

An Overview of Fundamentalist Groups in Peru

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Observatorio de los Grupos Anti-derechos
Centro de Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos
Sexuales y Reproductivos (PROMSEX)

Jaris Mujica and Mauricio Cerna

Organizations working on sexual and reproductive rights are confronted with the conservative wing of Catholicism and individuals who, while part of public institutions, are also members of religious fundamentalist groups. In this context, studying the fundamentalist and conservative phenomena is an exercise that allows for the generation of knowledge and of a pro-rights political discourse. Viewed in this way, the dissemination of information about fundamentalist groups (i.e., their institutional structures, activities, involvement in public administration and relations with the Peruvian Catholic Church) is itself a strategy to defend the democratic principles and human rights upon which the rights to sexual health and reproductive health are based.

In this case study, two members of the [Observatorio de los Grupos Anti-derechos](#) (Observatory of Anti-Rights Groups) of the Centro de Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos ([PROMSEX](#); Centre for the Promotion and Defence of Sexual and Reproductive Rights) present their understanding of the concept of religious fundamentalism. This is followed by a summary of the main activities of fundamentalist groups in Peru. Finally, they describe the strategies used by PROMSEX in its research and monitoring work, as well as the impact of disseminating this information to women's rights activists and Peruvian citizens in general.

Politics and Religion: Fundamentalisms

Religious fundamentalisms are a form of expression of and imposition of religious beliefs. They do not exist only in the extreme radicalism of holy war or in rejecting the social order of the modern world. In Latin America and in Peru in particular, many of these groups are part of politico-religious organizations with a certain amount of economic power, which they use to penetrate formal democratic processes, using the tools of democracy at the same time that they employ discourses

that contravene individuals' rights and freedoms. These organizations base their discursive strategies and structures on the principle of the "inerrancy" (the concept of being totally without error) of Holy Scripture or of the Pope. They conceive of their fundamental beliefs as universal and unequivocal and their leaders generally embody messianic images.

In some cases, fundamentalist groups may act at the margins of the State with the objective of overturning it to create a nexus that merges the world of God with the world of "men." However, there are also groups that choose not to oppose the State but rather integrate themselves into it through public policies that aim to perpetuate divine principles (including through democratic means). Such is the case in Peru, where religious fundamentalism cannot be understood as an attitude of opposition or a direct break with the formal democratic system of the State; rather it must be viewed as a collection of practices and discourses that reinterpret and accommodate democracy and human rights discourses in light of biblical principles and papal mandates. In spite of their formal inclusion in democratic processes, fundamentalist groups display an attitude that contradicts democracy, since their objectives are to impose their beliefs and ways of life on the entire population and restrict civil rights.

Broadly speaking, we can say that in Peru these organizations are characterized as "naturalists," from the "Catholic right," and connected to economically powerful groups that operate on the basis of global policies.

The "naturalist" character of fundamentalist groups lies in "natural law," which, according to the conservatism of the upper echelons of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, is the commandment of God: heterosexual men and women join in marriage to procreate and thereby reveal "the mystery of God's love." From this position, they build a series of discourses that give sense to the activities of these groups, based on a correlation between global and local strategies designed to prevent the application of sexual and reproductive rights.

Natural Law or "Normalcy"	"Unnatural" or "Abnormal"
Marriages or unions between people of different sexes	Marriages or unions between people of the same sex
Heterosexuality	Sexual diversity
Sexuality as a means for reproduction and as a form of expression of masculine or feminine "nature"	Sexuality as enjoyment of one's own body and a form of expression of sexual diversity
Intercourse open to the possibility of reproduction	Contraceptive use
Motherhood as the real or symbolic destiny of women	Not being a mother
Pregnancy as a mystery of love (ending the pregnancy is forbidden)	Pregnancy as a woman's choice (ending the pregnancy is allowed)
Heterosexual family	Homosexual family

