

Presidential rivals do battle over Peru's history

By Hal Weitzman in Trujillo, Peru

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A huge monochrome photograph dominates one wall of the offices of the Apra party's headquarters in Trujillo, Peru's third-largest city. It shows a tall, twentysomething Alan García, who was to become the first Apra leader to win the presidency, sporting bushy sideburns and dress shirt, next to the diminutive, balding, elderly figure of Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, Apra's founder.

Mr García may now be weeks away from a chance to reclaim the presidency, but Haya de la Torre, who died in 1979, is perhaps the more important political figure in Trujillo. The creator of Peru's oldest and most powerful political party was born here, and it was here in 1932 that Apra led a revolt against sugar barons that was brutally repressed.

At a recent rally in the northern coastal city, Mr García's speech was replete with references to Haya de la Torre and Apra's history. Rejecting the stark choice between completely open markets and nationalising industry, as threatened by his challenger in the elections, he told an ecstatic crowd: "Just as Victor Raul said: 'Neither Washington nor Moscow – only Apra will save Peru'."

As Mr García, who this week squeaked through into the second round of Peru's presidential election, gears up for what promises to be a bruising contest with Ollanta Humala, the radical nationalist who topped the poll in the first round, the battle will be as much about the past as the future. Both candidates want to overcome aspects of their personal records and both will seek to do so by evoking the spirit of some of the towering figures of Peru's political past.

While Mr García leans heavily on Haya de la Torre, Mr Humala, a former army officer, has marketed himself as the political heir of Juan Velasco Alvarado, the leftwing military dictator who governed Peru from 1968 to 1975. Velasco, who nationalised industries and curbed press freedom, is chiefly remembered for an agrarian reform programme that was an economic failure but politically popular in rural areas.

"Velasco got rid of a semi-feudal system and expropriated property from a class that had controlled agricultural land for 500 years," Gonzalo García, Mr Humala's vice-presidential running-mate, said in a recent interview. "In that period we had the biggest redistribution of land in the 20th century – bigger even than Cuba. That's why for 85 per cent of the population, Velasco is still revered as a deity.

"Of course, for the other 15 per cent, he's the devil."

At the same time, the Humala-García contest pits two of Peru's most powerful political institutions against each other: Apra, its oldest and most formidable party; and the military, which has governed the country for much of its recent past. The two have clashed many times but never has the confrontation been channelled so starkly through the electoral process.

Apra activists are also hoping that victory would reinvigorate the party, which has lost ground in the years

since Mr García left office.

In placing themselves consciously within history, both candidates are hoping to deflect attention from their weaknesses. By appealing to the fidelity of Apra's relationship with the Peruvian people, Mr García hopes to dull memories of his disastrous 1985-1990 presidency, which brought economic chaos and a bloody guerrilla war. By associating himself with a revolutionary strand of Peruvian history that has rebelled against governing elites, Mr Humala intends to deflect attention from his lack of experience.

Both candidates have also sought to reassess their backgrounds. Mr Humala has brushed off allegations of human rights abuses through constant references to comrades left behind and his contribution to defending the country against Maoist Shining Path guerrillas.

Mr García has responded with reference to Apra's history: thousands of its activists died struggling for democracy against repressive military governments and some 1,600 elected Apra officials were assassinated by the Shining Path. In the coming weeks he will play up his experience and his status as a known quantity against the uncertainty that surrounds his rival.

There was a hint of the venom to come in Mr García's speech at his closing first-round rally in Lima.

"I have a message for that man who discovered nationalism at the age of 40 and who says he will bury the Apra," Mr García spat. "Long after he is dead and in the ground, my political party will have more life than ever."

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