ARTICLE

Presence and Acceptance of Regional Movements in the South of the Country and their Secessionist Potential

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Summary

Do the regional groups in southern Peru have any link with those sectors that openly seek separation from Peru? What is the potential of the latter to achieve their goals? The article will examine the presence, acceptance, and capacity for expansion of regional parties, as well as their attributed secessionist potential. The October 2022 elections and the protests that took place at the end of the same year are taken as case studies, since both events are directly or indirectly associated with this type of grouping. It is concluded that among the regional sectors there is no single agenda, and they are not necessarily linked to secessionist aspirations, except in the case of Arequipa. Currently, secessionist groups are at an emerging stage and do not bring together large sectors of the population. In addition, they lack foreign support, a crucial factor in their success. However, there is fertile ground for its growth, due to the political crisis and the neglect of the central government.

Keywords: Secessionism, Regional Movements, Social Discontent, Regional Elections, Political and Economic Crisis.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyze the presence and acceptance of regional sectors in the southern part of the country and their supposed connection with groups seeking secession, in the context of the current political and economic crisis. Recently, some Peruvian columnists pointed out the risk they may pose to Peru’s territorial integrity.¹ On the other hand, foreign media claimed that the protests at the end of 2022 had Bolivia’s backing to establish a splinter republic aligned with the Movement Towards

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Socialism (MAS). Its objective would have been to mobilize part of the Peruvian population to politically destabilize the country, since several of these provinces possess important natural resources. It is argued that their main motivation would be to obtain the lithium present in the altiplano, as well as access to water and the Peruvian sea.

However, a deeper analysis largely refutes such claims. Far from there being a unified front in political and social terms in terms of its demands and objectives directed from the outside, it is found that in the regional political scenario fragmentation and a strong presence of local movements predominate. Nor is there an organization that currently has the resources or the acceptance to be able to mobilize important sectors of the population towards a project that would culminate in a secession from the country. The Arequipa case, however, deserves attention because the leader of the party that won the regional elections in 2022 openly expressed his separatist intentions.

In the first place, the causal variables responsible for the emergence of secessionist groups will be examined, as well as the stages they usually go through in order to correctly identify their potential and real dimensions. Second, the history of secessionism in the country will be briefly addressed and a look will be taken at the relations between regions and the capital in the second half of the twentieth century to better understand the place occupied by these groups. Thirdly, the results of the regional elections will be explored and, on the other hand, the causes of the outbreak of 2022–23 will be sought to be explained. This will facilitate a more detailed review of the presence and representativeness of regional parties and movements, as well as the possible linkage between them. In addition, an analysis of the outbreak will help to better identify the source of the discontent and


whether or not it is related to these groups. Finally, a diagnosis will be provided based on the aforementioned points to assess the potential risk that the aforementioned movements would represent.

**What is Secession?**

Before we begin, it is necessary to provide an appropriate definition of the notion of secession that will be employed in this study. This can be defined as the process by which a group wishes to separate itself from the state to which it belongs in order to create a new one, from the territory of the original state.\(^4\) By 2020, globally, it was estimated that the number of these types of movements was more than 60.\(^5\) In recent times, this type of grouping has gained greater prominence in the world, as exemplified by the cases of Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine or Araucanía and Santa Cruz in Chile and Bolivia, respectively. Their success is variable, and the vast majority do not manage to separate themselves from their countries of origin.\(^6\)

**Internal Variables of Secession**

According to academic literature, there is no single causal theory that explains the rise of secessionist movements and reasons. However, two types of variables can be identified that would promote them: the underlying ones, which provide the fertile ground in which these groups usually appear, and the proximate ones, which allow them to obtain popular support and contribute to their strengthening and sustainability.\(^7\) As for the former, the underlying reasons, we can point out, for example, the

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\(^6\) For the purposes of the following analysis, the term *separatism* will be used as a synonym for secessionism.

