

The Brazilian Political Conundrum

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Brazilian political life has been polarized in the past years. The newest major cleavage can be expressed as between those who believe there is a coup going on and those who don't. I believe there is a constitutional coup in progress in Brazil, also called by many a juridical-media-parliamentary coup, in reference to the main forces that came together in a powerful coalition against President Dilma Rousseff. Some may think the expression "constitutional coup" is an oxymoron. But the Brazilian case is an example that proves the opposite. After the Senate accepted the admissibility of the accusations against Dilma Rousseff, several leaks of political leaders supporting the coup made clear that the formal legal arguments against her government were nothing but a smoke screen. The real goal was to stop the ongoing investigations of political and corporate corruption that are clearly dismantling the precarious appearance of seriousness of the Brazilian political class. What should we think of a situation in which there is no proven "crime of responsibility" committed by the president (a constitutional exigency to impeach her) and in which there are obvious political manipulations in the National Congress to end 13 years of hegemony of the Workers Party (PT)?

Republican democracy has in itself the provisions that allow for its manipulation and eventual negation, ignoring, for instance, the preference of the majority of a country's voters. In this connection, it is true that there is no failure of Brazilian republican institutions; on the contrary, they are revealing their real nature: to favor those with more political and economic leverage. But it is also true that the executive is in trouble, with ministers being confronted by state employees or by citizens who challenge the rightfulness of their acts. A great number of Congress members are suspect of corruption and

barely can walk on the streets without being called *golpistas* (coup supporters). Members of the judiciary are making politically oriented leaks to the press and acting in such biased ways that impartiality, a central quality for the rule of law, has become a chimera.

There are other ways to show that what is going on is a coup. What would one expect of the new interim government, with a likely duration of six months, a period in which the Senate has to judge whether or not to impeach the president? A low-key administration would be the right answer for a government with an obvious deficit of legitimacy and led by a vice president who represented the alliance the PT was willing to make with the conservative forces in the National Congress. Instead of a discreet transition period, the nightmares of those of us who were always critical of this process became true. An all-male cabinet, several members of which are accused of corruption, was established, a cabinet with no Afro-Brazilians, supported by overtly homophobic and racist politicians, by agribusiness interests, and by the media and industrial moguls. In a few days, it made a 180-degree turn, disregarding the political program the government was elected to implement. The new conservative forces in power have already enacted or proposed a right-wing shift in educational, cultural, scientific, housing, welfare, social justice, Indian land, and labor policies.

In response, social movements and diverse political networks and groupings went to the streets in hundreds of demonstrations all across the country, a fact that is, perhaps, the only positive consequence of this political process. Brazilian youth, with an impressive presence of young women, are having their political initiation. If my youth was politically marked by the struggle against the military dictatorship of

1964–1985 and a subsequent generation was marked by the "caras pintadas" struggle against the Fernando Collor government (1990–1992), the current generation is marked by the struggle against the constitutional coup and what it means as a political, social, economic, and cultural retrocession. A major new political agency is the social media on the Internet. In spite of their bubble effect (as we know social media tend to reproduce ideological clusters) social media represent the end of the information of the media oligopoly. New actors, such as "Midia Ninja," provide news that is boycotted by the large conglomerates. The impact of the social networks is yet to be assessed in this juncture of Brazilian political life.

At the same time, the fatigue of the Brazilian political system and of its republican and democratic structures is perceived by many analysts and activists. With the spread of heightened intolerance, some speak of a growing fascism in Brazilian society; others say the Workers Party did not really shake the foundations of Brazilian inequality, while others think it is the end of the political pact of the New Republic initiated with the 1988 Constitution. It is clear, though, that the period of the Workers Party hegemony has finished. Never, in democratic times, has a party stayed in power for so long. However, the problem, as many have indicated, is the lack of options. New national leaders will not come out of the Congress. Will they come out of the streets, of the organized resistance against the coup? At this point, I have reasons to be pessimistic about it. The only possible conclusion is that after these years of turbulence and volatility, Brazilian politics will not be the same.

The relative decline of the Workers Party triggers larger concerns. On the national

level, there is a fear of the return of conservative elites that would sell the country's riches, especially the huge oil reserves, to international private interests. There is also an anxiety concerning Brazilian global interests. The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), for instance, do not operate in tune with Washington's guidelines, as the recent foundation of their own development bank (a blow against the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement) demonstrates. There are also worries about what will be the impacts on Petrobras and on major Brazilian engineering corporations, the senior executives of which are jailed and accused of corruption of state employees and politicians. Viewed in line with the Honduran (2009) and Paraguayan (2012) coups, the Brazilian conundrum is also thought of as another example of a renewed strategy of U.S. imperialism in Latin America. The 2015 election of Mauricio Macri in Argentina seems to be another indication that the left turn in the continent is finishing. I am not particularly fond of this domino-like interpretation, but it certainly is food for thought. It means that the Latin American left, institutional or other, needs to rethink its visions and programs.

Furthermore, what may well be at stake are even larger structural forces. The 2008 capitalist crisis meant another repositioning of neoliberal strategies and actions. A new round of anti-labor and anti-welfare policies and of conservatism is clear around the world. It is prompting strong reactions on the streets such as the current ones of the French labor movement. What this may be pointing out is that the efficacy of the more than 30-year-old neoliberal pacts and policies is reaching its limits. Citizens everywhere are tired of corrupt and inept politicians, of the increasing flagrant inequalities and concentration

of economic power and wealth, and of the environmental destruction caused by greedy and irresponsible corporations. The republican structure with the supposed equilibrium between three independent powers seems to have reached its limit, too. Democracy has become again a field of contention in which citizens perceive that it also needs to be democratized in order to reach more equitable state structures and services. The intensification of information exchange in the social media reinforces and multiplies awareness of the many existing injustices and wrongdoing and contributes to redefining democracy.

The current volatility in Brazilian political life is certainly a result of many forces; some of them were barely outlined here. Brazil is not a small country. No wonder there is so much international interest in the country's current situation. The results of the drama that is being played out there will not only affect the lives of its citizens but will ramify through Latin America and beyond. ■