REVISTA INVECOM
ISSN en línea: 2739-0063

Procedural safeguards and due process: the central role of indictment in the Peruvian criminal justice system

Garantías procesales y debido proceso: rol central de la imputación en el sistema penal peruano

Received: 10/08/2025 - **Accepted:** 08/11/2025

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Abstract

In the Peruvian criminal justice system, the principle of specific charges has become particularly important due to its impact on the guarantee of due process. Various studies warn that deficiencies in the formulation of charges by some legal practitioners lead to confusion, legal uncertainty, and inconsistent judicial decisions. Such deficiencies have a direct impact on the defense of the accused and on the consistency of the criminal process, especially in complex cases, since the absence of clear boundaries in the charges leads to contradictory rulings that compromise legal certainty and erode the consistency of the system. The research, developed using a qualitative documentary-interpretive approach, employed dogmatic and hermeneutic methods, complemented by semi-structured interviews with judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys selected for their experience in criminal litigation. Based on these findings, it is argued that strict adherence to the principle of specific charges is an essential condition for ensuring a balanced criminal process that is compatible with constitutional standards. Likewise, the analysis showed that the lack of clear charges leads to scenarios of defenselessness, delays proceedings, and reduces the quality of legal debate, affecting the uniformity and legitimacy of rulings. It is concluded that observance of this principle is indispensable to ensure criminal proceedings in accordance with constitutional standards. Beyond regulatory adjustments, it is necessary to foster an institutional culture based on technical precision, continuous training, and the ethical commitment of justice operators in order to safeguard the fundamental rights of the accused.

Keywords: specific charge, due process, criminal proceedings.

Resumen

En el sistema de justicia penal peruano, el principio de imputación específica ha adquirido especial relevancia por su impacto en la garantía del debido proceso. Diversos estudios advierten que las deficiencias en la formulación de cargos por parte de algunos operadores jurídicos generan confusión, inseguridad jurídica y decisiones judiciales inconsistentes. Tales deficiencias repercuten de manera directa en la defensa del imputado y en la coherencia del proceso penal, especialmente en casos complejos, pues la ausencia de delimitaciones claras en las acusaciones deriva en resoluciones contradictorias que comprometen la seguridad jurídica y erosionan la coherencia del sistema. La investigación, desarrollada bajo un enfoque cualitativo de carácter documental-interpretativo, empleó los métodos dogmático y hermenéutico, complementados con entrevistas semiestructuradas a jueces, fiscales y abogados defensores seleccionados por su experiencia en litigación penal. A partir de estos hallazgos, se sostiene que el respeto estricto del principio de imputación específica constituye una condición esencial para garantizar un proceso penal equilibrado y compatible con los estándares constitucionales. Asimismo, el análisis evidenció que la falta de imputaciones claras propicia escenarios de indefensión, dilata los procedimientos y reduce la calidad del debate jurídico, afectando la uniformidad y legitimidad de las resoluciones. Se concluye que la observancia de dicho principio es indispensable para asegurar un proceso penal acorde con los estándares constitucionales. Más allá de ajustes normativos, se requiere fomentar una cultura institucional basada en la precisión técnica, la capacitación continua y el compromiso ético de los operadores de justicia, con el fin de salvaguardar los derechos fundamentales del imputado.

Palabras clave: imputación específica, debido proceso, proceso penal.

Introduction

In contemporary criminal justice systems, a primary challenge lies in the persistent lack of precision in the formulation of charges, which directly impacts the right to defense and due process (García & Ocaña, 2024). Both the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) assert that every person under investigation must clearly understand the facts attributed to them. Thus, the principle of specific charges is not merely a formality, but a crucial safeguard that ensures adversarial fairness and procedural equality (Izaguirre, 2024).

This principle serves an essential function within the accusatory model as it delineates the conduct being charged and constrains the punitive power of the state, thereby preventing arbitrary actions (Centellas, 2022). Although countries like Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia recognize this principle, its application often encounters significant challenges, particularly in the early stages of criminal proceedings (Durán & Henríquez, 2021). It is during this phase that vague or inadequately supported charges are commonly presented, which in turn restricts the defense and jeopardizes judicial impartiality. Almanza (2022) warns that the lack of oversight permits accusations based on weak presumptions, undermining the transparency of the system.