presence of cleavages, marked ethnic and linguistic differences present in a given country, which make a group differ from the majority that inhabits it. Such is the case of nations such as Sri Lanka, where there are ethno-religious minorities such as the Tamils, of Hindu religion, as opposed to the Sinhalese majority, of Buddhist religion. His case is quite illustrative and will be used to exemplify and clarify the explanatory perspective. On the other hand, it is possible to identify the so-called proximate reasons that serve as triggers that activate the demands that lead to the acceptance and formation of separatist movements. For example, this category may include policies that seek to assimilate a population, erasing its distinctive culture and traditions. Discriminatory practices could also be mentioned. In the case of the Tamils, the Sri Lankan government systematically pursued a number of exclusionary policies towards them with the explicit aim of favoring the Sinhalese, which would have led to the beginning of the Tamil armed struggle in the 1970s and 1980s. The separatist and terrorist group that emerged from this conflict called itself the “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam” (LTTE).

For such movements to emerge, there must first be a situation or environment that puts a minority at a social or political disadvantage. In turn, this dissatisfaction will have to be exploited by secessionist groups. Leaders are needed to be able to exploit these feelings and demands successfully, which is achieved through speeches that evoke the impossibility of changing the prevailing political status quo, emphasizing

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8 The case of the Tamils is useful for exploring the importance of both types of variables, as it represents a very clear example of the dynamics identified by the underlying and proximate factors. See Horowitz, 1981.


12 Peter Chalk, “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’s (LTTE) International Organization and Operations: A Preliminary Analysis”, *FAS* (1999), [https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/com77e.htm](https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/com77e.htm)

that the only possible way to solve the problems suffered by a group or community is secession.\textsuperscript{14} And finally, their message must resonate with the target audience, so that the population they are trying to convince tunes in and accepts their ideas. Social, political, and economic conditions must generate a reality such that the target group internalizes and accepts the content promoted by separatist messages, finding in them a “grain of truth” that matches their concerns or problems.\textsuperscript{15}

In the case of the conflict in Sri Lanka, the LTTE promoted a message of victimization by pointing to the constant discrimination and oppression by the government, arguing that this was the main reason why the Tamils “could never coexist with the Sinhalese”.\textsuperscript{16} However, internal factors are not the only ones that need to be taken into consideration. It is also necessary to include external factors in the sense of foreign support for such groups.

**External Variables of Secession**

Another key factor in the phenomenon of secession is the role that external powers can play. However, when considering the international component, successful secessions are rare, mainly due to the difficulty they face in obtaining the desired support.\textsuperscript{17} Four modalities of support by the powers can be identified: the tangible high-level (arms supplies or direct participation of the powers), as happened with Bangladesh in 1971, which managed to secede from Pakistan with the assistance of India.\textsuperscript{18} The second corresponds to limited tangible support (humanitarian, for example). The third comprises high-level diplomatic recognition, and the fourth comprises limited diplomatic recognition.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 140.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 141. This even led them to commit suicide bombings.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Peter Chalk, “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’s (LTTE) International Organization and Operations: A Preliminary Analysis”, FAS, (1999), \url{https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/com77e.htm}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Martin Riegl and Bohumil Dobos, “The Geopolitics of Secession”, in: The Routledge Handbook of Self-Determination and Secession (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2023), ed. Ryan D. Griffiths et al, 177.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 182
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
In this sense, the support of the great powers (or superpowers, as it was during the Cold War) usually determines the success or failure of such movements. In modern cases such as Kosovo or Ossetia and Abkhazia, their recognition is limited and in their secession they had the help of great powers such as the United States (US) and Russia, respectively. Similar to the above arguments, other authors, such as Elizabeth Nelson, find that the accompaniment of regional actors is decisive for the triumph of the secessionists.

These regional powers can provide their support to these movements in three ways: through tangible backing, by providing resources or equipment to secessionists, through diplomacy, or by shaping the preferences of actors such as great powers interested in intervening in situations of potential secession. However, this is not enough to analyze a dynamic phenomenon such as secessionism.

