

Less than a third of Peruvians are satisfied with democracy — and misinformation makes it worse| Poynter

<https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/less-than-a-third-of-peruvians-support-democracy-and-misinformation-makes-it-worse/>

If you thought democracy was doing fine in Peru, think again.

According to the latest poll released this week by the Latin American Public Opinion Project out of Vanderbilt University, only 28% of Peruvians say they are satisfied with democracy. And almost 60% of them say they would support an unconstitutional presidential coup against the National Congress.

On Sept. 30, President Martin Vizcarra determined the dissolution of the country's opposition-controlled Parliament — using a constitutional article — and scheduled a new presidential election for January 2020.

The political crisis that led Vizcarra to take this path is closely tied to all the investigations connected to the so-called Operation Car Wash.

Born in Brazil in March 2014 as an investigation into money laundering involving a gas station owner in the southwestern state of Parana, Operation Car Wash soon became an international case that involved not only Brazilian politicians but also high-level officials in other South American countries.

A huge number of Peruvian politicians, including the leader of Vizcarra's opposition, are either on the list of suspects or investigated people.

David Hidalgo is the founder and content director of OjoPúblico, a digital Peruvian venue focused on investigative journalism that also runs a fact-checking initiative called OjoBiónico. He said that misinformation related to the Operation Car Wash and its main characters plays a crucial role in the political crisis his country is living. And fact-checkers have a great opportunity

to show their work and shine.

“The next few months will be crucial to enroll the citizens in the fact-checking universe,” he said in an email sent to the IFCN. “Among Peruvians, I see people doubting traditional media. People asking who they should trust, who is telling the truth and who is biased.”

Hidalgo says media outlets are clearly taking positions in the political debate and reflecting the fact that Peru is now pessimistic about its future. So this is the context where fact-checking has the chance to grow.

“After the impact we had with OjoBiónico, two major Peruvian newspapers created fact-checking units (to deal with this political crisis). I am sure this will strengthen the practice in the country and make it something more relevant to the audience,” Hidalgo said.

What has been debunked?

The moment Vizcarra called for the Congress constitutional dissolution, Peruvians started to share on social media and on WhatsApp a message saying that young men would be forced to join the army right away. A document supposedly signed by two ministries — defense and interior — was also spread, making people panic all around.

The Peruvian Army had to post a public denial and many media outlets republished it as fast as they could to stop the chaos generated by that hoax.

“Misinformation will keep trying to create confusion around political parties and their connections to the Carwash Operation. But it will surely focus on discrediting prosecutors that are working on the case,” said Hidalgo. “It is important to remember that some of the congressmen will lose their legal immunity in 30 days because of the congress dissolution.”

To follow this situation, OjoPúblico will keep its partnership with the biggest radio station in Peru: Radio Programas del Perú (RPP). On their weekly program, fact-checkers from OjoBiónico go on air to explain what is true and what is false in the public discourse.

Hidalgo said it would be extremely helpful if tech giants like Facebook, WhatsApp, Google and Twitter could come to Peru and work closer with local fact-checkers.

“Right now, Peru could be used as a real life lab where these companies could experiment with some of their ideas to fight political disinformation in a polarized context, but we don’t notice they are working focused on this here. We don’t see these platforms doing something about our problems. How about a campaign that doesn’t promote fact-checking as a product but as a tool that everyone could use to avoid being fooled by authorities?”

The same would apply for governmental forces.

“Peruvian citizens are just starting to understand mis/disinformation as something that can have an impact in real life. Dealing with it is also a question authorities must answer. And I don’t have any information about an official program to fight false news.”

On April 17, when former President Alan García committed suicide, Peruvians got stuck in the middle of two huge and equally false narratives.

Some people kept saying that García had killed himself as a result of the pressure coming from the operation. That was false. García had written his suicide letter a long time ago.

Others said García was actually alive because a video showed a man leaving his house. Wrong. The footage actually showed a prosecutor, not the former president.

If fact-checking and fact-checkers were stronger at that time, Peruvians would probably be in better shape to distinguish facts from fiction.