

“WASHING, SEWING AND WAVING THE FLAG”: A REPORT FROM THE NEVER-ENDING STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN PERU

• *Interview with Claudia Coca* •

By *Sur Journal*

In the art gallery of this issue of *Sur*, we present a photographic record of a paradigmatic action staged by Colectivo Sociedad Civil in Peru in 2000 named “Lava la bandera” (Washing the flag). Carried out as a symbolic call for democracy, this collective and political intervention challenged the meaning that had been historically attributed to the flag as an insignia, a distinctive mark of a people. Bringing national flags to city squares and washing them collectively both expressed criticism of a dilapidated symbol and its fragile representative capacity and used many hands to forge other possible meanings.

The action was carried out in a very specific context. Systematic human rights violations, political persecution, corruption, and poverty were present throughout the Alberto Fujimori dictatorship in the country.

Today, Peru is once again facing a profound political crisis. A crisis that, in a little over a month, has left an alarming number of people dead and injured due to violent state repression of demonstrators.¹ Thousands of people have taken to the streets of Peru, waving their flags high – the flags of a country that is experiencing a moment of instability, like twenty years ago, as the result of severe national inequality, structural racism, and an institutional crisis manifested in the form of systematic human rights violations.

In this brief interview with *Sur*, Peruvian artist, political activist, and teacher Claudia Coca tells us about her experience with Colectivo Sociedad Civil at the time of the “Lava

la bandera” interventions. She talks about the expectations back then, the meaning and impact of these street art interventions that filled many public squares in Peru, and, finally, about the timeless importance of re-signifying and appropriating the symbolic value of the flag to the creation of collective actions to denounce human rights violations and as part of an ongoing struggle for democracy.

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Sur Journal • Tell us about Colectivo Sociedad Civil. What were the ideas that brought its members together and who were they?

Claudia Coca • To me, Colectivo Sociedad Civil was a collective of citizens who wished to engage civil society in the struggle to reclaim democracy. In 2000, with a great deal of ingenuity, we adopted the following motto: “For the cultural overthrow of the dictatorship”. And I say ingenuity because we never expected to be in the same situation today, and I say this with hopelessness and pain.

There were few of us at first and then, many of us during the most intense days of the struggle for democracy.²

Sur • What struck you the most, as a group, when you were carrying out the “Lava la bandera” action?

C.C. • We were out in the streets for many months, holding multiple citizen actions. Although “Lava la bandera” was the most famous one, we had several important experiences at different moments. I would say that for me, the most notable aspect was the union of forces among citizens. We started out as a few and ended up with many people participating in the group that would go out to stage multiple symbolic actions against the dictatorship.

The importance of the “Lava la bandera” action was that we kept it up for six months - before, during, and after the fall of Fujimori. Washing the flag every Friday at the Plaza de Armas led people to replicate this action in other parts of the country. Even Peruvian citizens in other countries would perform the action in squares and embassies. We did not coordinate with these actions; they were the initiative of other citizens.



Documentation of the media coverage of the actions of the Sociedad Civil Collective. Archives provided by artist Claudia Coca.

SUR • How do you interpret the repercussion and the political impact that the actions had in comparison to your expectations?

C.C. • The democratic media outlets covered the actions, which were later published by printed media and broadcast on the radio and television. This was very important in order for the public to see symbolic actions of a peaceful and thought-provoking nature. It was fundamental to us to be accompanied by the media, particularly for safety reasons, and this was an important factor in attracting more citizens to participate. Seeing citizens holding a different kind of protest meant that the fear of being persecuted and labeled a “terrorist” was subsiding, and this is why we went out to protest. The Fujimori regime had appropriated the symbolic language that associated all those who went to the protests with terrorism. Sadly, this continues to this day, and we are beginning to relive it all over again.

SUR • What are the commonalities between the current context and the one in which the action took place? Tell us about the social and political demands that motivate protests in Peru today. What are the democratic alternatives?

C.C. • Fascist regimes have the same characteristics, which is why there are many similarities between the current government and the Fujimori regime. The lack of constitutional rights is the most important one. Today, the lives of Peruvians are being taken just as they were 23 years ago.

Peru is a country with an unjust centralist system that abandons other regions of the country, which suffer from poverty, inequality, and discrimination. Structural racism prevents us from conceiving a society in which all citizens have equal rights.

The current situation was brought on by the failed coup d'état led by former President Pedro Castillo, who was connected to multiple investigations on corruption and had a mediocre, corrupt, populist government for a year and a half. People are demanding that President Dina Boluarte resign and that new presidential elections be held.³ This would force Congress to change the Bureau members and elect a new consensus president to take office as the President of the Republic.



Image of "Coser la bandera", 2021.
Personal archive.

Sur • In the current situation, when we think about national symbols and the possibility of challenging them and altering their hegemonic and colonial meaning, what would be the meaning today of an intervention like the one that was carried out back then? What would it be comparable to today?

C. C. • Thinking about the colonial nature of national symbols is a subject that requires a thorough analysis. However, a symbol like the flag still represents a common ground that people identify with – hence, the importance of re-signifying and appropriating its symbolic value when creating actions/situations to build unity in the fight against violations of human rights and for democratic rights.

Today's marches are filled with red and white flags, as well as black and white flags. Red was replaced by black as a sign of mourning for the over 60 Peruvians who have lost their lives at the hands of President Dina Boluarte's regime and her prime minister, Alberto Otárola.

In 2021, many citizen groups took measures to push for the creation of the Commission of Truth and Reconciliation. We, at Colectivo Sociedad Civil, held an action entitled "Coser la bandera" (Sewing the flag), in which we made a black and white flag out of pieces of clothing, which symbolized the clothes people wore at the bodiless wakes of those who disappeared during the armed conflict. This action was carried out by the relatives of those who went missing and by civil society in a show of solidarity.

Peru is once again in mourning, so we see people raising and waving black and white flags.

The flag continues to be a symbol of communion, of recognition; to many, it is a cry for inclusion and rights. An indigenous woman carrying a flag is fighting for her own inclusion and that of her people, who continue to fight for their place and their rights, as they did over 500 years ago.



Women travel from several parts of the country to Lima – 2023 demonstrations.
Credit: Reuters.



Claudia Coca.
Source: Personal archive photo.

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*Interview received in January 2023.
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NOTES

1 • "Guterres preocupado com protestos no Peru que mataram dezenas", ONU News, January 26, 2023, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://news.un.org/pt/story/2023/01/1808777>.

2 • The founding members of Colectivo Sociedad Civil come from the world of visual arts. In the first weeks of its formation, creation, and work, members included, in addition to Claudia Coca, Susana Torres Márquez, Abel Valdivia, Emilio Santisteban, Sandro Venturo,

Gustavo Buntinx, Fernando Bryce, and Natalia Iguíñiz.

3 • Harold Quispe, "Mayoría de peruanos exige adelantar elecciones en 2023: nueva encuesta del IEP este domingo." La República, January 28, 2023, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://larepublica.pe/politica/actualidad/2023/01/28/adelanto-de-elecciones-mayoria-de-peruanos-exige-adelantar-elecciones-2023-encuesta-del-iep-de-domingo-dina-boluarte-334590>.



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