrilla movement and all left forces.

The real fear Washington, the Peruvian oligarchy and state apparatus have today

over the movement in support of Pedro Castillo is its potential to go beyond electoral politics and develop into a new revolutionary uprising of the workers and oppressed.