In Peru, despite the introduction of a rights-oriented model by the New Criminal Procedure Code (Abanto, 2021), relevant deficiencies persist. Article 139, subsection 14, of the Constitution and Article 71 of the Criminal Procedure Code recognize the principle; however, many prosecutorial offices continue to raise ambiguous charges lacking evidentiary support (Calderón, 2022). This situation impairs the defense, reduces preliminary hearings to mere formalities, and broadens the discretionary powers of the Public Ministry (Navarrete & Arenas, 2020).

Judicial precedents have also noted this issue. The Plenary Agreement 01-2019/CIJ-116 indicates that a lack of precision can lead to absolute nullities by restricting the right to defend (Figueroa & Piélago, 2020). Consequently, specific charges are a structural requirement that legitimizes the criminal process.

Despite the existing legal framework, this reality illustrates a legal culture that remains distant from contemporary procedural constitutionalism. Imprecise charges lacking evidentiary support undermine procedural balance and erode public trust (Guerreros et al., 2024).

In this context, the research poses the question: To what extent does the appropriate application of the principle of specific charges in the preliminary stage strengthen due process? To address this question, the study adopts a legal-doctrinal and philosophical approach grounded in doctrine, legal standards, jurisprudence, and interviews with judges, prosecutors, and criminal defense attorneys, with the aim of formulating proposals that optimize procedural practices and ensure a more equitable and transparent penal system.

Methodology

This study aims to profoundly analyze the principle of specific charges, demonstrating that it is not simply a procedural formality but a constitutional guarantee that underpins the legitimacy of the Peruvian criminal process. A qualitative methodology was designed, incorporating an empirical component to gather perceptions and experiences from actors involved in the criminal justice system.

From a theoretical standpoint, the dogmatic method was employed to analyze the conceptual, doctrinal, and normative foundations of the principle within the framework of the Peruvian accusatory process. This approach was complemented by the hermeneutic method, which focuses on interpreting applicable laws and the main national and international jurisprudential criteria, integrating various perspectives to construct a coherent and critical analysis.

Additionally, a selective documentary review was conducted of specialized academic sources, including scientific articles, monographs, theses, institutional documents, and international treaties. This literature search reinforced the conceptual foundations and delineated the doctrinal and normative scope of the principle.

In the empirical component, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five experts in criminal law: two judges, a senior prosecutor, and two attorneys with extensive litigation experience. Participants were selected through intentional sampling, prioritizing their expertise. Open-ended questions yielded qualitative insights into the practical application of the principle of specific charges in current criminal proceedings.

In summary, the methodological strategy integrated theoretical contributions and empirical findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand. This approach unveiled structural limitations within the criminal system and generated valuable inputs for proposing necessary normative adjustments and institutional reforms aimed at ensuring the efficacy of the principle while strengthening the legitimacy and transparency of the Peruvian criminal process.

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Results and discussion

I. Conceptual foundations and theoretical perspectives on specific charges

The study of the principle of specific charges requires a perspective that goes beyond mere formalism, recognizing its role as a structural guarantee of due process in criminal law. Correct application not only safeguards the right to defense but also upholds the legitimacy of the justice system. Various doctrinal currents—criminal guarantees, constitutional state theory, legal epistemology, and case theory—concur that all accusations must be formulated with clarity, precision, and sufficient legal grounding.

From the standpoint of criminal guarantees, Ferrajoli (2010) emphasizes that specific charges limit the punitive power of the state, preventing arbitrary actions and ensuring effective defense. The theory of constitutional state (García, 2010) indicates that imprecise accusations undermine legality and legal certainty, affecting the predictability of the process. Epistemologically, Hessen et al. (1981) and Moncada (2019) argue that precision in charges organizes judicial reasoning and prevents speculative decisions. In case theory, a specific charge articulates the prosecutorial hypothesis and guides the evidentiary process (Abanto, 2021).

Together, these perspectives demonstrate that specific charges constitute an essential pillar of the criminal process, indispensable for ensuring rights, directing judicial debate, and maintaining constitutional legitimacy.

