
“Not Even Mr. Fujimori Can Control the Weather”

AMBASSADOR JAVIER PÉREZ DE CUELLAR

Former Secretary-General of the United Nations

An Interview by Benjamin F. Moser
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Javier Pérez de Cuellar, the best-known living Peruvian, was Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1982 to 1991. While in that post, he was instrumental in placing a new emphasis on human rights and on promoting democratic change in Latin America and the former Soviet bloc. Upon his retirement, he returned to Peru to participate in politics. A lawyer, diplomat, and statesman, he has been an important voice for democracy and humanitarianism not only in Peru but throughout the world.

*Before assuming the top post at the United Nations, he was Peruvian Ambassador to Venezuela, Switzerland, and the Soviet Union. He has written two books, *Derecho Diplomático* (1964) and *Anarchy or Order* (1992), has forty-seven honorary degrees, and has been decorated by thirty-two countries. He was Alberto Fujimori's opponent in the 1995 presidential elections—marked by widespread fraud—and is an articulate opponent of the authoritarianism that has emerged in 1990s Peru. Ambassador Pérez de Cuellar now divides his time between Paris and Lima, where the *Journal* interviewed him at his home in January.*

Journal: Peru is in a better economic state now than it has been in the past several decades. Why do you think this is?

Pérez de Cuellar: The changes of the past seven years are clearly due to the new economic policies put into effect by Fujimori's government in 1990. At that time,

I was the Secretary-General of the United Nations and I helped Fujimori, who was then president-elect, to make connections with the financial community, with the World Bank, with the Interamerican Development Bank. The mistaken populist, inflationist economic policy of the old regime was traded for a free market policy. This, naturally, caused hardships for the Peruvian people, because the International Monetary Fund's prescriptions are extremely exacting. And the government had the courage to change its economic policy completely. In doing so, it had everyone's support—from foreigners and from the United States. Now, evidently, since that macroeconomic change—which in reality has meant social and economic development in this country—foreign investment has been encouraged. Really, all of that is excellent, and I don't think any new government would be able to change this economic policy. We can, however, blame the government for the fact that, notwithstanding the increase in the gross national product, there has been little distribution of economic benefits. Unfortunately, 50 percent of Peruvians live barely above the poverty line, and about 20 percent live in extreme poverty. It is very difficult to speak of progress in a country where such major economic discrepancies exist. For example, compare this part of Lima [the elegant neighborhood of San Isidro] with the interior and the outskirts of Lima. I think this government's major fault is its total insensitivity to social concerns.

Journal: But when Fujimori visits the interior, people welcome him cheering, "Welcome Chino!" In the city, though, there is no audible support for him.

Pérez de Cuellar: The Peruvian people remain forever hopeful that things are going to change. And the president's arrival seems like something extraordinary. They get excited and encouraged. Unfortunately, now the president is always campaigning, even though there is no election until 2000, and he has been campaigning since 1992, because he is already anticipating running for office for the third time. He is always campaigning. And now, for example, because of the disasters occasioned by El Niño, he has been touring the country. All he is interested in is giving the impression that he is contributing to the relief efforts, and he does not bring along generals or soldiers to make himself more visible—to give the impression that he is fighting a battle all by himself, that he is Superman. Unfortunately, not even Mr. Fujimori can control the weather, and the real problem is not El Niño but the lack of development in this country. Of course the president must respond to natural disasters, but he always does it with a populist, electoral cynicism. However, one shouldn't condemn everything the government does. It's important to criticize constructively.

Journal: Do you consider Fujimori's government legitimate?

Pérez de Cuellar: That is difficult to answer. It lost its legitimacy in 1992 when it shut down the Congress illegally.

Journal: But that action was approved by the public.

Pérez de Cuellar: The public longed for change but was somewhat disappointed, because the changes proved futile.

Journal: But they benefited Fujimori, and now the Parliament is submissive.

Pérez de Cuellar: Yes, now he is free to act as he wishes. But remember, five years of former President García's administration had practically ruined Peru. So along comes this gentleman who claims, two years into office, that Parliament was preventing the implementation of his reforms. He said, Look, I can't move my program forward because Congress is blocking me. So I'm going to get rid of the Congress. So everyone in the street says *ay caramba*, that means he's going to change things. Well, it's about time things changed. But that assumption exemplifies the lack of civic culture in Peru. People don't understand their rights, and that is not this government's fault. It's always been a problem. The people have always been kept ignorant of their rights. Then someone says that we're going to have magnificent changes, but now we can say at the end of five years that these changes have not benefited the people. I am not interested in my own situation—I am interested in the situation of my compatriots. And I know that here in Lima; in Cuzco; in Puno; in Ayacucho; and in Huancavelica, which is probably the poorest department of Peru, there has been no change. Problems are not solved because the government lacks a sense of social responsibility. The government suffers from a fatal lack of social responsibility.