Another characteristic of these groups is the social composition of their decision-making levels. The leaders of these organizations are individuals with extensive higher education, in many cases having a master's degree or doctorate. They are active participants in academic institutions. Usually their connections with the ultra-conservative sector of the Catholic Church can be traced back to a family history and their having passed through Catholic schools attended by the middle and upper classes. In many cases this means that the social standing of fundamentalist leaders provides them with the opportunity to understand the mechanisms of formal democracy (and its cracks), and therefore access levels of government where decisions are made and where they can block or eliminate policies that support sexual and reproductive rights. For this reason religious fundamentalism in Peru does not represent a break from the structures of the State or regulatory frameworks, but the very opposite: it is a way of harmonizing the "naturalist view" with public policy and the laws of the State.

The Political Impact of Fundamentalist Groups on Public Policy

For fundamentalist groups, public policies are a way to mandate that people live in accordance with divine precepts or "natural law." This prompts them to design and implement policies based on their perspectives, and also work towards overturning or blocking implementation of laws and projects that they consider profane

or contrary to “natural law.” To do so, fundamentalist groups have developed an efficient social division of labour without losing the ability to collaborate with one another or organize around objectives that are global in scope, such as the worldwide moratorium on abortion.¹

In Peru, the work of fundamentalist groups is concentrated on developing discourses against sexual and reproductive rights and gender perspectives; promoting and implementing educational and health policies that correspond with the precepts of natural law; lobbying to block policies that protect women’s health and lives, the civil rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals (LGBT), and the exercise of sexuality free of risks. They also work to attack, defame and campaign against sexual and reproductive rights activists through various electronic media, including monitoring activists to prove they have committed “illegal” acts.

These activities are conducted by organizations such as [Opus Dei](#), the [Sodalicio de Vida Cristiana \(SVC, Society of Apostolic Life\)](#), the [Centro de Promoción Familiar y Regulación Natural de la Natalidad \(CEPROFARENA, Centre for Promotion of the Family and Natural Regulation of Fertility\)](#), [Population Research Institute \(PRI\)](#) and [Alianza Latinoamericana para la Familia \(ALAFA, Latin American Alliance for the Family\)](#), which we will describe in detail in the following paragraphs.²

The Position of Fundamentalist Groups in the Field of Politics in Peru

The Education of the Elites and the Prelature of Opus Dei

The Prelature of Opus Dei was established in Peru in the middle of the 1950s, at the request of the then-Archbishop of Lima, Cardinal Guevara.³ In less than sixty years, this institution was able to position itself politically through the establishment of educational institutions for the instruction of the upper classes and the “Peruvian aristocracy”;⁴ through the presence of its members in high positions in State institutions;⁵ and by implementing sustainable economic development projects in rural areas.⁶ In this way, Opus Dei has positioned itself as an organization that (through the Episcopal Conference and the State) is able to promote the blocking of laws that protect the right to life and health of women and of citizens in general, whether from its position on the Episcopal Conference or from within State mechanisms. Its members attempt to dominate the bureaucratic structure of the Peruvian Church and pressure the State. As a result, currently eleven of the twenty Peruvian bishoprics are held by Opus Dei members. In addition, the archbishop of Lima, Juan Luis Cipriani, is a member of the prelature and publicly and repeatedly speaks against

therapeutic abortion, euthanasia and emergency oral contraception (EOC). In January 2009, Cipriani was decorated by the Peruvian president, Alan García, with the Order of the Sun of Peru in the rank of Grand Cross.

Religious-Political Charisma: El Sodalicio de la Vida Cristiana (SVC)

SVC is a society of apostolic life⁷ that arose in Peru under the leadership of Luis Fernando Figari. Currently it has offices across Latin America, Europe and Asia operating under the name [Movimiento de Vida Cristiana/Christian Life Movement](#). SVC’s main tasks include catechizing the faithful, conducting activities that facilitate the dissemination of fundamentalist ideas and organizing groups who agree with their principles through its more than 40,000 members.