**The Secession Cycle**

The analysis of secessionist movements can be carried out through a cyclical scheme that includes the following stages: emergence, consolidation, escalation and recognition. The first phase, emergency, is linked to the formation of parties or groups that publicly advocate territorial autonomy or independence. The second period, consolidation, refers to the period of nonviolent activity in which movements expand through proselytizing, recruitment, and coalition formation with a view to achieving growth.

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20 Ibid., 185.
23 Ibid., 1251.
25 Ibid., 149.
26 Ibid.
The third stage, escalation, involves the shift from a peaceful separatist strategy to an open armed confrontation with the government.\textsuperscript{27} As for recognition, he refers to the fact that the movement gained full legitimacy at the international level as a new independent country.\textsuperscript{28}

Next, a brief review will be carried out that will facilitate the understanding of the reasons mentioned in Peruvian history. For this purpose, it is essential to refer to the origin and characteristics of one of the most prominent regionalist/separatist movements: that of Loreto.

**Regionalism and Separatism in Peruvian History**

Attempts and initiatives at separatism or secessionism proper are rare in Peruvian political history. However, there have been events such as the federalist uprisings in Loreto in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the words of historian Carlos Contreras, geographical isolation and fiscal sufficiency fueled the feeling of autonomy in the hearts and minds of its population, which is similar to the situation described today.\textsuperscript{29}

In the midst of the first uprising, in 1899, the first separatist feat in Republican history was carried out, led by Civil Guard Colonel Emilio Vizcarra,\textsuperscript{30} who proclaimed himself “Supreme Chief of the (self-named) Jungle Nation”, but his movement was short-lived and was put down by President López de Romaña.\textsuperscript{31} The second uprising occurred in 1921, led by Captain Guillermo Cervantes, who, in the words of Carlos Dávila, led an “independent republic” with its own flag and laws.\textsuperscript{32} The main reason for their uprising would have been to oppose the decision of former President Augusto Bernardino Leguía, whose government

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{29} Carlos Contreras, “El otro centenario: la sublevación federalista de Iquitos de 1921”, Revista IDEELE (February 2021), https://www.revistaideele.com/2021/02/24/el-otro-centenario-la-sublevacion-federalista-de-iquitos-de-1921/ 
\textsuperscript{30} Carlos Dávila Herrera, “El Conflicto y la Historia de Loreto”, Seminario de Historial Rural y Andina, Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, (Lima, 2003), 36.  
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 37.  
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 38.
was known as “Leguía’s Eleventh,” to sell the Putumayo-Cauca region to Colombia. Like the previous movement, it was defeated in 1921. Interestingly, a movement with similar aspirations and concerns resurfaced in the 21st century, according to engineer and ecologist David Landa, who proposes that the region (and the rest of the country) be federally administered.

Throughout the 20th century, regionalism was significantly weakened by the central government, as Alberto Vergara points out, as a result of the Agrarian Reform and other subsequent processes, such as the (re)centralization implemented by former President Alberto Fujimori. The outcome of this period was, in political terms, a fragmented society without its own vision of the regions, lacking an articulating discourse and a unifying political project.

Despite this, regional movements (with their critical discourses towards Lima) have become a focus of concern, especially when one of their leaders, such as Felipe Domínguez in Arequipa in 2018, openly declared his secessionist intentions. In this sense, they provide the closest thing to a case study that can be analyzed based on the theoretical tools used. Its potential for expansion and growth remains to be studied in the context of the 2022 elections and the protests at the end of the same year.

