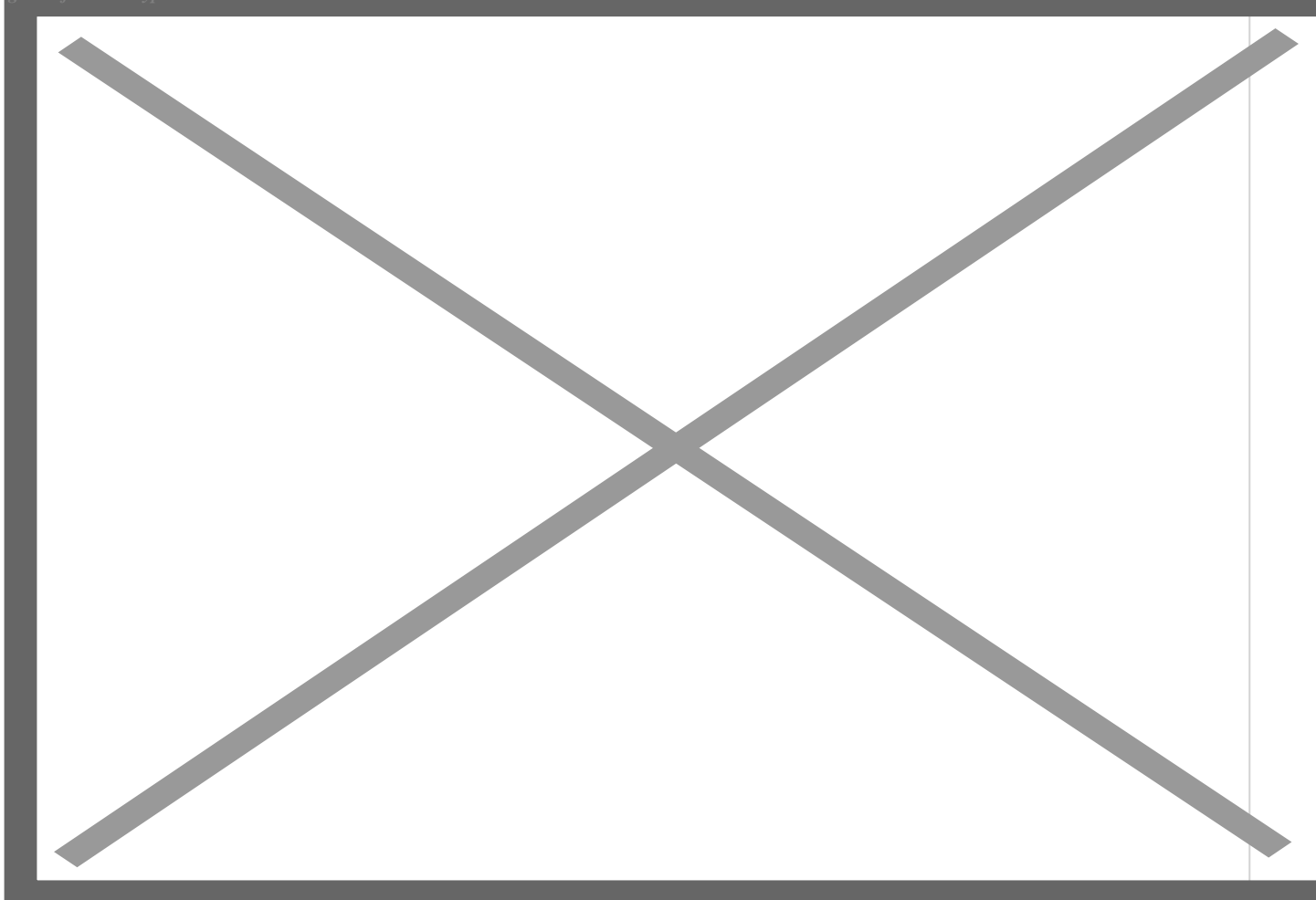


Peruvian Congress rejects new bid to advance elections amid ongoing protests

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Demonstrators take part in a protest to demand Peru's President Dina Boluarte to step down, in Cuzco, Peru [Paul Gambin/Reuters]

Lima, February 3 (RHC)-- The Peruvian Congress has voted down another proposal to bring forward elections to 2023, a day after a similar bid was turned down amid nationwide protests that are shaking the country's economy.

The motion put forward by the Free Peru party was rejected on Thursday with 75 votes against and only 48 in favour, with one abstention. In addition to moving elections up from April 2024 to July 2023, the proposal included the calling of a referendum on forming a constitutional convention – another key demand of protesters.

Peru has been embroiled in a political crisis with near-daily demonstrations since December 7, when then-President Pedro Castillo was arrested after attempting to dissolve Congress and rule by decree.

At least 48 people, including a police officer, have been killed in clashes between security forces and protesters, according to the human rights ombudsman's office. Protesters have erected roadblocks causing shortages of food, fuel and other basic commodities in several regions of the Andean nation.

The economic fallout of the demonstrations is hitting hard on workers. Luz Camacho, a local farmer who picks up pomegranates in the southern region of Ica has lost one-quarter of her wage, enough to not be able to pay her debt to the bank. "It has affected us a lot because we haven't worked and we have loans and debts. Where are we going to get an income?" Camacho told Al Jazeera.

The chamber of commerce estimates that the region has lost \$300 million since the crisis started in December. "This political crisis is turning into a social economic crisis," said Jose Luis Gereda, the director of Pomica, an Ica-based company that packs fruits to be shipped abroad. Gereda buys 70 percent of its products from small producers who have been prevented by protesters from accessing fields.

In December, lawmakers moved elections, originally due in 2026, up to April 2024, but as protesters dug in their heels, Boluarte called for holding the vote this year instead. The unrest is being propelled mainly by poor Indigenous Peruvians from southern areas of the country.

They affirm that Castillo, who is also from that region and has Indigenous roots, is an ally in their fight against poverty, racism and inequality. Boluarte's government began to show additional cracks on Thursday, with the departure of Raul Molina, a chief adviser.

Molina blamed Boluarte for a lack of "substantive political gestures" as well as for not establishing any clear suspects in the deaths of protesters during the crisis. "Madam President, listen to our people, to the great majority who are asking for changes", read Molina's letter of resignation released on Thursday by the press.

Five ministers in Boluarte's government have resigned since she came to power in December.

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