It also has a website for disseminating religious news, [ACI Prensa](#),⁸ and [Ve-Multimedios](#), an Apostolic organization that provides technical assistance on web design and virtual courses to fundamentalists. It also owns the [Universidad Católica San Pablo](#). The SVC also exerts political pressure to block initiatives that do not conform to “natural law”, as it did to overturn the protocol for therapeutic abortion in the Arequipa Region of southern Peru.⁹

The Medical Wing of the Fundamentalists: CEPROFARENA

CEPROFARENA is a non-governmental organization affiliated with [Vida Humana Internacional \(VHI/Human Life International, HLI\)](#). It works to bring dogmatic religious discourse into medical practices as a basis for political opposition to sexual and reproductive rights.

Similar to Opus Dei, many CEPROFARENA members are closely associated with institutions of public administration. Among its members, supporters and former leaders are ex-ministers and deputy ministers, parliamentarians, ministerial advisors and members of bioethics committees who have used their religious beliefs to promote undemocratic initiatives such as prohibiting the free distribution of EOC to impoverished women,¹⁰ celebrating the “Day of the Unborn,” criminalizing abortion, and opposing same-sex unions. It is the “medical wing” of fundamentalist groups.

Lobbying and Defamation: Population Research Institute

The [Population Research Institute \(PRI\)](#) follows global guidelines that it seeks to concretize in the health policies of different countries. They work to block funding to organizations that advocate for sexual and reproductive rights of citizens; lobby and advise parliamentarians and

propose laws to prohibit the use of contraception, same-sex marriage and therapeutic abortion; and generally work against the secularity of the State.

In Latin America, PRI's main headquarters are in Peru and the organization is represented by Carlos Polo, one of the most prominent activists among fundamentalist groups. As an activist and president of the PRI office in Latin America, Polo does not limit PRI's work to lobbying the Peruvian parliament; it is also engaged in every Latin American country where the political situation may affect fundamentalist interests. In addition to its lobbying work, PRI also functions as a machinery to discredit groups that advocate for sexual and reproductive rights.

Fundamentalist Pedagogy: ALAFA

The [Alianza Latinoamericana para la Familia](#) (ALAFA, Latin American Alliance for the Family) is a fundamentalist organization that emerged in Venezuela and that is closely linked to Opus Dei. It has been able to expand the parameters of its work thanks to a network of contacts that the organization has due to the economic ties of its leaders.

Its work very specifically focuses on creating educational programs entitled "Learning to Love," which are disseminated through Catholic schools. ALAFA practices, implements and teaches Catholic fundamentalist ideas to children in schools (some of which are owned by the SVC or Opus Dei).

In addition, when the political situation warrants, ALAFA participates in global campaigns against sexual and reproductive rights. It also lobbies educational institutions, academic forums and the Ministry of Education (MINEDU). It is the pedagogical arm of the fundamentalists.

Fundamentalists against Sexual and Reproductive Rights Work

Fundamentalist groups operate as independent organizations coordinated by an opportunistic integrating dynamic and a logic of division of labour. They have built this structure based on an identity that distinguishes in a dichotomous way between normality/abnormality, a culture of life/a culture of death, and us/them. Thanks to the division of labour among fundamentalist groups, their strategies are combined to include: the insertion of a religious-scientific discourse into medical practice; a focus on the educational sphere; parliamentary lobbying; and legal and regulatory proposals and interpretations put forward by fundamentalist lawyers and public officials who are part of the state structure.

In Peru, the existence of fundamentalist groups cannot be understood

without analyzing the political power of the conservative sectors of the Catholic Church, whose beliefs and objectives the fundamentalist groups share, and whose work they complement. In effect, the conservative sectors of the Catholic Church appear to be absorbed in their evangelizing function, asserting that the people [regular, lay Catholics] who are members of lay organizations are the ones called to be "apostles charged with creating a propitious time for God to build his kingdom on Earth." However, this characterization is inaccurate, given that the clergy does at times bring its beliefs into the political sphere.