II. Normative configuration and theoretical foundations of the principle of specific charges

The principle of specific charges is crucial for ensuring that all individuals under investigation clearly understand the facts and their legal characterization, enabling full defense. From a functional perspective, this principle mandates that the Public Ministry formulate unequivocal attributions consistent with the penal code, avoiding ambiguities that create legal insecurity (Correas, 1989).

Guerreros et al. (2024) and Calderón (2022) highlight that inadequate identification of facts or subjects negatively impacts procedural equity and the principle of contradiction. Philosophically, Almanza (2022), from a Kantian perspective, posits that specific charges affirm the dignity and autonomy of individuals, granting them the status of responsible subjects.

The principle encompasses three dimensions:

1. Legal, which requires clear and congruent charges.
2. Rational, demanding coherence and objective support.
3. Axiological, safeguarding human dignity.

Thus, it serves cognitive, normative, and ethical functions, establishing itself as a structural guarantee that legitimizes both the prosecution and the criminal process.

III. Technical structure of imputation: constitutive elements and argumentative coherence

A valid charge necessitates the coherent articulation of three components: the description of facts, the normative framework, and the evidentiary basis. Its robustness depends on logically linking these elements.

According to San Martín (2000), the factual narrative must directly relate to the elements of the criminal type, incorporating both objective and subjective aspects. In crimes involving evaluative components, Baytelman and Duce (2004) underscore the need for more precise analysis, where intent must be determined based on a coherent set of circumstances.

Mendoza (2011) asserts that a charge must harmoniously integrate narrative and legal interpretation, supported by evidence that attests to its plausibility. Without this backing, the accusation is rendered illegitimate and places the accused in a position of defenselessness.

In summary, an effective charge requires narrative coherence, appropriate legal classification, and verifiable evidentiary support, thereby ensuring the right to defense and respect for due process.

IV. Legal configuration of charges: essential criteria and the role of judicial control

The validity of a criminal accusation mandates structural conditions that ensure its legitimacy. In Nullity Resource No. 2823-2015, the Supreme Court established three essential criteria: clear exposition of the facts, comprehensible language, and correspondence between conduct and the criminal type. These guidelines allow the accused to understand the charges and exercise their defense from the earliest stages.

However, validity does not solely depend on form; it also requires reasonable evidentiary support that lends credibility to the accusation (Mendoza, 2011). In complex offenses, such as corruption, this support may rely on multiple indications that, when logically integrated, substantiate the charge.

Thus, a valid charge must articulate facts, normative elements, clear language, and sufficient evidence (Hernández, 2005), ensuring a legitimate process aligned with the constitutional state of law (Valle, 2022).

V. Specific charges as a structural guarantee of due process in criminal proceedings

In the Peruvian criminal process, specific charges represent a substantive guarantee that legitimizes the exercise of the *ius puniendi*. They delineate the criminal conflict and enable the accused to comprehend the facts and legal norms supporting the charges, ensuring procedural equality and transparency.

Sandoval (2022) defines due process as a set of material guarantees aimed at protecting rights. In alignment with this view, Alfaro et al. (2020) assert that accusations must adhere to clear normative criteria. Appeal Order No. 99-2024 reaffirmed that ambiguous charges violate the right to defense (CSJ, 2024). Normatively, both the Constitution and the Code of Criminal Procedure demand detailed communication accompanied by elements of conviction.

Nevertheless, Juárez et al. (2023) caution that the effectiveness of this principle also depends on the ethical commitment of judges and prosecutors. The findings of the study reveal a gap between the guarantees of the normative framework and daily practice, where deficiencies persist that obstruct its application (García & Ocaña, 2024).

Consequently, specific charges connect substantive criminal law and procedural law, ensuring that criminal prosecution occurs with rationality, legality, and respect for human dignity. Doctrinal sources, jurisprudence, and international treaties consistently recognize this principle as an essential pillar of due process and a necessary condition for the legitimacy of the justice system.

