

Brazil: Coup or Fiasco? - “The PT sought to exercise its power as a centrist government”

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The President of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, has been suspended from her office while she goes on trial by the Senate. If convicted, she would be removed from office, which is what is meant in Brazil by “impeachment.” Anyone, even Brazilians, who have been trying to follow the last several months of political maneuvering may be excused if they are somewhat confused by the many turns this process has taken.

What is really at issue here? Is this a constitutional coup as Pres. Rousseff has called it repeatedly? Or is this a legitimate act of holding the president responsible for grave misdeeds by her and members of her cabinet and advisors, as the “opposition” claims? If the latter, why is this occurring only now and not, say, in Rousseff’s first term as president before she was easily re-elected in 2015 by a significant margin?

Rousseff is a member of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) that has been long led by her predecessor in office, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula). One way to view these events is to see it as part of the story of the PT - its coming to power and now, quite probably, its ouster from power.

What is the PT, and what has it represented in Brazilian politics? The PT was founded in 1980 as a party opposed to the military dictatorship that had ruled Brazil since the coup of 1964. It was a socialist, anti-imperialist party, bringing together Marxist groups, large civil associations like the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Workers Movement or MST), and Catholic movements of the liberation theology persuasion.

From the point of view both of the military and of the traditional Establishment parties in Brazil, the PT was a dangerous revolutionary party, which threatened the conservative economic and social structures of the country. The United States viewed its “anti-imperialism” as directed primarily at the U.S. dominant role in Latin American politics, which indeed it was.

The PT however did not seek power through guerrilla insurrection but rather through parliamentary elections, sustained and supported by extra-parliamentary demonstrations. It took four presidential elections to bring finally a PT candidate, Lula, to office in 2003. The Brazilian Establishment never expected this would actually happen and never accepted that it could possibly continue. They have devoted their energies ever since to bringing the PT down. They may have gotten their way in 2016. Historians in the future may look upon the period 2003-2016 as the fifteen-year PT interlude.

What in fact has happened in this interlude? The PT in office was something far less radical than the opponents of the PT feared, but still radical enough to have made them relentless in their desire to destroy the PT, not merely as the holders of the presidential office but as a movement with a legitimate place in Brazilian politics.

If the PT was able to come to electoral power in 2003, it was because of the combination of the growing attractiveness of its program and its rhetoric and the declining geopolitical strength of the

United States. And what did the PT do with its time in office? On the one hand it sought to succor the poorest strata of Brazil through a redistributive program known as the Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) program that included the Bolsa familia (Family Allowance), which did indeed improve their income level and reduce the enormous inequalities from which Brazil suffered.

In addition, Brazil's foreign policy under the PT marked a significant shift away from Brazil's historic subservience to U.S. geopolitical imperatives. Brazil took the lead in creating autonomous Latin American structures that included Cuba and excluded the United States and Canada.

On the other hand, Brazil's macroeconomic policies remained quite orthodox from the point of view of neoliberal emphases on market orientations of governmental policies. And the PT's multiple promises to prevent environmental destruction were never seriously implemented. Nor did the PT ever carry out its promises of agrarian reform.

In short, its performance as a left movement was a mixed bag. As a result, groups within the party and in its larger political alliances were constantly defecting. This resulted in the weakened position that made it possible in 2015 for the enemies of the PT to implement a plan to destroy it.

The scenario was simple. It centered on charges of corruption. Corruption has been massive and endemic in Brazilian politics, and important figures of the PT itself were by no means exempt from the practice. The one person not subject to such charges was Dilma Rousseff. What then to do? The person who took the lead in the impeachment process, President of the Chamber of Deputies Eduardo Cunha (and an Evangelical Christian) was himself removed from office because he is being indicted for corruption. No matter! The process proceeded on the basis that Dilma Rousseff failed in her responsibility to contain the corruption. This led Boaventura dos Santos Sousa to summarize the situation as one in which the one honest politician was being ousted by the most corrupt.

Rousseff has been suspended from office and her Vice-President Michel Temer has assumed office as Interim President, immediately appointing a far-right cabinet. It seems almost certain that Rousseff will be impeached and removed permanently from office. She is not the real target. The real target is Lula. Under Brazilian law, no president can have more than two successive terms. It has been everyone's expectation that Lula would be the PT candidate again in 2019.

Lula has been Brazil's most popular politician for a long time now. And while his popularity has been somewhat tarnished by the corruption scandal, he seems to remain sufficiently popular that he would win the election. So the right forces will try now to have him actually charged with corruption and therefore ineligible to run.

What will happen then? No one is sure. The rightwing politicians will fight among themselves for the presidency. The army may decide once again to take power. What seems sure is that the PT is finished. The PT sought to exercise its power as a centrist government, balancing its program. But the serious budget deficit and the decline of world prices for oil and other Brazilian exports has disillusioned a large swatch of its voters. As in many other countries today, massive discontent leads to a rejection of normal centrist politics.

What a successor movement of the PT might do would be to return to its roots as a consistently left anti-imperialist movement. This will be no more easy than it was for the PT in 1980. The difference between 1980 and now is the degree to which the modern world-system is in structural crisis. The struggle is worldwide and the Brazilian left can either play a major role in it or slip into global irrelevance and national misery.

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P.S.

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