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Latin America Graft and Poverty Trying Patience With Democracy

By JUAN FORERO

LAVERA, Peru — On a morning in April, people in this normally placid spot in Peru's southeastern highlands burst into a town council meeting, grabbed their mayor, dragged him through the streets and lynched him. The killers, convinced the mayor was on the take and angry that he had neglected promises to pave a highway and build a market for vendors, also badly beat four councilmen.

The beating death of the mayor may seem like an isolated incident in an isolated Peruvian town but it is in fact a specter haunting elected officials across Latin America. A kind of toxic impatience with the democratic process has seeped into the region's political discourse, even a thirst for mob rule that has put leaders on notice.

In the last few years, six elected heads of state have been ousted in the face of violent unrest, something nearly unheard of in the previous decade. A widely noted United Nations survey of 19,000 Latin Americans in 18 countries in April produced a startling result: a majority would choose a dictator over an elected leader if that provided economic benefits.

Analysts say that the main source of the discontent is corruption and the widespread feeling that elected governments have done little or nothing to help the 220 million people in the region who still live in poverty, about 43 percent of the population.

"Latin America is paying the price for centuries of inequality and injustice, and the United States really doesn't have a clue about what is happening in the region," said Riordan Roett, director of Latin American studies at Johns Hopkins University.

"These are very, very fragile regimes," he added. "Increasingly, there's frustration and resentment. The rate of voting is going down. Blank ballots are increasing. The average Latin American would prefer a very strong government that produces a physical security and economic security, and no government has been able to do that."

These at-risk governments stretch thousands of miles from the Caribbean and Central America through the spine of the Andes to the continent's southern cone, and increasingly the problems associated with weak governments are spilling beyond Latin America and affecting United

States interests in the region.

"We're confronted with large increase in illegal migration," Mr. Roett said, "more drugs pouring into the American market to meet an insatiable demand, and the potential for regime failure that could spread in the region and bring serious threats to our security position in the hemisphere."

Among the weakest states is Guatemala, which struggles with paramilitary groups, youth gangs and judicial impunity and has become a crossroads for the smuggling of people and drugs to the United States.

Several other governments are fragile at best and susceptible to popular unrest that could further weaken and topple them. These include the interim administration of Prime Minister Gérard Latortue in Haiti, which took power after a popular revolt this year, and President Carlos Mesa in Bolivia, who took power after such a revolt last year.

The most unpredictable and volatile region is the Andes.

Venezuela remains deeply polarized, as foes of President Hugo Chávez plot to oust him while he continues with what he has called a "peaceful revolution" that includes a radical redistribution of the nation's oil wealth. Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia are buffeted by nearly continuous protests from indigenous groups and other once-forgotten classes that are demanding to be heard.

Their struggles vividly demonstrate an issue that animates strife in nearly all Latin America — the gap between the haves and have-nots of money and power that makes the region the world's most inequitable, and increasingly the most politically polarized.

Even in Argentina, once Latin America's most developed country, President Néstor Kirchner has warned of threats against his government and his life as he struggles to root out corruption, repair democratic institutions and lift the country out of an economic implosion in 2001 that prompted the fall of four presidents in two weeks.

In Argentina and elsewhere, the most immediate cause for alarm is the short-lived nature of individual governments and the havoc it can create. But the larger concern is that roiling instability is eroding the foundations of democracy.

In this climate, even competence has become cause for concern — the popular impulse being to find something that works and to stick with it, whether arrived at democratically or not. In Colombia, where a stable and popular government has made new strides in beating back a 40-year-old Marxist insurgency and reviving the economy, the temptation has been to extend extrajudicial authority to President Álvaro Uribe's government and even change the constitution to permit his re-election.

But, then, the pool of competent leaders from which to choose has proved limited. Having lost faith in President Alejandro Toledo, Peruvians, opinion polls show, look to a return of Alberto K. Fujimori, the elected authoritarian who fled after corruption charges and lives in Japan, or to Alan García, another former president, who was exiled in disgrace after a tenure considered one of the most corrupt and incompetent in Peru's recent history.

Their fortunes are being revived with the feeling, increasingly common in Peru and elsewhere, that only a caudillo, the classic Latin strongman, can solve the longstanding problems that plague the region.

The United Nations report, also drawn from interviews with current and former presidents, political analysts and cultural and economic figures, showed that 56 percent of those asked said economic progress was more important than democracy.

