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Gregory Scruggs

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Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff Awaits Results of Senate Trial

by Gregory Scruggs
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In a congressional impeachment proceeding rejected by large swaths of Brazilian society as a coup, president Dilma Rousseff was removed from office last month and a provisional government assumed power. Following a vote in favor of impeachment by the lower house on April 11 over charges that Rousseff obfuscated government economic statistics to win reelection, the Brazilian Senate voted on May 12 to begin a trial, which must determine within 180 days whether to remove or reinstate Rousseff, otherwise she will return to office by default (NotiSur, April 10, 2015, and April 29, 2016).

Nevertheless, the Senate decision temporarily removed the leftist Rousseff (Partido dos Trabalhadores, Workers’ Party, PT) from office and elevated conservative vice-president Michel Temer (Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro, Brazilian Democratic Movement Party, PMDB) to the Palacio do Planalto. Temer appointed a new Cabinet, effectively ending 12 years of PT rule in the federal government. If Rousseff is not reinstated, Temer will serve out her term until 2018 unless early elections are called, which Rousseff has said publicly she would support. Temer, meanwhile, would not be eligible to campaign for reelection because he faces campaign finance and graft charges.

While intergovernmental organizations in Latin America have been tepid in their disapprobation of Brazil’s political crisis, social movements in Brazil have been active, staging protests in an attempt to show public support for Rousseff. The Senate trial will unfold over the coming months, and only a few senators will need to be swayed to prevent the needed two-thirds from voting for her permanent removal from office.

All-white, all-male Cabinet

The worst fears of the Brazilian left came true when Temer (NotiSur, July 1, 2011) assumed office as he appointed an all-white, all-male cabinet with an average age of 58. Several of his appointees were drawn from the ranks of the traditional latifundario (large land owners) oligarchs, such as José Sarney, now minister of the environment, and Blairo Maggi, an agribusiness tycoon nicknamed the “Soy King,” now minister of agriculture. Like Temer himself, 15 of his appointees face criminal investigations.

The lack of any women in the Cabinet was deemed particularly galling by women’s rights groups. “There’s a horrible misogynist trace,” former Minister of Cities Inês Magalhães told LADB via Skype. “I don’t recognize the government as legitimate. It’s one thing to lose an election. If we had lost an election, it would have been another situation.”

The interim president also announced new austerity and privatization measures designed to rein in a US$48 billion budget deficit. He called for the government to sell off a US$28 billion stake in the state-run investment bank, BNDES, as well as shares of state-run oil company Petrobras (NotiSur, Aug. 14, 2015, and Nov. 6, 2015), electric utility Eletrobras, the postal service, and three public banks.
He also called for the liquidation of the country’s sovereign wealth fund. On June 17, Temer’s minister of social development announced that the provisional government would not pay out a 9% readjustment to the Bolsa Família conditional-cash transfer program, the signature initiative of the PT government, which Rousseff had announced in early May as the first such increase in two years.

“Not paying the readjustment of the Bolsa Família is selfishness toward the poor people in this country,” Rousseff said in a speech in Recife where she addressed a pro-democracy gathering.

**Protest scene**

For months, anti-Rousseff protesters have engaged in panelaços, loud banging of pots and pans whenever the president appeared on television. With the switch to Temer, whose approval ratings hover in the same 11% range as Rousseff’s on the eve of her impeachment, the panelaços have switched sides. The second major nationwide anti-Temer protest took place on June 10.

Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, the former president and Rousseff mentor (*NotiSur*, Nov. 1, 2002, Nov. 3, 2006, and Jan. 9, 2009), spoke to a crowd in São Paulo recently. “Temer, what you did was wrong, and as a great constitutionalist, you know it’s wrong,” he said. “Return power to the people, to Dilma.”

The PT has planned a series of coordinated actions over the coming months to maintain and illustrate public support for their ousted leader. The same day as the protests, oil workers went on strike for 24 hours at Petrobras.

Temer’s Cabinet reshuffle also eliminated the Ministry of Culture, merging that portfolio with education in a move reviled by the artistic community. High-profile singers like Caetano Veloso and Erasmo Carlos performed protest shows, and artists occupied the offices of Funarte, the grant making arm of the Ministry of Culture, in several cities including Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Under pressure, Temer reinstated the ministry and offered it to a series of women candidates, all of whom refused the position. In the end, it was handed to a male diplomat.

**Neighbors react**

The geopolitical response to Brazil’s new government has been muted. The Organization of American States (OAS) did not censure Brazil over the impeachment and has been largely silent. Instead, OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro (*NotiSur*, April 10, 2015) has been pressuring Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro (*NotiSur*, Feb. 19, 2016, and April 8, 2016) to step down. The US Ambassador to the OAS specifically said that the impeachment was not a coup.

Although Rousseff appealed to the MERCOSUR economic union in an April press conference following a speech at the UN, thus far its members have taken no actions against Brazil. Instead, the new Brazilian Foreign Minister José Serra has signaled that Brazil may try to block Venezuela from assuming the rotating MERCOSUR presidency.

Both Ecuador and Venezuela recalled their ambassadors to Brasília upon Temer’s ascension to power. Ernesto Samper, the secretary-general of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) came to Rousseff’s support, saying publicly that she is the country’s legitimate leader. In an interview with teleSUR, Samper said that the impeachment was “compromising the democratic governability of the region in a dangerous way.”