

# **Valentin Paniagua, 69, former Peruvian president**

## **Former Peruvian leader Valentín Paniagua died at age 69. He is credited with helping lead Peru back to democracy after the regime of Alberto Fujimori ended in 2000.**

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**LIMA** - Former President Valentín Paniagua, an unassuming former law professor who shepherded Peru back to democracy as interim president following the 2000 collapse of Alberto Fujimori's autocratic regime, died Monday. He was 69.

Paniagua had been hospitalized with respiratory problems since undergoing surgery in August for inflammation of his heart membrane.

The death of Paniagua, who governed Peru from November 2000 to July 2001, was announced by Jorge del Castillo, Peru's current Cabinet chief.

"Paniagua played a fundamental role in the recuperation of the nation's democracy," del Castillo told Radioprogramas in Lima. "He brought tranquility and order to Peru."

Paniagua governed for only eight months, but in that short time he forged a legacy for leading a broad-based government that took big strides toward rebuilding Peru's tattered democracy, including overseeing clean elections.

He left office with popularity ratings of nearly 70 percent, and surveys showed he was the favorite to win this year's presidential election as recently as a year ago.

But he delayed entering the race, and when centrist Popular Action Party leaders finally persuaded him to run, he wasn't completely committed to it.

He finished fifth in a field of 20 candidates.

"You have to have a calling and an ardent desire to reach the presidency, and I don't," he said in an interview in 2004. He won less than 6 percent of the vote.

In November 2000, Paniagua was the head of the opposition-led Congress during a six-day succession crisis. Fujimori fled Peru as his 10-year authoritarian government crumbled in scandals provoked by his shadowy security advisor, Vladimiro Montesinos.

Paniagua became interim president after Fujimori's two vice presidents resigned. He faced the enormous challenge of supervising elections and the mandate of those who propelled him into power to root out Montesinos' network of corruption and his influence over the army and judiciary.

"Today, we close one stage and open another in the history of Peru," Paniagua declared after donning the red-and-white presidential sash in Congress. "There is much to be done in the months ahead."

Marking a sharp break with Fujimori's autocratic regime, Paniagua pledged honesty and impartiality as the hallmarks of his caretaker government -- and he delivered.

He organized new elections won by Alejandro Toledo, who took office in July 2001. On July 28, Toledo was replaced by Alan García, winner of the presidential runoff in June.

Paniagua was born and raised in Cuzco, the ancient capital of the Inca empire, and spoke the Indian language Quechua as well as Spanish, English and French.

Paniagua, who had Spanish and Indian ancestry, said in his inaugural address that he would look to Peru's ancient Andean roots for inspiration in leading the country.

"We will make the Inca ethic of hard work, truthfulness and honesty ours," he said.