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Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff Battles Corruption Allegations in her Administration

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Just eight months (257 days) into her term, Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff has had to dismiss five ministers from her massive, 37-member Cabinet. This sets a record—one every two months, or, more precisely, one every 51 days. A close look is even more illustrative; the first Cabinet minister left on June 7 and the fifth on Sept. 14—a period of just 99 days—meaning that Rousseff has really lost a close collaborator every 20 days.

All except former defense minister Nelson Jobim had to resign because of corruption charges. The most troubling aspect is that in no case were the real or alleged infractions proven by the judiciary or admitted by the accused or by any authority.

It was the powerful rightist media that destroyed the government team with its denunciations (bringing institutionality into play), that instilled in public opinion the belief that all Rousseff’s collaborators are corrupt (probably committing the crimes of defamation and libel in the process), and that condemned the accused to the worst ostracism (and, certainly, to political death).

Nevertheless, the media continues its denunciations. And certain names have already begun to appear. The guns are now pointed at Institutional Relations Minister Ideli Salvatti; her colleague, Communications Minister Paulo Bernardo; Cabinet chief Gleisi Hoffman; and the president of the lower house Marcos Maia.

Earlier, except in one case, the accused were all members of the parties that make up the heterogeneous base allied with the administration. Those who have begun to be accused now are all from within the president's most trusted circle and longtime militants of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT).

Many PT leaders as well as analysts say that the first wave was "a warning" of what was to come later, of this new phase that might prove directly destabilizing, with all that that signifies in one of the leading Latin American countries, one of the five emerging powers of the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa).

Public not taken in by media campaign

The public seems to have grasped the intentions of the rightist media's campaign. On Sept. 7, Independence Day, some 30,000 people demonstrated in Brasilia against corruption. There were chants against some political leaders, but the bulk of slogans denounced the dailies, the media conglomerate Rede Globo (which owns newspapers, radio stations, magazines, and television channels), and the magazine. "People are not stupid, down with Rede Globo," was the most prevalent slogan.

Corruption exists throughout the world, and Brazil is obviously no exception. Many analysts, who note that all those who resigned were also ministers or officials during the two terms of
former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2002-2010), say that corruption, or the perception of the existence of corruption, is the worst legacy that Lula could have left his successor (NotiSur, Sept. 7, 2007). To formulate such an affirmation, almost an accusation, they recall that all the ministers who resigned had been accused of criminal acts against the state during Lula's first or second term. They also recall that Lula always refrained from pushing for legal or legislative investigations, for the sake of what was, and still is, called "governability."

In recent days, Lula has not mentioned either the newspapers that formulated the unsubstantiated denunciations or the judiciary that did not investigate, nor has he mentioned that the same accusations were heard during his two administrations. He also has not referred to the scourge of corruption.

Lula only said, and he said it to, the standard-bearer of the media accusers, "I fear that the summary rite of the resignations and Dilma's temperament will threaten governability and isolate the president."

"Is that a judgment or an epitaph for Dilma?" asked a reporter from the Uruguayan magazine.

"As for Lula," wrote Brazilian analyst Mario A. Jakoskind in another article in the same issue of Brecha, "the former president is so active these days that there are those who say that he will probably be a candidate for the presidency in 2014 for the alliance of the PT, the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), and other smaller parties. He denies it and says that Rousseff is the best."

Corruption—or the "perception of corruption" as the lawyers caution that it should be called to avoid the crime of prejudgment—is everywhere and seems to be, at least in Brazil, an endemic evil. All the ministers who resigned recently were accused of the crimes of illicit enrichment and influence peddling (favoring businesses and third parties with irregular contracts worth tens of billions of dollars).

Elementary logic indicates that, for there to be corrupt persons, there must first be persons who corrupt. Nevertheless, no media denounced any business allegedly or actually favored by any bribe or perk. But it is clear, in any case, that just as there could be corrupt politicians there could also be corrupt business owners.

**Corruption crosses class, economic boundaries**

The phenomenon seems to cut across the various strata of society. Some examples: 1) In the southern state of Santa Catarina, it was proven that soccer referees had conspired with sports leaders to fix the results of the local league games; 2) On July 31, it became known that the head of the Army, Gen. Enzo Marins Peri, and seven other high-ranking officers were under investigation by the judiciary, accused of having signed 88 fraudulent contracts worth a total of US$7.5 million; 3) On Sept. 8, the local chapter of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Transparency International (TI) warned that, given the huge investments that the country will make for infrastructure to host the 2014 soccer World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games, the government-approved direct-contracting system "involves a high risk of diversion of public funds."

Corruption—and this is a proven case—even reaches the churches. On Sept. 12, the São Paulo public prosecutor announced that its office had evidence of various crimes committed by the
founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus), Bishop Edir Macedo, and three other church leaders. The evangelical church, founded in 1977 and having a presence in 182 countries, including all those in Latin America and the US and Canada, has as its political arm the Partido da República (PR), one of the members of the alliance formed during the Lula administrations and inherited by Rousseff.

José Alencar, Lula's vice president during both terms, was from the PR and a leader of the Igreja Universal. Former transportation minister Alfredo Nascimento, who in July was the second to resign, was from the PR—the third in importance among the parties allied with Lula—with a bloc of 42 deputies and 6 senators.

Bishop Macedo, who with his prosperity theology and slogan "stop suffering" has won over millions of faithful throughout the world, was accused of diversion of funds, money laundering, and fraud "against the state and the faithful," to whom he made "false promises and threats that spiritual and economic assistance would be bestowed only upon those who made sacrifices for the church," said the indictment.

The Associated Press reported that, between 2003 and 2006, the church declared having received donations of US$3 million, "but according to the witnesses of the Fiscalía that sum could be much higher."

The public prosecutor's indictment alleges that, despite counting on tax immunity, like all churches, the bishop declared to tax authorities only 10% of the tithes collected from the faithful. The rest was converted to dollars and sent to tax havens and bank accounts in the US, Uruguay, the United Kingdom, and the Caribbean. "The money came back to the country in the form of loans that were invested in, among other things, media registered in the name of Macedo and other bishops and through which strong political pressure was exerted," said the prosecutor's office. Among other media outlets, the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus owns Rede Record, one of the five major private TV networks.

Analyst Alfredo Prado, correspondent in Brasilia for the Angolan magazine, praises the speed with which Rousseff has acted in the face of the accusations, but he cautions the president that "her concerns should not be limited to determining whether one of her ministers is or could be corrupt." Today, he says, the president "faces threats against growth and economic stability resulting from the crisis that erupted with special force in the US and the European Union (EU) but whose effects on the economies of the world, including in the large emerging countries like Brazil, are already being felt, and it is there where she should act."

Pablo Giuliano, the well-informed correspondent of the ANSA news agency in Rio de Janeiro, said on Aug. 18 that Rousseff is fighting corruption more energetically than did Lula, with more decisiveness than Lula, but he asks, "How far can Dilma go in that ethical crusade without undermining governability?"

The president responded on Sept. 12, when she answered a question on the program on TV Globo. "The struggle against corruption," she said, "is a constant and not simply an occasional cleaning. Let's be clear: I am no one's hostage. One must be very careful in Brazil when one attempts to demonize politics, because that is to destabilize. My allies are honest people; it is not possible that one day someone comes along and says lightly, without any proof, that 'all politicians are corrupt,' because that also is to destabilize and to destabilize, in this case, is to threaten democracy."