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## Supporters of Brazil's Imprisoned Former President Vow to Protest 'In Perpetuity'

by Gregory Scruggs

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Brazil's former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011), once called the most popular politician on Earth, has begun serving a prison sentence for a bribery conviction. While the federal judicial system argues that justice was served, da Silva's defenders accuse the government of detaining a political prisoner and weakening Brazilian democracy.

Crusading federal judge Sergio Moro ordered da Silva, popularly known as Lula, to turn himself in to the federal police on April 6, capping the highest-profile conviction to date in the wide-ranging Operation Car Wash corruption investigation ([NotiSur, Jan. 13, 2017](#)). Judges convicted da Silva in July 2017, but he was free on an appeal, which he lost in January ([NotiSur, July 28, 2017](#)).

Da Silva, a former steelworker, initially defied the order as hundreds of supporters surrounded the national steelworkers' union headquarters in São Bernardo do Campo, a municipality on the outskirts of São Paulo. He held off in order to attend Saturday mass at the union hall in honor of his late wife. After an overnight standoff at the building, da Silva voluntarily surrendered to the federal police on April 7. He is now serving at least 12 years and one month in a minimum-security prison in Curitiba, the headquarters for the corruption investigation. As president, he inaugurated the facility in 2007.

### *The downfall*

Da Silva's journey to a 161-square-foot cell with a bed, dresser, desk, and bathroom is the culmination of a protracted legal battle. Prosecutors accused da Silva of taking a US\$755,000 bribe from construction giant OAS in the form of renovations to an oceanfront apartment.

While relatively small, the kickback was part of a much larger corruption scheme to benefit da Silva's Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers Party, PT) amounting in the tens of millions of dollars. Da Silva is the defendant in at least seven other cases, which criminologists believe could elongate the 72-year-old's sentence to at least 36 years. The four-year-old probe has resulted in the convictions of 120 people and billions of dollars in restitution payments. High-ranking politicians, including the former governor of Rio de Janeiro, and members of the business elite are serving jail time.

Da Silva was convicted in July 2017. He appealed to a three-judge panel, which ruled against him on Jan. 24 at a courtroom in Porto Alegre. Outside the courthouse, thousands of protesters gathered, while the military secured the city.

The denied appeal appears to have ended da Silva's bid for a third term as president. He was polling well ahead of other candidates for the October race to replace the unpopular conservative Michel Temer, who assumed the office after the 2016 impeachment of Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) ([NotiSur, April 29, 2016, June 24, 2016, Sept. 30, 2016](#)). Da Silva still leads in the polls, although his prison sentence will likely make him ineligible for the ballot.

"I will comply with the order, and all of you will become Lula. I'm not above the law. If I didn't believe in the law, I wouldn't have started a political party. I would have started a revolution," the ex-president said as he prepared to surrender.

Rousseff, da Silva's handpicked successor, said in a statement, "Lula has become a political prisoner, victim of relentless persecution by adversaries who resorted to the judiciary to silence him, destroy him, in an effort to discredit his role before history and the Brazilian people."

Representatives of the Brazilian legal system have been less sympathetic.

"Justice exists to protect everyone, and to demand that the law be applied indistinctly to those who are poor and those who are powerful," said José Robalinho Cavalcanti, the president of Brazil's national association of prosecutors (Associação Nacional dos Procuradores da República, ANPR). "That may seem obvious in the democratic world. But for Brazil, it is not."

### *Protests continue*

Da Silva's supporters continue to run a protest encampment in the vicinity of the Curitiba prison and vow to remain in perpetuity.

"Our vigil will not end. While Lula is in jail, we'll stay here," said PT head Gleisi Hoffmann. She and 60 other PT members legally changed their middle names to "Lula" this week in solidarity with the former president.

Meanwhile, protesters from the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (Homeless Workers Movement, MTST) occupied the beachfront triplex in Guarujá, São Paulo, that was at the heart of the legal case against da Silva.

"If the triplex was Lula's, then it belongs to the people," the movement's representatives have said in statements published on social media since the occupation began on April 16.

Under the Brazilian Constitution, social movements can legally occupy unused buildings, a tactic that the MTST has used to highlight the need for more affordable housing in Brazil.

Guilherme Boulos, an MTST leader who is running for president under the Partido Socialismo e Liberdade (Socialism and Freedom Party, PSOL) banner, told the British daily *The Guardian*, "As I see things, Lula's conviction was unjust and political ... [and] clearly designed to remove him from the electoral process. Today he is in prison because of a judicial farce."

"What we are talking about here is an attack on democracy and the lynching of a figure of Lula's importance," Boulos said.

-- End --