

## **Peru's Lourdes Flores Challenging Neopopulist Trends**

**By Ronald Bruce St John | March 14, 2006**

Lourdes Flores Nano, lawyer, centrist politician, and former legislator, looks set to become the next president of Peru. If her campaign stays on track, she will reverse the neopopulist trend in Latin America, most recently evidenced by the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia. She will also become the first woman elected president of Peru, just months after Michelle Bachelet made similar history in Chile. As with Bachelet in Chile, a Flores Nano victory will signal a major cultural change in Peru.

### **Issue-oriented Campaign**

Flores Nano, candidate for the Unidad Nacional party, is running an issue-oriented campaign that resonates well in a country which appeared in recent years to lack a sense of direction. In a private interview in her Lima home in 2003, she told me the problem with the administration of now outgoing President Alejandro Toledo was that it appeared to have no goals. If she again ran for the presidency, she said she would emphasize agricultural production, increased education, and improved health care. She is making good on her promise in this new bid for the presidency, stressing issues that will improve the quality of life of the average Peruvian.

When one of her opponents, running well behind her in the polls, recently opened the possibility of a political alliance, her response was typical in that she stressed the need to talk about "ideas before alliances." Well-thought-out, deeply ingrained policy positions, when coupled with a demonstrated ability to compromise to get things done, are a rarity in Latin America and are welcomed by thoughtful Peruvians.

Promising a frontal attack on the poverty that is so pervasive in much of Peru, Flores Nano presents herself as the candidate representing change for the

future in Peru. In contrast, she describes her strongest opponent, Ollanta Humala Tasso, as representing the failed ideas of the past. She has a point here as Humala often expresses his admiration for the 1968-75 socialist dictatorship of General Juan Velasco Alvarado, a regime that brought socioeconomic ruin to Peru in the form of disastrous macroeconomic policies, failed agrarian reform, and the nationalization of inefficient industries.

Enjoying strong support from the Peruvian business community, Flores Nano supports free market economics, including a trade agreement with the United States. The Peruvian economy grew almost 8% in the last quarter of 2005, and investors see her as the candidate most likely to maintain a strong economy. She strongly criticizes the economic model of the Toledo administration on the grounds it has been too focused on investment as the growth engine. She argues widespread prosperity and sustained growth necessitate a reorientation of the Peruvian economy with an increased emphasis, among other things, on the small producer. At the same time, she has pledged to respect existing multinational contracts in contrast to Humala who wants to renegotiate them.



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Unmarried, Flores Nano has made her gender an effective political weapon. A recent poll suggests that 26% of her supporters favor her simply because she is a woman. In a strongly Catholic country, she is pro-life but has said her administration would permit the use of the “morning after” contraception pill on the grounds the World Health Organization does not consider it abortive. She has also pledged to appoint women to key cabinet posts, including defense, economics, and foreign affairs, on the grounds “there is no place in power that a capable and honest woman cannot be.”

### Humala, Chávez, and Morales

Currently second in the polls, Ollanta Humala Tasso, a charismatic retired army officer, first drew international attention six years ago when he led a failed, month-long military uprising against the regime of then President Alberto Fujimori. Imprisoned briefly, he was pardoned after Fujimori left office and stayed in the army. Humala Tasso was forced into retirement in December 2004 after the Toledo administration, apparently concerned with his popularity, passed him over for promotion. While his abortive attempt to end the Fujimori presidency was soon squelched, Humala’s actions elicited strong nationalist support in certain sectors of the public and the media. In a period of great uncertainty in Peru, many considered him a true patriot. At the time, the influential Lima daily, *La República*, hailed him as “valiant and decisive, unlike most in Peru.”

A self-confessed admirer and ideological soulmate of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, Humala Tasso’s campaign rhetoric strongly criticizes Washington’s free trade policies and opposes coca eradication programs. When he met Chávez in Caracas in early January 2006, sharing the stage

with Morales of Bolivia, the Venezuelan chief executive publicly backed the nationalist Peruvian presidential hopeful, later dismissing Flores Nano as “the candidate of the oligarchy.” In protest, the Peruvian government withdrew its ambassador from Caracas, accusing Chávez of meddling in the internal affairs of Peru. Flores Nano later charged that a Humala victory would “put us on our knees before a foreign government.” Like Morales, Humala Tasso has denied allegations he is receiving financial aid from Chávez. Little known only three months earlier, the controversy in January highlighted the ability of Humala to dominate public discourse.

