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Gregory Scruggs

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Embattled Brazilian President Survives Corruption Vote

by Gregory Scruggs

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Brazil's deeply unpopular sitting president, Michel Temer, narrowly survived a vote in the lower house of Congress to determine whether or not corruption charges against him should go to trial. In a 263-227 vote on Aug. 2, with 23 abstentions, lawmakers declined to send the president to face the Supreme Court, which would have had jurisdiction in a corruption trial stemming from allegations that Temer received millions in bribes from Brazil's largest meat conglomerate.

While Temer, of the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), will remain in office without facing trial for the time being, his approval ratings have plummeted to 5%, even below those of his predecessor, Dilma Rousseff, of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). Rousseff was ousted last year in controversial impeachment proceedings with Temer, her vice-president, taking over at the Palácio do Planalto ([NotiSur, June 24, 2016](#), and [Sept. 30, 2016](#)).

The federal prosecutor's office, which leveled the accusations against Temer in June, is expected to issue two more indictments before the end of the month. In September, the current chief prosecutor, Rodrigo Janot, whom Temer has accused of having a personal vendetta against him, will step down and be replaced by a deputy prosecutor widely seen as more favorable to Temer.

Contested vote

The Aug. 2 congressional vote was a raucous, multi-hour affair following damning evidence from a taped phone call in May, leaked to the press, that purported to show Temer approving bribes. The indictment made Temer the first sitting president in Brazil to face legal charges. He is the highest-ranking sitting official yet to be ensnared in Operação Lava Jato, a wide-ranging corruption probe that has touched nearly every echelon of the Brazilian political and business structure ([NotiSur, May 26, 2017](#), and [July 28, 2017](#)).

Inside the congressional chambers, opposition legislators unfurled banners that read Fora Temer (Temer Out) and tossed fake money into the air in what they said was a critique of how openly corruption operates in Brazilian politics. Pro-Temer lawmakers responded aggressively, and shoving matches broke out on the floor of Congress.

In late July, the government transparency group Contas Abertas noted that districts governed by pro-Temer legislators received on average R\$1million (US\$316,523) in federal budget allocations. In all, the Temer administration gave away R\$766.4 million (US\$242.6 million) in federal funds, which was seen as an effort to reward lawmakers for their expected votes against the corruption charges. The watchdog group noted that this was unusual given Temer's austerity policies, which have slashed budgets for local services like police departments, hospitals, and universities.

Ilona Szabó de Carvalho, co-founder of Agora!, a new youth-driven political movement, referred to a metaphor in Brazil that says that when two men are drowning, they embrace. She used it to explain how lawmakers have come to support Temer.

"This is the picture of our legislative branch today," she said.

After the vote, Temer seized on his victory as evidence for widespread support of his economic austerity program. "With the support the lower house has given me, we will pass all the reforms that the country needs," he said after the vote. "Now it is time to invest in our country. Brazil is ready to start growing again."

However, despite aggressive caps on public spending, the Brazilian economy continues to struggle. In early June, the country's unemployment rate stood at 13.6%, more than double the rate before Brazil's recession began in 2015. Currently, 14 million people are out of work.

The dismal state of the economy continues to motivate the political opposition.

"Brazil is being governed by a bandit who committed a common crime, which is apparent to the Brazilian people and the world," Décio Lima, a PT legislator, said in a video statement following the outcome of the congressional vote.

Riordan Roett, a professor and director of the Latin American Studies Program at Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies, told *The Atlantic* magazine that Temer is not a popular figure and never has been.

"[He] is really under a tremendous amount of scrutiny at the present time by the Brazilian public," Roett said.

New prosecutor

Having dodged this congressional bullet, Temer is bracing for what else chief prosecutor Janot will throw at him before his term expires in September. Janot is expected to sign off on two new indictments with stronger evidence that would be harder for Congress to ignore. The expected charges are for obstruction of justice and racketeering.

Meanwhile, Temer is counterattacking. On Aug. 8, his legal team called on the Supreme Court to remove Janot from the case, arguing that the top prosecutor has exceeded his constitutional authority in his zeal to prosecute Temer.

"We are not, it has become clear, confronting mere institutional action," Temer's lawyers wrote in a document seen by the Reuters news agency. "Everything indicates that the motivation is personal."

Given the magnitude of the corruption case, it seems unlikely that the Supreme Court would pull Janot from the job, as there is no demonstrated malfeasance. However, Temer will likely get a reprieve of sorts when deputy prosecutor Raquel Dodge takes over for Janot on Sep. 18.

Dodge will inherit the investigation against Temer, whatever the ultimate charges may be, which already has some observers worried about her perceived coziness with the president. On Aug. 8, she met with Temer at his private residence at 10 p.m. Both the location and timing raised suspicions. In a public statement, Dodge said she met with the president to discuss details of her inauguration, which will take place at the presidential palace, not the prosecutor's office.

Political commentator Josias de Souza summed up the optics succinctly: "Raquel Dodge started off in the worst way possible," she said.

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