It should be noted that the Peruvian State is structured in such a way as to permit the Catholic Church to participate in politics. In addition, the democratic social and legal context¹¹ of Peru of course allows Catholics who are members of lay organizations the room to participate in decision-making fora and in the formulation of public policy.

This porous or nonexistent separation of church and state *in practice* has led to the failure of and attempts to overturn laws and public policies addressing sexual and reproductive health. Fundamentalist groups have positioned themselves within institutions of public administration such as the Congress, the Ministry of Health (MINSA), the above mentioned MINEDU, and the Ministry of Justice (MINJUS). For fundamentalist groups, each one of these spaces is a political target because it is through these institutions that policies restricting the freedoms of citizens can be formulated. For this reason, MINSA¹² has become the centre of activity for the blocking of or non-compliance with laws that protect the health and rights of women and of the general population more broadly. In addition, MINJUS is the focus for influencing the legal arena, where the most conservative sectors of the Catholic Church operate through the [Dirección de Asuntos Católicos](#) (Catholic Affairs Office) of that ministry. The Congress is the institution where parliamentarians are lobbied to introduce fundamentalist bills such as the proposal for a Ministry of the Family, the criminalization of therapeutic abortion, and the prohibition on distributing EOC to impoverished women, among others.

PROMSEX: Creating Knowledge and Political Awareness

The promotion and defence of sexual and reproductive rights is a pillar of human rights work that is in constant danger due to the organizing and political positioning of fundamentalist groups and the conservative hierarchy of the Catholic Church. This situation led PROMSEX to try to understand fundamentalism, which we initially called the conservative or anti-rights phenomenon. Thus, we sought to deconstruct the discourses of these groups, study their social networks, and identify their objectives and their main leaders in order to develop more precise arguments and generate specific knowledge to deal with these groups. As a result of this research

work, PROMSEX published *Economía política del cuerpo: la reestructuración de los grupos conservadores y el biopoder (Political Economy of the Body: The Restructuring of Conservative Groups and Bio-power)*.¹³

Later on we created the Observatory of Anti-Rights Groups¹⁴ dedicated to documenting, analyzing and disseminating information about the activities that fundamentalist groups carry out to weaken the pro-sexual and reproductive rights agenda. Initially, this task was focused on events in Peru. However, given that these organizations follow global guidelines and function through networks linking various groups of countries, we also saw the need to analyze the political situation in Ecuador, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The Observatory's activities include the distribution of monthly newsletters that provide information about the main activities of the conservative wings of the Catholic Church and of the fundamentalist groups to other organizations working on sexual and reproductive rights. In this way, we have been able to alert other organizations so that they could create strategies in response. Such is the case in El Salvador, where the consequences of a campaign that consisted of collecting signatures against abortion in Parliament by an organization linked to Vida Humana Internacional in Central America were foreseen.

The work of monitoring fundamentalist and conservative groups involves several tools. On the one hand, we follow their activities through virtual and print media reporting which documents their statements, manifestos and events. We also participate in several of these spaces. We monitor the individual activities of their leaders and research their employment and academic backgrounds. In addition, we conduct in-depth interviews with key informants and actors linked to these organizations, hold informal conversations, and document their activities. We use ethnographic tools and discourse analysis. Finally, we follow and document inter-institutional relationships between fundamentalist and conservative organizations, their campaigns and coordination meetings, their international ties and their political strategies, their participation in political spaces (for example, in Parliament or government ministries) and in public debate via the media.

Perspectives on the Future: Restructuring Pro-Rights Strategies in the Face of Fundamentalism

Through our research, we have realized that for these self-styled “pro-life” groups, life does not belong to individuals but to God and his representatives, the clergy. According to this view, individuals cannot make decisions about their own lives. Additionally, the notion of family refers only to the union of a man and a woman in order to make manifest “the mystery of God’s love” through sexuality for reproductive purposes.

