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Friends Turn on Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff

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After giving signs that seemed to indicate differences from the marked tendencies of her predecessor former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff finished her sixth month in office with two stinging defeats, a distancing by some of her principal social allies, and strong signals from political associates that they were unwilling to support certain essential aspects of the platform that helped her win the October 2010 election. Against this backdrop, five activists from the campesino movement that opposes deforestation of the Amazônia were murdered.

Before that, Rousseff had made two important decisions. She had changed Brazil's longstanding vote at the UN regarding Iran—joining calls for an investigation of that country's human rights situation—and she had announced her support for creating a truth commission (Comissão da Verdade) to investigate events related to state terrorism during the 1965-1985 dictatorship (NotiSur, May 27, 2011). The two issues had been left pending by the Lula administration.

The two defeats came at the hands of members of her heterogeneous coalition. In one, the lower house passed changes to the Código Florestal that eliminate regulations on deforestation in the Amazônia. In the other, the religious bloc in Congress stopped distribution of education materials aimed at combatting discrimination against homosexuals.

Those who have warned the president that they would no longer support her unless she honored her campaign promises were the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), umbrella organizations for the indigenous communities, and various environmental organizations.

Finally, the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB)—to which Vice President Michel Temer and Senate president (and former Brazil President) José Sarney (1985-1990) belong—announced that it would not support either the human rights policies that she had announced or her decision to open the archives of the country's recent history.

Five environmentalists killed

A few hours before deputies passed the change to the Código Florestal on May 24, the bullet-riddled bodies of two campesino leaders—José Cláudio Ribeiro da Silva and his wife Maria do Espírito Santo—were found in the Amazonian state of Pará. The couple had systematically denounced the large landowners who had cleared a large swathe of native forest to make charcoal and then use the devastated forest land to plant soy. In subsequent days, and in the same area, three other settlers from protected areas (Áreas de Preservação Permanente, APP) were murdered.

The Código Florestal, in effect since 1965, bans clearing the forest on more than 20% of a property and defines APPs as areas "covered or not with native vegetation that serve to preserve water resources, the landscape, geological stability, biodiversity, gene flow of flora and fauna, soil protection, and human well-being."
Only small-scale extraction of nuts and fruits is allowed in the APPs. That was the work to which the da Silvas and the other three settlers, victims of the large landowners' private-security forces, were dedicated.

When the deputies began to debate the amendments to the Código Florestal, the da Silvas' murders were already known, but none of the 473 legislators present mentioned them. They also had information regarding forest clearing from the Atlas dos Remanescentes Florestais da Mata Atlântica, a study by the state Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (INPE). The study, carried out between March and April of this year, found that 593 sq km of forest were destroyed, compared with 103 sq km in the same two-month period in 2010. Of the total, 220 sq km—the equivalent of 32,000 soccer fields (a very graphic statistic since soccer is the passion of Brazilians)—is in Pará, where the five murders occurred.

Only some of the 63 deputies who voted against the amendments mentioned the INPE statistics. More than 360 of the 410 lawmakers who voted for the changes belong to the governing bloc.

Rousseff says she will veto two of the central points in the reform passed by the lower house if the Senate does not change them. One provides an amnesty for landowners who violated the Código Florestal before 2008. The other establishes that owners of lands in the APPs of up to 400 hectares can clear 80% of their land, the limit in unprotected areas.

**Environmentalists react to lower-house vote**

The country's ten environment ministers since 1973 wrote a joint letter warning the legislators that, if they did not stop the modifications, "we will be faced with an environmental disaster." Among the signers was Marina Silva, former minister in the Lula administration and leader of the Partido Verde who in the October 2010 elections received almost 20 million votes (NotiSur, Oct. 22, 2010).

The reaction of environmentalists, many of them government supporters, was immediate. The director of the Brazilian branch of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Carlos Alberto de Mattos Scaramuzza warned that "with this, Brazil loses and the world loses because Brazil is a major greenhouse-gas emitter" and it will be unable to meet its goal of reducing contamination by between 36% and 38% by 2020, as it had promised (NotiSur, Jan. 15, 2010). He added that "the only winner is the most backward agribusiness sector, which does not want to invest to adapt to minimal patterns of sustainability."

Scaramuzza said that the agriculture-sector offensive to obtain legislation to its liking is occurring in a context of "very high" international prices, adding that soy earnings—one of the reasons for forest clearing—nearly doubled in the last year, with a 1,000 ha piece of land yielding profits of more than US$600,000. The WWF says the amnesty, increased profits, and meager state control of forest clearing is "an explosive combination."

Greenpeace coordinator Paulo Adario says the reforms cast doubt on Brazil's ability to meet its commitment to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and also "create an incentive for expanding the agroindustrial complex on what remains of the native forests by relaxing the requirement that land holdings maintain the original vegetation on a percentage of their land and by weakening the state's management capacity regarding environmental patrimony."

Adario said, "This will have negative impacts on the diplomacy of Brazil, a country that aspires to play a central role at a global level."
For the CUT, the text approved by the deputies "threatens the country's sustainable development besides being a hurdle for Brazil's ability to meet its international contractual commitments."

The governing Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) said it would try to use its ample majority in the Senate to block the deputies' "betrayal." If that effort fails, Rousseff says that she will veto the sections of the measure that she considers harmful to the government's effort to halt deforestation, which is responsible for almost two-thirds of Brazil's emissions of the gases that cause climate change.

The day after the deputies' "betrayal," pressure from evangelical and Catholic deputies—a bloc of almost 40 lawmakers—forced Rousseff to suspend distribution of materials on the rights of homosexuals and against homophobia. The educational campaign, directed at elementary and secondary students, was another of Rousseff's campaign promises, and its launch had been announced shortly after the Supremo Tribunal Federal (STF) unanimously recognized the legality of civil unions of same-sex couples.

"It's real blackmail," said Cândido Vaccarezza, leader of the bloc of governing-party deputies, referring to the proposal from his colleague Anthony Garotinho of the evangelical bloc. Garotinho, who now leads the rightist Partido da República (PR) after having been in five other parties since he entered politics in 1998, had threatened the president with initiating investigations of two of her ministers for alleged acts of corruption.

Rousseff's difficult days continue. The indigenous organizations that belong to the Comissão Nacional de Política Indigenista (CNPI) withdrew from that official forum, denouncing the president for having authorized, without prior consultation, construction of several hydroelectric plants that "will destroy the ecosystem" in their ancestral lands in the Amazônia.

The armed forces and leaders of the right—among them Sarney—made it clear that they would not accept either creating the truth commission that would be charged with investigating the military or opening the archives that contain documentation on actions of the military during the dictatorship and, further back in time, during the 1864-1870 Guerra do Paraguai (Guerra de la Triple Alianza) against Paraguay.

Those forces have another ally, the head of the Senate foreign relations committee and ex-President Fernando Collor de Mello (1990-1992), who was forced to resign because of corruption. On June 20, Sarney opened the latest front in the dispute. He and Collor de Mello denounced policies regarding work contracts related to the 2014 soccer World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics, both to be held in Brazil.

Within this context, Rousseff has asked Lula to help her repair relations with those whom she thought were her friends and today are challenging her.

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