

# Peruvian leftist losing support over rights charges

**Ollanta Humala, a leftist former army officer who almost won Peru's presidential election last spring, is losing popularity in the wake of human rights charges against him.**

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**LIMA** - Once seemingly unstoppable in his quest for Peru's presidency, retired army officer Ollanta Humala has seen his star plummet over human rights charges and dissatisfaction with his leftist politics.

Now the man who had appeared poised to join Latin America's club of leftist leaders is stumping for a list of unpopular candidates ahead of Nov. 19 municipal and regional elections, and struggling to save his political future.

His appeal in Lima's slums is still evident. People chanted "Ollanta! Ollanta!" from markets and doorways of shacks as Humala's green SUV led two dozen vehicles ferrying candidates and supporters from one impoverished Lima district to another.

But there were also jeers, and one truck in Humala's caravan ran out of gas. Another, carrying a brass band, screeched to a lopsided halt as a rear wheel broke off the axle.

"Ollanta, get out of here. Go home!" one woman shouted from a storefront. Another responded to his salute with an energetic thumbs down.

Humala's popularity has plunged over allegations that he ordered the torture and murder of jungle residents during Peru's 'dirty war' against Maoist Shining Path guerrillas.

Polls show Humala's disapproval ratings are as high as 70 percent, largely due to the human rights charges. His mayoral candidate in Lima has about 2 percent support. His other municipal and regional candidates are projected to win in only three of Peru's 24 states.

Even in the neglected and impoverished southern and central highlands where Humala's support was strongest, some independent front-runners have rejected his overtures to join forces.

## **RAPID DESCENT**

It's a steep decline from the April 9 elections, when Humala's nationalist coalition won 45 seats in the 120-member Congress, becoming the largest bloc. About half have since defected over complaints he has shifted too far to the left.

Lawmakers who won seats on his coattails have abandoned him, accusing him of straying too far to the left. Most of his allies were headed for a humiliating defeat in the local elections.

Humala, an unabashed admirer of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, acknowledges his troubles even as he refuses to give up his aspirations, leading the ragtag march through impoverished shantytowns under a banner reading "Ollanta for President 2011."

"I have no illusions. I have to build the party," Humala said. "There is a lot of time before 2011 and a lot of things can happen."

Humala, 44, had been on the brink of joining the ranks of populist leaders like Chávez and Bolivian President Evo Morales, winning first-round presidential elections in April with pledges to punish corrupt politicians, intervene in Peru's free-market economy and radically redistribute wealth.

But Alan García handily defeated Humala in the June runoff, adroitly painting him as a pawn in Chávez's quest to expand Venezuela's influence over the region. Many Peruvians were offended by Chávez's open endorsement of Humala, and diplomatic relations with Venezuela remain icy.

## **LOSING FAVOR**

As Humala's misfortunes mount, other corners of Latin America are showing wariness with the brand of confrontational, nationalist politics he embodies. A similar backlash may cost leftist economist Rafael Correa the presidency of Ecuador. Correa boasted about his ties with Chávez, only to lose the first-round elections two weeks ago to banana tycoon Alvaro Noboa.

"There is a continental and regional strategy to stigmatize Hugo Chávez, as if he were a bad person, which he isn't," Humala told The Associated Press. "He is a Venezuelan patriot who is developing a revolutionary project in his country."

Humala blames his troubles on García, dismissing the human rights charges against him as political persecution. García's government "is pressuring the courts to try to put me in prison," Humala said during his Lima tour.

Last month, relatives of a married couple allegedly ordered killed by Humala released a secretly taped video of a man offering them \$20,000 to drop their accusations. The wife's brother recanted testimony in June that he was tortured in Humala's presence.

Humala told the AP he couldn't comment on a pending case, then jumped out of his car to climb aboard a pickup truck and wave to passers-by.