VI. Procedural congruence and just sentencing: balancing accusation and judicial decision

In the context of the Peruvian criminal process, the relationship between the charges formulated by the Public Ministry and the sentence issued by the judicial body forms a critical axis for the legitimacy of the trial. This connection is secured through the principle of procedural congruence, which stipulates that judicial decisions must strictly adhere to the facts communicated to the accused. According to Plenary Agreement No. 6-2009/CJ-116, a conviction must be based solely on the facts previously disclosed to the defendant (Corte Suprema de Justicia de la República, 2009). This principle protects the right to defense by preventing judges from introducing new or unnotified elements.

The principle of congruence is not a mere formal requirement; rather, it is a substantive guarantee that ensures the effectiveness of the right to defense. When a judge modifies the facts or adds elements not presented in the charges, it undermines the principle of equality of arms and creates material defenselessness. In this regard, Bautista (2021) argues that correspondence between accusation and sentencing is an indispensable mechanism for ensuring a fair, transparent, and balanced criminal process.

Its significance has also been affirmed at the international level. In the case of *Fermín Ramírez vs. Guatemala*, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights concluded that the correspondence between the charges and the sentence is an essential condition for due process, as only by knowing the facts and normative grounds can the accused exercise an effective defense (Corte IDH, 2005).

Domestically, both the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court have maintained that a vague or incoherent accusation violates the principle of contradiction and jeopardizes the validity of the sentence. If the facts are not specific, the accused lacks sufficient tools to contest the charges, thus weakening the accusatorial model envisioned by the Constitution and the Code of Criminal Procedure.

Therefore, adherence to the principle of congruence is a cornerstone of criminal justice. The coherence between the accusation and the resolution not only protects the rights of the accused but also enhances institutional transparency and public trust. When this guarantee is violated—whether through the introduction of uncharged facts or alterations to the factual basis—the validity of the ruling is compromised, calling into question the legitimacy of the entire criminal process.

The content of Plenary Agreement No. 6-2009/CJ-116, along with precedents from the Inter-American Court and the Constitutional Court, solidifies a uniform doctrine: no one can be convicted for facts that have not been formally attributed to them. Therefore, the congruence between accusation and sentencing embodies a material manifestation of procedural equity and the constitutional obligation to motivate judicial decisions.

In summary, this principle cannot be reduced to a mere procedural technicality. It represents a structural guarantee that reflects the essential values of the rights-oriented criminal process—predictability, transparency, and respect for the right to defense—and ensures that the exercise of the state's punitive power remains within the bounds of legality and constitutional justice.

VII. Results and analysis of interviews on specific charges in the Peruvian criminal process

The analysis of interviews conducted with magistrates, prosecutors, and criminal defense attorneys revealed a significant gap between the normative design of the principle of specific charges and its practical application within the Peruvian criminal process. At the initial stages, many accusations lack factual and legal precision, which negatively impacts the right to defense and generates procedural nullities.

Interviewees agreed that the application of this principle faces structural obstacles. Several criminal attorneys pointed out a tendency to prioritize punitive criteria over fundamental guarantees, as well as the use of standardized formats in charge drafting. Additionally, there is a lack of rigorous judicial oversight and a tolerance for incomplete charges, perpetuating a deficient model that compromises the quality of judicial decisions.

This finding aligns with Mendoza (2011), who identifies specific charges as central to effective defense, and with Guerreros et al. (2024), who refer to this phenomenon as "structural defenselessness." Similarly, Ferrajoli (2010) and Baytelman and Duce (2004) assert that precision in charges serves as a limit against state arbitrariness and is a prerequisite for rational trial proceedings.

The interviews also highlighted the prevalence of punitive criteria and the standardized use of formats in the formulation of charges. This practice, as Bautista (2021) warns, drains substance from charge formulation, reducing it to a mere formal procedure. The insufficient judicial oversight further reinforces this deficient model. Although interviewees appreciated the guidelines established in Plenary Agreement No. 6-2009/CJ-116, they noted its inconsistent application. This observation aligns with Alfaro et al. (2020), who underscore that the effectiveness of due process hinges on technical rigor, institutional strength, and judicial control over charges.

In this regard, the Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (2005) reaffirmed that precise charges are fundamental to the principle of penal legality. The observed deficiencies reflect a structural problem exacerbated by procedural burdens, limited professional training, and the absence of uniform criteria. Overcoming this scenario necessitates strengthening institutional frameworks, promoting ongoing training, and consolidating a procedural culture rooted in transparency, legality, and the protection of human rights.

