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Two coups failed

by GWYNNE DYER

Could there be anything more ridiculous than last week's failed coup attempt in Peru?

Last Wednesday morning, President Pedro Castillo made an unscheduled broadcast announcing that he was dissolving Congress, suspending the constitution, and would rule the country by decree. But within minutes he was abandoned by his own ministers, in a few hours he was impeached by Congress, and he was in jail by dinner-time.

The baby-faced 53-year-old president, who wears his huge white ten-gallon hat everywhere he goes (except, perhaps, in jail), was never a credible occupant of the office. He had no experience of governmentbefore being elected two years ago by despairing voters who were willing to try anything new, and he showed no aptitude for his new job either.

Castillo ran as an independent, and his only declared ally was the Marxist-Lenin ?Free Peru Party'. Once in office, however, he displayed much skill and enthusiasm in diverting public funds into his own pockets: bribes, fake contracts, selling government jobs, etc.

Even in Peru this is bound to attract public disapproval, and most of the people who joined his government quit again within months. (Five prime ministers in two years.) Moreover, Congress was dominated by hard-right parties, and soon they were trying to impeach him.

By last week they thought they had a majority to start the impeachment process, or at least Castillo thought they did. So he launched his ?autogolpe' (?self-coup'), named after the action of a previous Peruvian president who overthrew his own elected government and ruled as a dictator. But where Alberto Fujimori succeeded in 1992, Castillo failed in 2022.

He failed because most of Peru's 33 millionpeople saw his action as illegitimate. The country is going through a bad patch, but its people have concluded that respect for the constitution is good, while coups and dictators are bad.

Vice-President Dina Boluarte took over the presidency smoothly with Congress's blessing, while Castillo wound up behind bars. Well done Peru, but there was something even more ridiculous than Castillo's attempted coup last week.

Due to some sort of intercontinental quantum entanglement, a group of quite respectable German citizens were plotting a coup, and on the very same day they too ended up in jail.

Three thousand police carried out 130 raids across Germany and arrested 23 members of this largely internet-based organization. As many more people are still being sought. They included doctors, retired army officers, a former member of parliament, an ex-judge, even a celebrity chef ? and they almost all had guns stashed away.

?We don't yet have a name for this group,? said a spokeswoman for the federal prosecutor's office, but the goal was to storm the Bundestag (German parliament), overthrow the government, and revive the German Reich.

?Reich' can mean ?kingdom' or ?empire', but it doesn't normally mean ?democracy'. And it wasn't clear which Reich they had in mind, but it presumably wasn't the thousand-year-old Holy Roman Empire, the First Reich, destroyed by Napoleon in 1806.

Maybe the Second Reich, the unified Germany ruled by the Hohenzollern dynasty from 1871 to 1918. Or even the Third Reich, run by Adolf Hitler from 1933 to 1945. But definitely an autocracy of some sort, and the nameless group even had a ?king' ready to take power, a 71-year-old minor aristocrat known as Prince Heinrich XIII.

All musical-comedy stuff, except that the guns were real. Many of the plotters were also anti-vaxxers, and a leading Swiss newspaper was probably right to dismiss the group as ?fifty loons?. Certainly, the constitution of the German Federal Republic was never in danger, and we might conclude that ?what happens on the internet stays on the internet.'

That's true in most places, most of the time. Moreover, when the conspiracy theories do occasionally bleed over into reality it's usually horrible but isolated events like school shootings, not massive changes in national politics. However, big lies do sometimes take hold. They could do so even before the internet, as a previousgeneration of Germans could attest to. And no country is immune, no matter how old and secure its democracy may seem.