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Peruvians are celebrating an extraordinary victory this week: the conviction of their former president, Alberto Fujimori, for death squad killings carried out during his rule in the 1990s.

The Peruvian Supreme Court found him guilty of egregious human rights abuses, including the massacre of innocent civilians, and sentenced him to 25 years in prison -- a stiff message to other leaders that justice can eventually catch up to even the most powerful.

It is one of the first times a nation's own independent courts have convicted a former leader for such serious human rights crimes and it sets an important precedent for a region that suffered so much from political violence and rights violations. Equally significant, the ruling came after a lengthy televised trial, which was clearly fair to the defendant -- despite Peru's previous history of authoritarianism and weak rule of law. ()

For a decade, his government used bribery, extortion, and intimidation to concentrate power in the presidency, subverting the democratic process and eliminating normal checks by the judiciary, legislature, and media on government abuses. He led Peru from 1990 to 2000, presiding over the war with the Shining Path guerrillas and the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement. He was convicted of authorizing killings and kidnappings by paramilitary death squads. Fujimori is to be tried separately on multiple corruption charges. (...)

In country after country, particularly in Latin America, victims were inspired to challenge the amnesty laws of the 1980s and 1990s that had allowed the perpetrators of atrocities to go unpunished and, often, to remain in power. Thanks to these efforts, former leaders in Argentina, and Uruguay have also faced human rights trials.

After the creation of UN tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the world established the International Criminal Court (ICC) to prosecute genocide, crimes against humanity and serious war crimes when national courts are unable or unwilling to do so. The ICC is now investigating crimes in the Central African Republic, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in March the court indicted President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan on charges of crimes against humanity in Darfur. ()

The verdict will also send a powerful message to current heads of state who may be tempted to use abusive tactics to resolve their political problems. As Fujimori discovered yesterday, crimes they may be able to get away with while in power can come back to haunt them years later.

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