We also learned that fundamentalist groups have reinterpreted democracy from the basis of their religious beliefs and their political interests. In this way, they have been able to discursively legitimize their presence within local and global non-governmental organizations and within the State. Despite employing a discourse that recognizes democracy as a regime of coexistence and dialogue and appealing to human rights concepts, their strategy of political imposition of their beliefs reveals an ignorance of diversity and a defence of the laws of God (natural law) that does not necessarily correspond with the social problems people face.

In this sense, it must be recognized that fundamentalist groups may have succeeded in linking some aspects of their fundamentalist positions with democratic and human rights schemas among some sectors of civil society. However, it is important to note that this linking is the outcome of a discursive strategy, and is not based any recognition of the humanity of others: it is an instrumental use of rights language. That is why fundamentalists resort to a basic dichotomy that is not intended to increase understanding but rather to label and categorize people through such notions as “normal” and “abnormal,” or promoters of a “culture of life” versus a “culture of death.”

PROMSEX has not only successfully disseminated its research work among pro-rights groups in Peru and across the region, but has also given critical importance to the strategy of rigorously and systematically studying the workings of conservative and fundamentalist groups and discourses.

However, in spite of the advances made in researching religious fundamentalist groups, more work remains to be done on understanding how the conservative wings of Catholicism have appropriated bioethics to construct legal and medical arguments against abortion, euthanasia, assisted reproduction and contraception. In this regard, we note that fundamentalist groups are adapting their strategies and their medical, political and legal discourse using the linkage between bioethics and natural law that the Vatican’s Pontifical Councils have established.

The relationship between religious fundamentalism and bioethics requires sexual and reproductive rights activists to create dynamic strategies based on knowledge of the discourse on life and bioethics. To do so, we must not cease to observe, describe and understand.

Endnotes:

¹ Following the example of the universal moratorium on the death penalty proposed by Amnesty International and approved by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2007, Italian fundamentalist Catholic politicians launched the Global Moratorium on Abortion which seeks to modify the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to include protection for life “from conception until natural death.”

² Editor’s Note (EN): These are lay organizations. Such organizations create a blurred line between the “secular” and the “religious” because their mandate is explicitly religious but their membership is open to clergy as well as Catholics who are not part of the clergy (i.e., laypeople).

³ “El Opus Dei en el Perú,” Opus Dei website, 25 Sept. 2006.

⁴ Opus Dei schools are characterized as elitist. Its institutions include the Universidad de Piura, Colegio Salcantay (for women) and Alpamayo (for men).

⁵ Prominent Opus Dei members and sympathizers include Rafael Rey (ex-congressperson and minister of production), Luis Solari (ex-congressperson, minister of health and prime minister), Fernando Carbone (ex-minister of health) and [Fabiola Morales](#) (vice-president of the Congress and of the Grupo Acción Mundial de Parlamentarios por la Vida/Global Action Group of Parliamentarians for Life).

⁶ For example, the Condoray project, whose objective is to “train individuals, who, by assimilating human and Christian values, habits and work methods, will positively influence families in the [Nazca] Valley.” In another project in Valle Grande, an NGO has been founded that is dedicated to “research and transference of productive technologies.”

⁷ “¿Qué es el Sodalicio?” Sodalitium Christianae Vitae website - Peru Section, 10 Nov. 2009. EN: SVC is one particular society of apostolic life. A society of apostolic life is a group of Catholic men or women who come together for a specific purpose. Members of apostolic societies can be laypersons and do not have to make religious vows. A community needs written approval from the bishop of the diocese to operate, and this type of organization is defined by Canon Law. (From Wikipedia entry on “[Society of Apostolic Life](#).”)

⁸ The [Agencia Católica de Informaciones](#) serves Latin America.

⁹ To read more about how the therapeutic abortion protocol in Arequipa was overturned, see the case study by Foro Regional por los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos.