Short, compact, and charismatic, Humala Tasso’s campaign strategy in recent months, characterized by increasingly radical campaign statements, is often reminiscent of Morales’ successful bid for the presidency of Bolivia. In a country where the drug war has achieved only checkered success, Humala opposes the compulsory eradication of coca, government policy for the last 15 years, supporting instead the industrialization of coca. His proposed economic policies, including state participation in “strategic sectors” of the economy, the renegotiation of multinational contracts, and a windfall profits tax on foreign mining companies, have sent shock waves through Lima’s stock market and dried up foreign investment. He has also suggested Peru and Bolivia unite, politically and socially as well as economically, and asked President Toledo and his congressional allies to remain in Peru after the election until they can be investigated for corruption.

### Battle of the Polls

Of Indian descent, Humala Tasso’s presidential bid was dismissed as a non-starter until he began drawing large crowds in poorer communities, most especially in the Indian towns of the Andes. While

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his economic plans unsettle many middle and upper class voters, they are welcomed by the poor majority of Peruvians who have not shared in the economic growth of recent years. They see him as the kind of tough military man the country needs to impose order and punish the corrupt.

Rising in the polls with his strong nationalist message, Humala Tasso captured 11% in November 2005, up from 5% in April. In December 2005, he moved into a statistical dead heat with front-runner Flores Nano winning 22-23% of the electorate, depending on the composition and timing of the poll. In early January, the Apoyo polling company, the most widely respected polling organization in Peru, showed Humala favored by 28% with Flores backed by 25%, with a margin of error of 2.5% which still left them in a statistical tie. Analysts credit Humala's advance with his anti-corruption platform and his status as a political outsider. While his numbers have slipped since that time, he has run second behind Flores in every presidential poll conducted in the last two months.

A late February poll by Apoyo showed Flores with 33% to 26% for Humala. Former President Alan García Pérez, head of the Partido Aprista, was third with 22%, and former President Valentín Paniagua, candidate of the Frente del Centro, was fourth with just 7%. However, the poll did not survey voters in the more rural areas of Peru which represent up to 20% of the electorate and are believed to be Humala strongholds.

If Flores Nano fails to win 50% plus one in the first round of balloting on April 9, which appears likely, there will be a second round in June. In the second round, Flores would probably face either Humala or García. The late February Apoyo poll suggested Flores would win 60% of the votes against Humala and 62% against García. Most

analysts agree that Ollanta Humala and Alan García would have little chance in a runoff against Lourdes Flores. Polls have repeatedly given her the dominant position in a second round, primarily because her negative rating is very low. Very few Peruvians indicate they would never vote for Flores while substantial numbers show strong antipathy for both Humala and García.

Therefore, the best chance for both Ollanta Humala and Alan García would appear to be to eliminate Lourdes Flores in the first round. The increasing signs of a determined negative campaign against her suggest her opponents have reached the same conclusion. A growing number of campaign posters and other materials have begun to appear depicting Flores Nano as the candidate of the oligarchy in general and the Banco de Crédito in particular. A similar tactic was used effectively in the 1990 presidential campaign to brand Peruvian novelist and presidential hopeful, Mario Vargas Llosa, as the candidate of bankers and the wealthy.

Finally, there are also valid questions as to the reliability of the entire polling process in Peru. In the recent presidential elections in Bolivia, Apoyo predicted Morales would win by a small margin when he actually won by a landslide of 20 points in the first round of voting. Some Peruvian pundits believe recent polls are undercounting a substantial portion of the electorate, especially those Peruvians harboring an undercurrent of frustration and anger that could propel a radical candidate like Humala to victory. With over half the population categorized as poor, this segment of Peruvian society has had a growing influence on Peruvian politics over the last 25 years and could well determine the outcome of this election. Contemporary Peruvian electoral history, where the unofficial motto is "watch the outsider," supports the mounting skepticism surrounding public opinion polls. The last two

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elected presidents, Alberto Fujimori and Alejandro Toledo, were underdogs and owe their election to their outsider status, a role Humala now cultivates daily.

## Conclusion

In the final weeks of the campaign, the presidential race in Peru has become a three-person contest, and it is tightening. The most recent opinion polls, conducted a little more than four weeks ahead of the April 9 elections, suggest Lourdes Flores Nano retains her lead but her margin of victory is shrinking. These polls give her around 30% with Ollanta Humala Tasso in second place with some 25%, and Alan García Pérez third with approximately 22%.

Of potentially enormous significance, the number of undecided voters is increasing as the election nears, and then there is the traditional volatility of the Peruvian electorate. At this point, the presidency of Peru looks to be that of Flores to lose, and either Humala or García to win. With the race tightening, there will almost certainly be a second round. If Lourdes Flores Nano can make it to the second round, she will likely become the first woman to be the president of Peru.

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