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Committee Seeks Removal of Deputies

by LADB Staff

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A bribes-for-votes scandal in Brazil has led the lower-house ethics committee to call for the removal of 18 deputies. Disclosures that the ruling Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) used offshore, undelcared accounts to fund its electoral campaigns in 2002 and 2004 along with allegations that the PT bribed lawmakers to get legislative majorities has deteriorated the party's unity and led to turmoil within its top ranks, in addition to taking several of its congressional members to the brink of impeachment. The head of the Chamber of Deputies, Severino Cavalcanti of the Partido Progresista (PP), now also faces accusations that he took bribes from a business figure.

PT loses unity, subgroup declares independence

The scandal has brought the PT its worst crisis yet (NotiSur, Sep 9, 2005), with several high-ranking figures having been forced to quit. President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's chief of staff Jose Dirceu fell, as did the president of the PT, its treasurer, and its secretary-general the latter for allegedly taking a US$32,000 Land Rover as a gift from a private company. In August, 22 PT federal legislators, angered by the allegations of bribery and suspect campaign funding, declared "independence" from party ranks a step toward a schism that could cost the party almost a fifth of its congressional force.

"The events of the past few days are making the PT unviable as a democratic alternative that took decades to build. It is a tragedy for Brazil and for Latin America," said Inacio Cano, a political scientist at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, in late August as the photos of PT officials disclosing scandal into investigative-commission microphones ran daily in the newspapers.

On Aug. 29, the interim leader of the PT withdrew his candidacy for the presidency of the party during September elections, saying the PT refused to change its ways in the wake of scandals. "We proposed a vision of breaking [with the past] and that isn't what we're seeing happen," Tarso Genro was quoted as telling reporters.

Genro assumed the post as interim PT head after the former party president, Jose Genoino, resigned in June amid bribery allegations. Genro's withdrawal of his candidacy ahead of the PT's internal elections on Sept. 18 is a victory for his main PT rival, Dirceu, a former party president.

Genro had threatened to dismantle the party machine built by Dirceu, blaming him for the recent scandals. Ivan Valente, a legislator from the PT faction Acao Popular Socialista, said in July that there were three possible scenarios for the future of the party, all of which will involve a certain weakening of its former power. One is the continuity of the party's current orientation, with the PT
supporting the government's conservative economic policies and thereby losing its transformational drive and becoming a purely electoral party.

If this is the course the PT takes, it will almost certainly lose its current ties with the country's social movements and depend instead on its own economic power and control of state and local governments, he predicted. In the second scenario, the more leftist currents within the party would take over the helm when more than 800,000 PT members meet this month to elect the party's leaders. This is not likely to happen, and, even if it did, the PT would still suffer a certain loss of popular support, although it would at least be in a better position to regroup its forces and grow in the long term, Valente said.

The third possible scenario is a party split, with the more leftist wing of the PT breaking away if it does not manage to wrest control from the current leadership. Creating a viable alternative would take time, but could be sped up by merging with other parties and forging alliances with social movements, said Valente. The declaration of independence by 22 legislators seems to favor the third scenario.

**Removal of deputies would dilute PT's legislative base**

The Chamber of Deputies ethics committee unanimously called for the commencement of removal efforts against 19 deputies on Sept. 1. Central in the impeachment complaint was Roberto Jefferson, a deputy from the Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (PTB), who confessed to having received 4 million reais (US$1.7 million) in the process of showing that the PT maintained a secret account.

The list of deputies to be removed included seven members of the PT, including Dirceu, and four from the PP, the conservative party of chamber president Cavalcanti. There were also three deputies from the Partido Liberal (PL) of Vice President Jose Alencar, two from the PTB, including Jefferson, one from the Partido do Movimento Democratico Brasiliiero (PMDB), and one from the Partido da Frente Liberal (PFL), a right-wing opposition party. A committee report condemning deputies involved in bribery schemes included 19 names, the 19th being PL president Waldemaro Costa Neto, who resigned a month earlier to prevent such a removal from disqualifying him from running for office next year.

Those Congress members who go through impeachment could be banned from politics for eight years. All these parties, except the PFL, form part of the government's allied base in the Chamber of Deputies. Outside of Dirceu and Jefferson, the accused were found to have made withdrawals from the accounts of publicist Valerio.

The report calling for removal of the deputies received an unexpected unanimous vote from the ethics commission, but it must now go through several bureaucratic channels before successfully removing from office those accused of buying votes or using the postal service for illicit activities.
Group of deputies want chamber president Cavalcanti to resign

Cavalcanti became embroiled in the Brazilian political crisis in early September, after corruption allegations against him emerged. He was accused of receiving 10,000 reais (US$4,300) per month from Sebastiao Augusto Buani of the company Buani e Paulucci Ltda, to allow the businessman to set up and maintain a restaurant on the 10th floor of the Chamber of Deputies. A bribe payment was supposedly made by Buani to keep his establishment running just after an extension of his contract was completed.

A group of deputies called on Cavalcanti to step down as the charges were being investigated, including a document that linked him with the businessman. Among those calling on Cavalcanti to step down was Denise Frossard, of the small Partido Popular Socialista (PPS), who said, "President Cavalcanti never had the abilities to be president, but he was elected and now we're paying a very high price."

Cavalcanti responded to the allegations angrily, saying, "I cannot be placed in a public execration with sordid, irresponsible accusations without proof....They will never find anything that dishonors my term or corrupt acts that would stain my biography of almost 40 years of public life." Cavalcanti, a 74-year-old conservative, was originally elected to the chamber presidency in February in opposition to Lula's candidate, but has since come to be regarded as the president's main ally in Congress, particularly now that Lula's legislative base has deteriorated so badly. If Cavalcanti were removed, chamber vice president Jose Thomaz Nono of the PFL would take over.

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