**Regional Movements and Current Challenges**

Having pointed out the characteristics of secessionism and considering its hypothetical relationship with regionalism, it is necessary to analyze its

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33 Ibid., 39.
34 Ibid., 41.
35 RCR, “Aparición de movimientos separatistas se debe al abandono del estado de regiones fronterizas como Loreto”, (Loreto, 2023), https://www.revistaideele.com/2021/02/24/el-otro-centenario-la-sublevacion-federalista-de-iquitos-de-1921/
36 Alberto Vergara, *La danza hostil. Poderes subnacionales y Estado central en Bolivia y Perú*, IEP, (Lima, 2015), 279 – 296. In addition, as the book points out, the Shining Path, through the assassination of peasant and regional leaders, contributed to this weakening.
37 Ibid., 286.
38 Click, “Felipe Domínguez Chávez presenta lista a candidatos a regidores para cerro corolado por Vamos Perú” (September 2018), https://www.facebook.com/clickcompe/videos/206549270354490/
importance and link today. You can start by taking into account the results of the last local and regional elections held in October 2022. According to José Alejandro Godoy, it is possible to see that the winners in the regional and municipal elections outside Lima are mainly departmental groupings in which the so-called “coalitions of independents” predominate.\(^{39}\) These are characterized by the fact that they are formed expressly to participate in the elections and lack a consolidated party organization, with personalism predominating.\(^{40}\) Most of them are regionalist movements, that is, organized from the province and without links to national parties.\(^{41}\)

These groups managed to occupy 15 of the 24 regional governorates nationwide, including the southern departments of the country.\(^{42}\) Given that they are regional groups that respond mainly to local electorates and considering the uniqueness of their candidacies, it is difficult for them to articulate a united front with the purpose of consolidating a secessionist group in southern Peru. The same thing happens in the imaginary with respect to the so-called “south”. According to del Águila, there is no such thing as a unified “south” without differences. There are various groups of local power, opposing classes that coexist in the same space, but that do not represent a common political front.\(^{43}\) This situation seems to be replicated at the micro level, with the case of the province of Quispicanchi in Cusco being emblematic.


\(^{40}\) Ibid.


\(^{43}\) Irma del Águila, “La República Peruana del Sur”, *La República* (Lima: January 1, 2023), https://larepublica.pe/opinion/2023/01/01/la-republica-peruana-del-sur-por-irma-del-aguila
In recent years, a series of municipal leaders with their own political projects emerged in Quispicanchi, occupying provincial mayors, and displacing traditional urban politicians. Despite the vindictive discourses, these leaders are pragmatic and operate within the democratic system itself, formulating their public service policies in terms of the market economy. They represent more the local communities that have given them their electoral support than a single pan-regional project. As Raúl Ascencio points out, these are “initiatives isolated from each other”, in which the personalism of the candidates and leaders is once again present.

In addition, they lack a “unified and coherent political formation” and do not have a “coherent political program”, replicating the extreme fragmentation pointed out by Godoy. On the other hand, the rebellious and unified vote is only presented in front of Lima, which gives the appearance of being much more ideological and consolidated than it really is. Something similar happens in the case of Puno. According to José Luis Rénique, there are no visible regional leaders in this province either. At present, there are “various instances of local political deliberation” that try to gain prominence at the departmental level, but this has not led to the consolidation of a single platform at the regional level. Despite this fragmentation, voices are emerging that advocate separatism in Arequipa and Puno, and that would find land to expand due to the precarious economic situation in which they find themselves.

**Analysis of the Social Outbreak of 2022-23**

What the southern regions share are comparatively lower levels of human development and, especially, a high rate of monetary poverty, accentuated after the COVID–19 pandemic, as is the case in Ayacucho, Puno.
and Apurímac.\textsuperscript{50} Added to this is inflation that exceeded 8% in 2022.\textsuperscript{51} In accordance with Carmen Ilizarbe, it is necessary to make a comparison of the indices indicated before and after the crisis in order to better understand the decline in living standards.\textsuperscript{52}

Prior to this scourge, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI), monetary poverty was 20% at the national level and disaggregated by departments it was over 30% in Huancavelica and Puno, and reached almost 25% in Cusco, showing a reduction compared to the previous year. However, three years later, those same departments reached higher rates of monetary poverty, ranging between 39.4% and 43%, especially in the cases of Ayacucho and Puno, coinciding with the regions where most of the protests took place.