"Democracy today is broad, but it's not deep," said Larry Birns, director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, a Washington-based policy group. "It's broad in that the leadership talks about it, it's a buzzword. But the danger is that the more they talk about it the more skeptical the population becomes because they see a great deal of rhetoric but the standard of living of the impoverished hasn't improved."

The view is common among the common man, particularly in poverty-stricken corners.

"I believe in an authoritarian government, if it works," said Daniel Vargas, 24, a university student from Iquitos whose father was accused with six others of having orchestrated the lynching of the mayor, Fernando Cirilo Robles. "They do this in other countries and it works. Look at Cuba, that works. Look at Pinochet in Chile, that worked."

The United Nations report noted that the promise of prosperity offered by democracy has gone unfulfilled. Economic growth per capita, it said, "did not vary in a significant manner" in Latin America in the last 20 years, even though analysts had predicted that growth would pick up as governments flung open the doors to free-market changes prescribed by Washington and the International Monetary Fund. That institution has instead come to be considered a *bête noire* in this and many other developing parts of the world.

A slump in local economies that has lasted years has only deepened the discontent with governments already widely scorned as corrupt and overly bureaucratic. Predictions that economic growth is on the way — economists say Latin America will record a 4 percent growth rate this year after a long slump — have done little to quell the dissatisfaction.

The main reason: recent growth has not been widely shared, but concentrated in isolated pockets, usually attached to multinational investments that employ few people.

Peru is a good example. It has the region's most impressive economic growth, on paper, with the economy expanding about 4 percent a year since Mr. Toledo was elected in 2001. But that

growth has not filtered down, and the deep disillusionment that failure has inspired is not lost on Mr. Toledo, whose approval rating is mired below 10 percent.

"What good is an impressive growth rate?" he said in a speech in May. "Wall Street applauds us, but in the streets, no. So what good is it?"

The poverty and inequality that breed unrest are never more apparent than in this desolate region, 13,000 feet above sea level, that hugs Lake Titicaca and the Bolivian border.

Unlike Lima, prosperous and modern, the hamlets and farms here provide a meager life. "What we have here is a subhuman life," said Teófilo Chalco, 27, a farmer. "We try to make it and work from sunrise to sundown just to survive. But we win nothing. No services, no health care, nothing."

Like many in Latin America who feel a disconnect from their government, the people here are Aymará Indians. They form part of Latin America's forgotten classes, often indigenous or otherwise nonwhite, who increasingly promise political upheaval.

"The government only pays attention to those who have power," said Néstor Chambi, an indigenous leader and agronomist. "Rights are not for the poor. They are for the rich, by the rich, and so the people here have gotten tired."

The popular discontent with a central government seen as aloof, unresponsive and subservient to powerful interests was only amplified as Ilave's political, business and church leaders raised concerns about suspected corruption and incompetence by Mayor Robles, to no effect.

That Mr. Robles is Aymara himself, like practically all the townspeople here, did not matter. People here and throughout the region charge that politicians are corrupted by power and a long tradition in which politics is used as a spoils system for personal enrichment.

Elected officials do not remember their people or keep their promises, people here complained. Gregorio Ticona, the first Aymará elected to Congress, faces corruption charges. The president of the regional government, David Jiménez, was also charged in May with corruption.

"Institutions have no more credibility," said Percy Flórez, a municipal official in Ilave.

Mr. Robles, a university-educated social scientist who belonged to a far-left fringe party, had political adversaries who agitated for his resignation, namely the lieutenant mayor, Alberto Sandoval, who has also been charged in Mr. Robles' death.

But the political campaigning, mounting protests and hyperbolic reports in local radio stations, which fomented the unrest, did little to attract attention outside Ilave.

Protests reached a fever pitch after an April 2 meeting where residents demanded to know

details of the town's finances, only to be shouted down by Mr. Robles's lieutenants.

"People wanted to ask where the money was, but they did not let them speak," said Mr. Flórez.

The mayor tried to diffuse tensions by leaving town. But when he returned on April 26 for a town council meeting at his house a mob awaited.

Mr. Robles fled with four councilmen, who sought refuge in an adjacent house, but were hunted down and dragged out into the dusty street.

"They threw rocks at the windows and we were so afraid," said Arnaldo Chambilla, a councilman, from his hospital bed. "They pulled me out, they beat me. I do not remember after that."

Another councilman, Edgar Lope, recalled begging his attackers.

"I kneeled and said, 'Please forgive me,' " he said. "At that point, I had given myself to the Lord."