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## **Fujimori May Be Disgraced, but to Many in Peru He Looks Good in Comparison**

By JUAN FORERO

LIMA, Peru, July 13 — Like many Peruvians, Martha Blas says she is tired of President Alejandro Toledo and contends that he has done little for ordinary people. She offers a surprising solution: bring back the country's thoroughly disgraced former president, Alberto K. Fujimori.

Mr. Fujimori has lived in exile in Japan since 2000, when his government collapsed in a corruption scandal. Peru's current government would like to see him return, too, but for an altogether different reason: to try him on charges ranging from embezzlement to treason.

But no matter. Ms. Blas, a 30-year-old mother of two who works in a government-subsidized soup kitchen, said the accusations against Mr. Fujimori were "political."

She dismissed the repression that characterized his 10-year rule, and recalled the former president as strong and decisive. In contrast, she said, Mr. Toledo is weak, disorganized and leading Peru toward calamity.

"With Fujimori, we had many things because he supported us," Ms. Blas said. "We are waiting for him to come back."

Whipsawed by protests and personal scandal, Mr. Toledo's approval rating has fallen to a dismal 11 percent from nearly 60 percent shortly after his election in 2001.

At the same time, political analysts note that while Mr. Fujimori has a lower approval rating than other opposition figures and is viewed by many here and in Washington as a corrupt strongman who hijacked democracy, he still receives more popular backing than Mr. Toledo in opinion polls.

"He's at fairly high levels, quite good for someone who is in that type of political and legal situation," said Guillermo Loli, a pollster at Apoyo, a Lima-based polling firm. "This is a guy with 52 accusations against him. That's incredible."

Every week, Mr. Fujimori's supporters, an eclectic mix that includes day laborers as well as some former members of Congress and publicists, meet in a newly rented office covered with pictures of the former president. They run newspapers, including one called Fuji News, trumpeting the accomplishments of the Fujimori government, which they say fixed a broken economy and brought to heel two rebel groups.

At a recent session, more than 100 of these supporters gathered and listened to one speaker after another hail Mr. Fujimori and demonize Mr. Toledo. Then they erupted in a chant, "We feel it, we feel it, Fujimori as president!"

Hoping to shore up his own support, Mr. Toledo has just replaced six cabinet ministers and appointed Beatriz Merino, a Harvard-educated tax specialist, to be his new prime minister. But the president still has been unable to win over Peruvians, despite the country's strong economic growth, which, at 5 percent, was the highest in the region last year.

Most Peruvians instead believe that the Toledo government has failed to deliver on promises of a better life. With criticism coming even from Mr. Toledo's own party, many Peruvians, as well as political analysts, speculate that the president may not finish out his five-year term.

With the help of his determined group of allies, Mr. Fujimori, 64, has long been trying to orchestrate a possible political resurrection. On his Web site, [albertofujimori.org](http://albertofujimori.org), and in recent interviews, including one with The New York Times in March, he has said that one day he intends to return to lead this troubled Andean nation of 26 million people once again.

"He's planned to come back to Peru from the moment he landed in Tokyo," said Carlos Raffo, a spokesman for Mr. Fujimori in Lima. "I go to Tokyo and he says, 'We're going to work for a plan of return.' "

Even in Peru there is a precedent for such a long shot, analysts note. Alan García, whose five-year presidency in the 1980's was marked by hyperinflation and corruption so widespread that it forced his own exile, returned in time to run for president in 2001, and barely lost. He is now Peru's leading opposition figure, with an Apoyo poll in April giving him 42 percent support.

What would make Mr. Fujimori's return difficult, however, is that even his supporters acknowledge that he would almost certainly face charges of corruption and other offenses.

Indeed, if Mr. Toledo's government has its way, Mr. Fujimori would return — but to face those charges. The government is preparing a 700-page extradition request. But Japan and Peru do not have an extradition treaty, and Tokyo has made it clear that any such request would not be honored. In Japan, Mr. Fujimori has virtual immunity; he is a citizen there, by virtue of his parents' Japanese birth.

The fact that even a small but vocal group of supporters is actively working for Mr. Fujimori's return to government worries human rights officials and other Peruvians mindful that, while president, he abolished Congress, ran an intrusive secret police force, and set up secret courts with hooded judges that wrongly convicted hundreds of Peruvians.

There is also some concern about Mr. Fujimori's ability to stir trouble from abroad in Peru, where the tentacles of his security apparatus once permeated virtually all of society. Government officials here charge that Mr. Fujimori and his operatives have tried to destabilize the current government through a sophisticated media campaign aimed at distorting the blemishes of Mr. Toledo's administration, an accusation Mr. Fujimori's allies reject.

"It's so troubling that some Peruvians seem to have a very short memory of somebody like Fujimori," José Miguel Vivanco, director of the Americas Division of Human Rights Watch, said from Washington. "He was the head of a government that corrupted basically all the institutions of state through bribery and intimidation."

How much Mr. Fujimori actually steers his admirers' activities from abroad is unclear, though high-level supporters are in constant contact with the former president. Obed Bernuy, 39, a rank-and-file supporter and a shopkeeper who warmly calls Mr. Fujimori "El Chino," a reference to his Asian ancestry, has eagerly put up posters of Mr. Fujimori across Lima.

"El Chino contacts us and tells us what to do," Mr. Bernuy explained. "We then go out and do it."

For now, however, the former president seems mostly limited to using his Web site to send long-distance political missives, leveling charges against the beleaguered Mr. Toledo, whose supporters angrily say that Mr. Fujimori has no moral standing to criticize Peru's current leader.

The political messages, while bothersome to the Toledo government, are just as often merely playful.

In a Mother's Day message, Mr. Fujimori told Peruvians, "Good night, and a big hug from Tokyo." More recently, he promised, "See you soon!"