Journal: Which is probably not exclusive to Peru. However, what is different in Peru is the treatment that you and various other political officials have suffered.

Pérez de Cuellar: Peru actually has an authoritarian, not a democratic, government. The executive branch and the armed forces control the country. Naturally, they do not have any interest in permitting the opposition to be heard. Although opposition to the government is voiced in many newspapers, there is a limit to freedom of the press. There is indirect control, like we have seen in the case of Canal 2.

Journal: Baruch Ivcher's.

Pérez de Cuellar: The treatment of Ivcher and his television station, Frecuencia

Latina, is proof that there is not exactly press freedom in this country. According to the law, of course, there is, but not in practice. Peru's largest newspaper, *El Comercio*, is not an opposition paper, but it is also not always in agreement with the government. When it does oppose the government, it does so tactfully.

Journal: It seems that *El Comercio* doesn't dissent openly.

Pérez de Cuellar: That has always been its style. It is never excessively political. However, the editorials always criticize the illegal, unconstitutional, or arbitrary acts of the government. The newspaper *Expresso* has criticized Fujimori's plan to run for a third presidential term and is moving into the opposition because they feel that enough is enough. Fujimori changed the constitution before, with a clear majority in Congress, so that he could be immediately reelected. His authoritarianism is already too obvious.

Journal: In the polls he has around 20 percent approval, and Alberto Andrade, mayor of Lima, has more than 50 percent.

Pérez de Cuellar: To be objective, we must recognize that most of these polls are taken in Lima, which has a third of the electorate. And when you go to the interior of the country, no one has heard of Andrade. In Cuzco, they don't know that there is this gentleman in Lima. There is a little bit of resistance to the capital—people think it is too powerful. So we have to look a little skeptically at those polls. And polls in Lima will always favor the limeños. Andrade has been an excellent mayor—he has changed the city.

Journal: It looks much better now—it used to be a disaster.

Pérez de Cuellar: A disaster. And besides that, Andrade has repaired the city without the support of the government. The government has never wanted the mayor to be the one in charge of fixing the city. But just because he is a good mayor doesn't mean he would be a good president—they are two different things.

Journal: You were speaking of the executive branch. If you were the President of the Republic, how would you assure the independence of the judiciary and legislative branches?

Pérez de Cuellar: I would not have to decide. I would simply have to follow the Constitution, which says everything clearly. It addresses the separation of powers, the independence of powers.

Journal: But Peru is not the only place in Latin America in which the existing laws are very clear but completely ignored by governments. How do you, as one man, make sure that everything works out normally and constitutionally?

Pérez de Cuellar: The independence of powers must be respected: the legislative branch makes the law and the executive branch must assure that the law is carried out. If there is a question about the law, it is referred to the judicial branch. But the powers must be well-organized and independent. As for the government's relationship to the people, that is not going to change in a day, of course. But if the government gets involved in the judicial branch, the army, the Congress—then there is a total domination. The image Peruvians have of our President is that he is totally controlled by another group dominated by the army generals, including Montesinos. The way things are now makes it difficult to confide in elections. This is why Fujimori likes referendums: do you think that this Mr. Fujimori should be elected for a third time or not? Yes or no? So there is still time for the government to ask for a referendum, but the government is so powerful that no one can tell if the referendum will be honest or not. At the same time, no one wants a coup d'état or anything like that. But if Fujimori remains in office after 2000, then there will be a total rupture which could involve a coup. And although Peru is operating under a false democracy, which has been harmful, military rule would be even worse. This is the great problem of Latin America.

Journal: Except for Peru, most Latin American governments seem to be becoming progressively more democratic.

Pérez de Cuellar: Well, Argentina is not doing so well. I'm not so sure what to make of the president of Argentina [Carlos Menem]. In Peru, as well, and Ecuador has a lot of problems.

Journal: Maybe more than anywhere else. After [disgraced former Ecuadorian President Abdala] Bucaram...