¹⁰ Recently, the Second Civil Chamber of Lima ruled in favour of free distribution of OEC to impoverished women, but the fundamentalist NGO Ala sin Componenda (Acción de Lucha Anticorrupción sin Componenda/Anti-corruption Action without Compromise) incessantly strives to impose its religious beliefs through public policies and has appealed the decision.

¹¹ From our perspective, the policy context cannot be understood separately from daily practices that are based on customs or social conventions. EN: Note that the degree of engagement in politics, not only of Catholic clergy, but also of both average lay Catholics and of powerful lay Catholic elites who are part of non-clerical Catholic organizations (as is the right of any citizen), provides for various ways in which the Church establishment and its allies may influence public policy in the Peruvian context.

¹² MINSA has had ministers, vice-ministers and ministerial advisors belonging to CEPROFARENA and closely linked to Opus Dei, SVC and VHI/HLI.

¹³ Jaris Mujica, *Economía política del cuerpo: la reestructuración de los grupos conservadores y el biopoder*, Lima: PROMSEX, 2007.

¹⁴ The concept of “anti-rights” refers to the naturalist (monolithic and non-inclusive) paradigm of fundamentalist groups, as opposed to a focus on process, which allows the area of legal norms to correspond with the principle of perfectibility of the law.

Further Reading:

[Boletín Informativo del Observatorio de los Grupos Anti-Derechos y Cuerpo y Derechos](#), Observatorio de los Grupos Anti-derechos, PROMSEX, Lima, Peru.

[Centro de Documentación de Bioética](#), Departamento de Humanidades Biomédicas de la Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, España.

Luna, Florencia, *Bioética. Nuevas reflexiones sobre debates clásicos*, Buenos Aires: Fondo de cultura económica, 2008.

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Perez-Tamayo, Ruy, *La construcción de la bioética*, Mexico: Fondo de cultura económica, 2007.

Romero, Catalina, *Religión y espacio public*, Lima: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, Económicas, Políticas y Antropológicas, PUCP, 2008.

Author Bios:

Jaris Mujica is pursuing a doctorate in political sciences at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), where he also received a master’s in political science and a graduate degree in anthropology. He has been awarded numerous prizes and research scholarships, including the Premio de la Asamblea Nacional de Rectores, the Beca Andina del IFEA and the Beca de Investigación del Colegio Mexiquense. He is the author of *El mercado negro* (2008), *Economía política del cuerpo* (2007), editor of *Después de Michel Foucault* (2006) and numerous articles and chapters in books. He has specialized in political anthropology, ethnography of the State, crime, corruption and fundamentalisms. He was a professor at the Universidad de San Marcos and the Universidad Jesuita Antonio Ruiz de Montoya. Currently, he is a professor in the political sciences master’s program at PUCP and adjunct researcher for the Centro de Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos (PROMSEX).

Mauricio Cerna received a graduate degree in anthropology from the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, where he is currently working towards a master’s in history in the Andean Studies Program. He has conducted research on political anthropology and religion. He is a member of the Observatory of Anti-Rights Groups - Centro de Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos (PROMSEX).

He is also a member of the research team for the Narrative Studies Seminary, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, Económicas, Políticas y Antropológicas (Centre for Sociology, Economic, Political and Anthropology Research, CISEPA), at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. He was recently awarded the Premio de Egresados de Antropología (Alumni Anthropology Award).

Organizational Bio:

PROMSEX is a non-governmental organization that advocates for the promotion and defence of sexual and reproductive rights and works towards a society free of all types of discrimination and violence, where women and men exercise full citizenship and their rights are guaranteed. PROMSEX works towards the elimination of all types of discrimination that prevent the full exercise of human rights that guarantee free and informed reproduction as well as pleasurable sexuality free from risks. PROMSEX's work is based on the concepts of gender equality, women's empowerment, the creation of non-sexist masculinity, expanding the exercise of citizenship and the elimination of gender violence. www.promsex.org