In addition, a particularly pronounced drought was recorded in several areas, coinciding with the 2022–2023 protests, which could have had a negative impact on the economic situation of many people engaged in agriculture.\textsuperscript{53} This socio–economic situation could have created an environment conducive to the emergence of discontent among a considerable part of the population, as revealed by surveys carried out before, during and immediately after the demonstrations.

Therefore, political variables cannot be ruled out with regard to the lack of representativeness of the political system. As indicated by Ilizarbe, 50% of those surveyed consider that the country is governed only for Lima, without taking into account other regions.\textsuperscript{54} This figure reaches 49% in southern

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\textsuperscript{50} Carmen Ilizarbe, “Perú 2022: Colapso democrático, estallido social y transición autoritaria”, \textit{Revista de Ciencia Política} (August, 2023), 6, \url{https://ojs.uc.cl/index.php/rcp/article/view/66257}
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\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 6.
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\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{54} Carmen Ilizarbe, “Perú 2022: Colapso democrático, estallido social y transición autoritaria”, 8.
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According to a study by the Institute of Peruvian Studies (IEP), in the month prior to the protests, 87% of Peruvians agreed that the way out of the political crisis should be early elections, reaching 84% in the southern macro-region. And by January 2023, disapproval in the South reached 90%. All of this indicates a clear dissatisfaction with the functioning of the political system in these regions.

Specifically in the context of the protests at the end of 2022, the widespread discontent did not translate into a solid bloc representing a common political project. This is largely explained, as Omar Coronel points out, by the absence of a unified voice during the protests. This lack of cohesion is also reflected in the weakness of subsequent demonstrations, such as the one in October 2023, which did not have a large turnout.

Although there was the presence of extremist groups such as FENATE (linked to MOVADEF, a front group of the Shining Path) and groups linked to organized crime, such as illegal mining, they did not lead the protests or express separatist intentions. It remains to be determined whether there is any link with the secessionists.

**Emergence and Development of Secessionist Groups**

In recent months, some citizens have gained greater visibility by openly advocating for the separation of certain areas of the country, as is the case in Arequipa. A prominent example is Felipe Domínguez Chávez, who actively...
promotes the creation of the so-called “Republic of the South.” According to Domínguez, this entity should include Puno, Cusco, Tacna, Moquegua, Ayacucho, Madre de Dios, and Apurímac. Its initiative is presented as peaceful, justified by “the self-determination of peoples.” This path is chosen for tactical reasons, since, in his own words, “they do not have the strength to confront the central government.”

Despite the fact that his platform “Vamos Perú” obtained just over 4,300 votes in 2018, representing only 0.004% of the total number of eligible voters in Arequipa, Domínguez participated again in the 2022 elections with the “Yo Arequipa” movement. On this occasion, his movement won the governorship of the region by taking first place with 38.4% of the vote. It remains to be seen what the true degree of acceptance of his ideas is and how much they influenced his victory in the region.

Another prominent figure in this context is Félix Suasaca, a community and environmental leader who argues in favor of the need to separate from Peru in order to receive the resources of the mining canon and thus “administer them within the macro-region,” despite the fact that the regional governorates are in charge of their administration. In early January,

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63 Ibid.


Suasaca and other collectives organized a meeting with other groups in Puno, Cusco, Apurimac, and even Moquegua and Tacna, with the aim of creating a “new republic.” It is relevant to note that Suasaca would have been one of the leaders of the mobilizations at the end of 2022 in Puno.

**Implications**

Considering the socio-economic and political panorama described, conditions conducive to the emergence and expansion of separatist and secessionist movements are evident. These generate an environment of discontent in which the ideas and proposals of secessionist leaders can find a place, facilitating the possibility of obtaining some degree of acceptance by the population.