Pérez de Cuellar: Yes, the man was a clown, wasn't he. The situation in Ecuador is very delicate now. Now, curiously, the United States is now very interested in the preservation of democracy—that's a change.

Journal: But governments don't often appreciate that. We have seen this in Colombia when the American Ambassador was openly accusing the President of Colombia of taking money from drug traffickers and everyone knew about it, and the Ambassador's saying it in public seemed only to hurt him.

Pérez de Cuellar: The Ambassador here is rather outspoken, but there is no possibility that the American government could do something—maybe it could, I don't know—perhaps a discreet action on the part of the government of the United States, because the situation here is rather chaotic.

Journal: But do you consider it has distracted from positive efforts that the government has made? For example, what about the question of boundaries between Ecuador and Peru? Has real progress been made or does the border conflict play into the hands of politicians in both countries?

Pérez de Cuellar: Well, there is a little of that. But I am a diplomat and know about the politics of Ecuador. What if all maps found in Mexican schools illustrated that the United States had robbed California and Texas from Mexico? It would be a way to teach Mexican children to resent the United States. But Mexican maps do not show that. We have not taken away anything—they have taken from us. The famous Liberator Bolivar took away from us all of Bolivia and part of Ecuador. But we do not claim that Ecuador is Peru or that Bolivia is Peru. There are signed, valid treaties.

Journal: But for the people of Ecuador the problem is very real, and is something that they feel very profoundly.

Pérez de Cuellar: Because they are taught to from childhood. For example, this compatriot of mine, [Peruvian Journal secretarial assistant] Marlene Quiñones. If you ask her if she resents Ecuador she says no, of course not. Because they have been taught to hate Peru. We could also hate Chile, because we lost territory—Iquique and Tarapacá—to them in a war.

Journal: But what politician or teacher is going to advise the people of Ecuador to abandon their resentment for Peru?

Pérez de Cuellar: Exactly. Ecuador has nurtured a form of patriotism that involves hating Peru for the land they consider to have been stolen. But Peru has not stolen anything at all. The Peruvian government is not going to give national territory to Ecuador. That is completely out of the question. To compensate Ecuador according to provisions of the 1946 treaty involves providing them with some navigation access to the Amazon. Ecuador wants part of the Amazon River. We already committed the error of giving Colombia access to the Amazon in 1929. The Amazon River had belonged exclusively to Peru and Brazil. The Amazon begins in Cuzco, and it converges with the rest of the rivers in Iquitos, which is a Peruvian city, and from there it continues until it reaches the city of Belém do Pará in Brazil. We

control the rivers that converge to form the Amazon. But that is not a reason for Ecuador to assume that it deserves sovereign access to the Amazon. We can help them, because there are provisions in the treaty destined to give them commercial access. But it is in the treaty. When they start to say that Ecuador doesn't like the treaty—I don't like the treaty with Chile, I don't like the treaty with Bolivia, with Colombia, or with Brazil—it becomes chaos. You Americans have treaties with Canada and with Mexico, but if you came along one day and said you were no longer interested in the treaties, there would be chaos. Look at Europe, for example—what is Europe? It exists through a series of treaties—Europe is a network of treaties. If Ecuador is going to create chaos, international order will disappear.

Journal: How can this tension be diminished? Peruvians are indifferent towards Ecuador, but the people of Ecuador do not forget their animosity towards Peru.

Pérez de Cuellar: That is the state's problem. Ecuador could initiate a campaign to educate its people. Ecuador's borders should not be misrepresented in textbooks or maps.

Journal: Many Americans were very impressed by the liberation of the hostages here in the Japanese Ambassador's residence. But what do you think about the longer-term results of that operation?

Pérez de Cuellar: Evidently, the army's successful release of the hostages was accomplished with contributions from many countries, including the United States, which provided technology that enabled the army to complete the operation. The operation was executed perfectly, but I believe that the slaughter of all the terrorists should have been prevented. We still don't know who directed and financed the operation. The killers should have been subjected to trial in order to find out. I was in Europe at that time and reaction there wasn't very positive. Their perspective is different from that of the United States, which has more immediate interest than Europe. The newspapers published the infamous photo of Fujimori walking over the bodies of the dead terrorists, and that was not received very well over there.

Journal: What could he have been thinking in allowing himself to be photographed like that?

Pérez de Cuellar: Revenge. It does not conform to the dignity of the head of state. He must have gotten some kind of satisfaction out of that.