VIII. Towards an effective specific charge: normative and institutional proposals for strengthening

The analysis of interviews and judicial practice reveals that the persistence of ambiguous, generic, or overly broad charges is not an isolated phenomenon but a structural problem that undermines the effectiveness of the Peruvian criminal process. Inaccuracies in the description of facts and weak connections to evidentiary elements create situations where procedural expediency takes precedence over the protection of fundamental rights.

In response, it is necessary to redefine the normative parameters that govern the formulation of charges. While Article 349 of the Code of Criminal Procedure establishes minimum criteria, its open wording allows for disparate interpretations that weaken legality. Therefore, it is pertinent to specify the essential elements of a valid charge: identification of the accused, a clear and chronological description of the facts, preliminary legal qualification, definition of procedural roles, and a direct relationship between the narrated facts and the supporting evidence.

However, normative reform alone is insufficient. A profound transformation in how prosecutors, judges, and defense attorneys conceive their roles within the accusatory system is required. Navarrete and Arenas (2020) caution that the poor quality of charges has turned many preliminary hearings into mere formalities, weakening judicial oversight and public trust in the justice system. Similarly, Guerreros et al. (2024) emphasize that specific charges are a substantive guarantee, not merely a formal requirement: when charges are vague or lack sufficient evidentiary support, they create a procedural imbalance that undermines the legitimacy of the accusatory model.

To address these deficiencies, it is proposed to strengthen the institutional capacities of the Public Ministry through specialized training programs in the technical drafting of charges, the development of mandatory guidelines, and the establishment of internal control units responsible for evaluating the quality of charges before they are presented. Likewise, the Judiciary must assume an active role as a guarantor of due process, rejecting charges that fail to meet standards of clarity and sufficiency. This stringent judicial control should not be viewed as a delay in proceedings but as a safeguard to prevent arbitrariness and ensure fair processes.

In summary, overcoming current shortcomings demands a comprehensive strategy that combines normative reforms, institutional strengthening, and a cultural shift among justice operators. Only through clear, coherent charges supported by verifiable evidence can it be possible to consolidate a penal model that respects the principle of legality, guarantees the rights of the accused, and enhances institutional legitimacy in the eyes of society.

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Conclusions

The analysis conducted allows us to conclude that the principle of specific charges is a fundamental pillar of the Peruvian criminal process. Its proper application not only ensures the coherence and validity of procedural acts but also preserves the legitimacy of the justice system as a whole. The absence of a clear and adequately substantiated charge undermines the accusatory model, violates due process, and restricts the accused's right to effective technical and material defense.

This principle transcends mere formalism to become a substantive guarantee that demands that every person subjected to investigation understands precisely the facts attributed to them and the corresponding legal qualification. Without this delineation, scenarios of defenselessness arise that are incompatible with the values inherent in a constitutional state governed by law. In alignment with this, both the Constitution and the Code of Criminal Procedure, as well as international human rights treaties ratified by Peru, establish the obligation to formulate clear, specific charges supported by verifiable evidence. Any deviation from these parameters—such as through generic or unsubstantiated accusations—directly affects the validity of the process and may result in the nullification of judicial actions.

The testimonies gathered from interviews confirm this perspective: judges, prosecutors, and criminal defense attorneys agree that specific charges are an indispensable condition for ensuring the transparency, rationality, and equity of the criminal procedure. However, they also acknowledge structural deficiencies that impede the effectiveness of this principle, including workload overload, limited technical specialization, the use of standardized models in charge drafting, and an institutional tendency to prioritize procedural speed over legal rigor.

Overcoming these limitations necessitates a comprehensive strategy that combines normative reforms, uniform jurisprudence, and a profound cultural shift in judicial practice. The principle of specific charges should be understood as a structural guarantee that conditions the validity of the process and protects fundamental rights, rather than merely a formal requirement. Ultimately, full adherence to this principle strengthens public trust in criminal justice, prevents arbitrary decisions, and consolidates the legitimacy of the judicial system. Therefore, its rigorous compliance must be regarded as an unavoidable priority for achieving a transparent, balanced penal model aligned with constitutional and conventional standards.

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