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## **Amid Impeachment Crisis, Brazil's Dilma Rousseff Talks of 'Coup'**

*by Gregory Scruggs*

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Capping a week of explosive politics in Brazil that included impeachment proceedings against her, President Dilma Rousseff defied expectations and traveled to New York to speak at the United Nations. Brazilian political analysts had widely expected her to seize the world stage and use the UN bully pulpit to denounce what many critics have called a "legal-media" coup d'état against her. She resisted the use of the word "coup" in her April 22 speech, instead referring obliquely to "a grave moment."

Later the same day, however, Rousseff used more pointed language with the press to describe the ongoing impeachment process as "a coup in progress." She indicated her intention to request that Brazil be expelled from MERCOSUR and UNASUR, two regional political and economic unions. Rousseff hopes that potential sanction from Brazil's South American neighbors will put pressure on the pro-impeachment forces.

The efforts to oust the president, whose Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) is in its fourth consecutive mandate, has already passed one major hurdle. On April 17, the Câmara dos Deputados voted 367-137, with seven abstentions, to impeach Rousseff. The case moves forward to the Senate, which will conduct a trial in May over allegations that Rousseff misrepresented official economic figures during her 2014 reelection campaign. The raucous vote, broadcast live, was presided over by several politicians who themselves are the subject of corruption investigations but who, as sitting deputies, retain immunity from prosecution.

### ***Coup or Constitution***

Rousseff's political comments at the UN occupied only a short section of a broader speech that included a paean to Brazil's environmental leadership and policy in the COP21 UN climate change conference that took place last December in Paris ([NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2015](#), and [Jan. 8, 2016](#)). The occasion for her visit to the UN was the signing ceremony of the Paris Climate Agreement. With huge carbon reserves in the Amazon rainforest, Brazil was a major player in the Paris negotiations, which for the first time created a binding agreement on climate change. The signing ceremony marked the beginning of a global push to encourage countries to ratify the provisions of the agreement.

At the end of her speech, Rousseff dedicated a brief set of comments to the impeachment crisis. "Despite this, I must say that Brazil is a great nation, with a society that was able to defeat authoritarianism and build a vibrant democracy," she said in the UN General Assembly Hall. "Our people are hard-working and have great esteem for freedom. I have no doubt they will be able to prevent any setback."

While largely staying on message for the signing ceremony, Rousseff used sharper language when she met privately with foreign and national journalists later that day. With a backdrop of pro- and anti-impeachment protesters on the streets in front of the residence of Brazil's UN ambassador, she

outlined her argument for why this constitutional process should nevertheless be considered an illegal removal of a sitting president.

"A coup is a mechanism by which you remove people from power for reasons that aren't justified by the law. I have not been convicted of any crime. Military coups happen because they rip up the Constitution," Rousseff said. "And in my case, there's another way to stage a coup: All it takes is the hand of a few members of Congress who are extremely powerful. With that, you rip up the Constitution and stage a coup. You rip up democratic principles and stage a coup."

Rousseff's forceful remarks referred to "conspirators" and "coup mongers," and she defended herself against accusations levied by people who have been charged with more serious allegations than those fueling her impeachment trial. "If [the impeachment] succeeds, people will assume power who are illegitimate, who never won a single vote for the presidency," she said. "People who have been accused of money laundering in foreign bank accounts and corruption. There are no corruption charges against me. I've never received money that benefited me. The sense of injustice, of being a victim, it's not something I chose, they put me in this position. They created a sacrificial process in Brazil."

### *Dirty laundry*

Corruption investigations have been simmering in Brazilian politics for years, starting with the mensalão (big monthly payment) vote-buying scandal that took place during the PT's first presidential administration under Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva ([NotiSur, Sept. 9, 2005](#), and April 7, 2006). In 2014, several high-ranking PT officials were found guilty by the Supremo Tribunal Federal and sentenced to prison, a step that was considered a watershed moment in the prosecution of political corruption.

More recently, the Polícia Federal's Operação Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash), which began in March 2014, has roiled Brazilian society with a seemingly endless string of accusations against the country's business and political elite ([NotiSur, August 14, 2015](#)). Centered on the state-owned oil company Petrobras, the money laundering investigation has uncovered the systematic bribery of company officials to award valuable construction contracts at inflated prices.

The investigation has already yielded 179 indictments and 93 convictions implicating 16 major companies. Prosecutors claim that R\$2.1 billion (nearly US\$600 million) in funds were misappropriated as a result of activities tied to the scandal. Rousseff herself has not been implicated in the investigation, although Lula was called in for questioning in March. Fearing that Lula may be indicted, Rousseff appointed him to a cabinet position, which would shield him from prosecution. The move, perceived as an obstruction of justice, was widely opposed and fueled the impeachment movement against her.

Meanwhile, five members of the Câmara dos Deputados' impeachment commission are under investigation by Lava Jato, including Paulo Maluf (Partido Progressista, PP), who has not been able to leave Brazil for years because of an outstanding Interpol warrant and has been sentenced to three years in prison for money laundering by a French court. The speaker of the Câmara, the conservative evangelical Eduardo Cunha (Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro, PMDB), who presided over the impeachment proceedings on April 17, has been accused of taking US \$5 million in bribes to steer Petrobras contracts toward favored companies, money he allegedly

deposited in Swiss bank accounts. Vice President Michel Temer (PMDB), next in the line of presidential succession, has also been implicated by witnesses deposited in the investigation.

In total, 36 out of 65 members of the Câmara's impeachment committee face legal proceedings. However, only the Supremo Tribunal Federal can try sitting deputies, a process that would take years, which effectively renders them immune from prosecution.

### *Polarized atmosphere*

The Sunday afternoon impeachment session on April 17 was broadcast live on national television. One by one, deputies filed to the front of the dais and issued 10-second statements as they cast their votes. Some wore Brazilian flags, one fired a confetti rocket. Choruses of the national football team's hymn, "Eu Sou Brasileiro" (I am Brazilian)—which has become an anthem of the pro-impeachment crowd—echoed in the chambers.

In the most charged moment of what became known as the "10 seconds of fame", conservative evangelical deputy Jair Bolsonaro (Partido Social Cristão, PSC) paid homage to Coronel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, who was responsible for disappearances and tortures during Brazil's military dictatorship. Rousseff, herself a left-wing guerrilla during that period, was tortured by government forces. In response, Jean Wyllys (Partido Socialismo e Liberdade, PSOL), an openly gay deputy whose pro-LGBT stance frequently clashes with the evangelical caucus, the Congress' largest single voting bloc, spit at Bolsonaro. Thus far, Bolsonaro has not been sanctioned, but Wyllys will face charges of "indecorum."

A wall separated pro- and anti-impeachment protesters on the esplanade outside the government complex. The "Brasília Wall" became a symbol of social division in the country, where polarized political attitudes have divided friends and family. Major protests both for and against impeachment have taken place in cities across the country. In São Paulo, a pro-impeachment rally brought 250,000 people to the city's main thoroughfare, the Avenida Paulista, in what was described as a World Cup atmosphere. Five kilometers away at the Anhangabaú plaza, 75,000 attended an anti-impeachment rally.

Until recently, analysts have suggested that support for impeachment is largely confined to the country's elite—a popular image of a white family at a pro-impeachment protest with their black nanny behind them pushing a stroller has come to symbolize this viewpoint. But the most recent polling data confirms that working-class voters are also fed up with the country's state of affairs and are joining the impeachment bandwagon. According to Datafolha polling, Rousseff's approval rating among the country's poorest is down to 16%, while among those with a basic education it is at 18%.

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