Journal: There was recently dissension between [Army General Nicolás] Hermoza

Rios and Fujimori, who said that his son Kenji had done more than the generals to free the hostages. Does this indicate divisions between the executive power and the armed forces?

Pérez de Cuellar: That is a problem of vanity. They both want to be authors of the operation, but I think, once again, the president fell short of the status of his position. I do not think it is right for the president to criticize the head of the Armed Forces, saying that he would not read his book and so forth. But disgraces like these are typical of Fujimori. What is more important is the question of form, that in reality President Fujimori was not able to work—he hasn't dared fire the head of the army. In principle, he is the chief of all the Armed Forces, so there is a problem there. According to the Constitution, the President of the Republic is the commander-in-chief, like he is everywhere. The general who wrote the book did not want to listen to Fujimori's criticism, that he and his son had done everything. So the constitutional problem began when the general called the comandantes and they all came. It seems that the chiefs of the different divisions abandoned their posts without Fujimori's authorization. I am not sure this is what happened. Fujimori then ordered them to return to their posts. Of course, they had to return to their posts. But there was a moment when there was some doubt as to who was in charge—the President of the Republic or the army chiefs of staff. I am not very fond of Mr. Fujimori, but in this case he is right, because he is the leader of the armed forces.

Journal: The difference between the Armed Forces and the executive seems to be getting smaller and smaller, though.

Pérez de Cuellar: Montesinos is a retired captain—a military man who was educated in the military. He is the advisor of the President of the Republic. To me, it is an incomprehensible situation.

Journal: But in the context of Peruvian and Latin American history it is not so surprising.

Pérez de Cuellar: It is a disgrace that there has always been the shadow of the military over Peruvian history. There have been several democratic regimes in this century which have been overthrown by the military. So the relationship between the armed forces and the executive is an essential one. In Chile it is the same thing—until recently Pinochet was head of the military.

Journal: It seems that the Chileans can only wait for him to die at this point.

Pérez de Cuellar: He's extremely old—84—but full of energy. He's an Indian, an Araucanian Indian. A strong man.

Journal: If the leaders of this administration were to lose in upcoming elections, would a legitimate transition be possible with long-term prospects for democratic government?

Pérez de Cuellar: That is what those of us in the opposition hope. To say, Mr. Fujimori, you took the country back to democracy, now why don't you restore independent institutions and let yourself be recognized in 2000 for your positive achievements, especially in economic policy. But if he does not change his style of government, there is either going to be a coup d'état or he is going to be defeated in the next elections, if the elections are clean. He still has a chance in the two years he has left to correct his policies and say, look, now we are going to give back to the other branches of government what belongs to them. But it looks like he can't, like something congenital. He is an authoritarian man—I don't know, maybe it's because of his race, which is not ours. He has a tendency towards authoritarianism—I think it's in his genes.

Journal: Who do you think will be President of Peru in 2000?

Pérez de Cuellar: There is still time for many candidates to emerge.

Journal: Will you be one of them?

Pérez de Cuellar: No, I am too old and it does not interest me. I have my own activities and I don't need to be president. I have no interest in participating in elections whose legitimacy is questionable.

Journal: Do you think that your loss in the last election was legitimate?

Pérez de Cuellar: Well, do I think the elections were clean? No. But I think that Fujimori might have won regardless. A President running for reelection already has four or five years in which he has done something. A new candidate can say very little in his own favor, by comparison. Nobody cares that I have been Secretary-General of the United Nations or that I have been an ambassador. I haven't built a single foot of highways. I have been involved in totally different activities. Campaigns in which a candidate is running for reelection are unfair. What could Dole say for himself? Particular laws he helped pass were irrelevant to most Americans. Why would people vote for change when Clinton's administration hasn't been so bad?

Journal: But if you ran on your ideas—if you said you wanted to make Peru a real democracy.

Pérez de Cuellar: Look, this young lady here [Marlene Quiñones] and educated people understand that. Unfortunately, there are millions and millions of Peruvians who are totally ignorant. That is the major problem. People are interested in the tangible. If the United States and Europe give ten tons of sugar, Fujimori hands it out and everyone thinks it's a gift from him.

Journal: Because he gets the photo-op.

Pérez de Cuellar: He's in the pictures. In every election in Peru, in Latin America, the candidate that is running for reelection has an unfair advantage, because he has already had a chance to do something in office. His opponent has not, unless he is an ex-president. But I am hopeful. Democratic Peruvians must unite against the government and expose it for what it is.

Journal: Thank you, Ambassador. 