

# Alberto Fujimori's day of reckoning

## OUR OPINION: TRIAL OF FORMER LEADER HAS RESONANCE BEYOND PERU

Opinion  
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The way former President Alberto Fujimori of Peru sees it, he should be considered a national hero. Mr. Fujimori waged a no-holds-barred campaign against the Shining Path and Tupac Amaru guerrillas in the 1990s that brought Peru back from the brink of disaster. A grateful nation should thank him, he believes, but instead it has put him on trial for abuse of power. No doubt, Mr. Fujimori deserves credit for thwarting Marxist insurgencies. But have no doubt about this, either: His trial fulfills the ends of justice.

This week, a judge sentenced Mr. Fujimori to six years in prison for ordering an illegal search -- without a court order -- at a time when his government was mired in a series of scandals. That's the least of it. He also faces charges of murder, kidnapping and corruption and could get a harsher sentence if convicted.

The worst abuses took place after Mr. Fujimori quashed the legislative branch and ruled by decree after he could no longer cope with political opposition. For a leader who once reigned supreme, being in the dock represents a huge fall from grace. For Peru, it is a necessary step on the road to political recovery.

In a sense, Mr. Fujimori's trial is a political morality play that could take its title from Lord Acton's dictum: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Mr. Fujimori was elected president at a time when the nation was desperate for a savior. Nothing in his background suggested that he would reach for autocratic power. But as the guerrillas grew stronger, Mr. Fujimori resorted to more and more desperate methods -- some would call them illegal -- to fight back. Few Peruvians complained as long as he was beating back the Shining Path, even when he dissolved the congress and assumed one-man rule with the support of the armed forces.

Once the insurgency was beaten, though, Peruvians began to regret giving him so much unchecked authority. Mr. Fujimori seemed determined to keep his hold on power and, with the help of his sinister spy chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, to resort to bribery, blackmail and other lawless measures to get his way. Eventually, his political support vanished, and he was forced to flee.

In court, Mr. Fujimori was indignant. He saved the nation from collapse and this is the thanks he gets? It's not fair, said his daughter. There is some truth in that, but the greater truth is this: In a democracy, there is always a day of reckoning for those who abuse power. A society is weakest when it succumbs to fear and exchanges political liberty for security. That is a bargain with the devil. This morality tale is taking place in Peru, but it could happen anywhere. Even here.