Their persistence creates the necessary environment, serving as underlying causes, for the emergence of movements of this type, as evidenced by their incipient presence today. The immediate causes would be the lack of response from the State to the worsening of poverty and the neglect of problems such as drought, which worsened the economic outlook described. If the central government and political parties in the capital do not channel these social demands and needs and do not represent the interests of citizens, the potential growth of these movements cannot be ruled out, especially when the separatist message seems to be sinking in.

As for regional parties, they managed to obtain 60% of the regions in the year 2022, confirming a trend towards a higher prevalence compared to the 2018 elections. The situation in Arequipa shows a clear weariness even within the regions, since the group “Yo Arequipa” displaced the traditional...
parties. This group was able to achieve this, since the latter did not take care of forming party bases in the regions and only appeared at the time of the elections to carry out “business,” according to a local media.\textsuperscript{71} Moreover, this grouping seems to follow the same \textit{ad hoc} logics of the traditional movements it displaced, evidenced by the fact that it changed parties for the 2022 elections.

On the other hand, “Yo Arequipa” recognizes the need to obtain political support through social programs. In this region, the mining canon of more than 29 million soles will be allocated to social spending, as announced in August by Governor Rohel Sánchez.\textsuperscript{72} If this spending is properly executed, it could help consolidate a strong base of support. Although the southern regions that receive mining canon have considerable resources, on their own, these will not necessarily define the acceptance of secessionist proposals in the population.\textsuperscript{73}

The case of Arequipa is representative of this trend and could mark the beginning of a trend in which secessionist movements reach the government of a region, taking advantage of the persistent “regionalization” of politics in the southern macro-region and the discrediting and rejection of national political parties. In this territory, one could speak of an early stage of consolidation, as long as leaders like Domínguez are able to get the population to accept their ideas and political platform. The international factor remains to be noted.

As Farid Kahhat points out, it is implausible that neighboring countries such as the Plurinational State of Bolivia would be able to successfully support


\textsuperscript{72} Swissinfo, “La región de Arequipa será la primera en destinar canon minero para fondo social en Perú”, (Peru: 2023), https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/per%C3%BA-miner%C3%A9a-la-regi%C3%B3n-de-arequipa-ser%C3%A1-la-primera-en-destinar-canon-minero-para-fondo-social-en-per%C3%BA48713748

\textsuperscript{73} CooperAccion, “Canon minero 2023”, (Peru: 2023), https://cooperaccion.org.pe/canon-minero-2023/
such a movement in Peruvian territory or have an economic interest in doing so. It has the world’s largest reserves of this mineral resource and, in addition, has much larger gas reserves than Camisea in the province of Tarija. 74

In addition, it is difficult to think that La Paz, with an economy smaller than Peru’s and with problems of its own, would be able to support an uncertain separatist enterprise that it would probably not control, especially given the political fragmentation in the country. 75 Bolivia is also not a wealthy country nor does it have capabilities, such as intelligence services with experience in the field, as could be the case of the Cuban Intelligence Directorate (DI), which, in any case, is dedicated to supporting the Maduro government for which it dedicates considerable efforts. 76 There is no indication that other regional or foreign powers are supporting them.

**Conclusions**

Given the fragmentation of regional movements and the diversity of their characteristics and demands, there is no imminent formation of an articulated and transregional movement capable of opposing the central government. Although this current has gained notoriety and a certain degree of acceptance due to the social, political, and economic crisis, its potential growth and recruitment of supporters will depend on various factors. However, government neglect, coupled with the crisis of representation and economic problems, has made it possible for them to reach positions of power, as in the case of Arequipa. Ultimately, the central government’s

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76 Infobae, “Cómo los servicios de inteligencia cubanos se quedaron con parte de Venezuela,” (Argentina: March 19, 2019), https://www.infobae.com/américa/venezuela/2019/03/19/como-los-servicios-de-inteligencia-cubanos-se-quedaron-con-parte-de-venezuela/
response to overcome the crisis will be crucial to prevent secessionism from taking on a more significant dimension, with the acceptance, resources and strength needed to represent a viable alternative for millions of Peruvians.

About the Author

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