Brazilian congress votes to impeach PT President Rousseff

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18 April 2016

After more than six hours of role-call voting, the lower house of the Brazilian congress Sunday approved, by more than a two-thirds majority, the impeachment of Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT) President Dilma Rousseff.

Now the Senate has a maximum of ten sessions, or roughly two weeks, to deliver a simple majority vote on opening formal investigations. After that Rousseff would face up to 180 days of suspension during a trial, during which Vice President Michel Temer would take over. A two-thirds majority in the Senate is required to finally depose her.

Every party, except for Rousseff's own Workers' Party, the Stalinist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), the Democratic Labor Party of Getúlio Vargas's followers (PDT) and the pseudo-left Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL) recommended votes for impeachment. Only these hardcore PT defenders and a small number of defectors from the other parties voted against it.

Rousseff is being tried by Congress, but not in the judicial system, for budget manipulations in fiscal year 2015, in which federal government funding for major state banks was delayed to avoid failure to meet legal obligations such as small-farm subsidies in the face of sharply falling tax revenues. The maneuver came amid crippling austerity measures, with cuts in major public works and social programs, which did not prevent a nominal deficit of 1 percent of the GDP. The Brazilian economy shrank by 4 percent that year, with another 4 percent loss predicted for this year.

The economic crisis is continually fuelled by political instability stemming from new revelations in the ever-widening Lava-Jato (Carwash) investigations of a bribes-for-contracts scheme in the state-run energy giant Petrobras, which Rousseff oversaw between 2002 and 2010 before being elected president. Although Rousseff has not been charged or even directly cited in plea-bargains related to the investigations, recent suspicions have been raised in relation to the possible funneling of the Petrobras kickback money into her 2014 campaign, a charge that would also ensnare vice-president Temer.

The impeachment process came to a head in a disgusting spectacle, broadcast live on major TV networks and tensely watched over huge monitors by people gathered in the streets of several major cities.

The rare Sunday session was the result of legal maneuvers by House speaker Eduardo Cunha, designed to give the proceedings an entertainment-like, maximum audience. In the inland capital of Brasília, the Monumental Axis, a three-kilometer mall surrounded by ministries and other public buildings, was divided by a two-meter wall in anticipation of hundreds of thousands of rival demonstrators brought in by bus.

Violence had been predicted along with a particularly large and apoplectic pro-impeachment gathering, but the crowds failed to reach their anticipated scale. Rival concentrations held in other major cities, more than three kilometers away from each other, were largely peaceful and invariably smaller than the hundreds-of-thousands-strong crowds that were mobilized by each side in March in the run-up to the impeachment.

Except for virulent right-wingers, virtually every commentator in the Brazilian press and also major international papers agreed that arguments for impeachment are at least dubious, since the budget manipulations that were the basis of the charges are fairly common in Brazilian politics, used by at least 16 current state governors and her two predecessors as president.

Moreover, the funds went to legally designated spending. Anxiety about Rousseff's single-digit approval rating, the disastrous state of the economy and the weakness of a *de facto* minority government incapable of overhauling spending and enforcing the drastic austerity

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measures demanded by the markets constituted the real reasons for her removal. The impeachment has been compared with a “no-confidence” vote in a parliamentary system, which has no legal basis in the Brazilian presidential system. The *Washington Post* questioned whether the process could not be described as a “soft coup.”

The run-up to the vote was characterized by frenetic negotiations, with a stampede of defections from the government camp unsuccessfully countered by an open sale of ministries and other government posts in exchange for “no” votes, directed from a luxury Brasília hotel by former president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva. Even on Sunday, undecided or government-leaning representatives were being lobbied by businessmen, who phoned them to say the markets would not tolerate the continuation of Rousseff’s presidency. Legislators were offered private jets in order to attend the vote, *Folha de S. Paulo* reported. Lula himself admitted the negotiations for votes reminded him of the rise and fall of the stock exchange.

Besides extralegal methods used by the investigation to implicate Lula and Rousseff, critics of the process have also questioned the credentials of Congress to judge the president, with the *New York Times* pointing out on April 14 that 60 percent of the lower house faces criminal charges that include murder and torture. The *Guardian* reported on April 15 that at least one congressman has been charged with employing modern-day slaves on soybean plantations.

The house speaker himself belongs to the deeply conservative evangelical Christian caucus and is a defendant in the Lava-Jato investigation, charged with squirreling away millions in Swiss bank accounts. The grotesque impeachment ceremony saw countless obscurantist biblical citations from right-wing, Christian fundamentalists, abundant anticommunist bigotry and even the fascistic representative Jair Bolsonaro dedicating his pro-impeachment vote to the deceased Gen. Brilhante Ustra, who oversaw the torture of Rousseff when she was imprisoned as an antigovernment guerrilla fighter under the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil between 1964 and 1985.

The PT’s inability to counter this reactionary alliance of forces with a “there will be no coup” campaign during the weeks leading up to the vote is an indictment of the party and its politics. The self-serving comparison with the 1964 coup that toppled the bourgeois-reformist government of President João Goulart was not enough to make a broader appeal, given the PT’s already proven willingness to impose IMF-style austerity measures and its constant calls for sacrifice from the working class.

While the huge right-wing demonstrations over the last month drew large middle class and virtually unanimous upper-middle class support, much smaller counterdemonstrations drew a dwindling layer of the left-leaning middle class and many former exiles from the dictatorship period, disgusted with the whole process. But it failed spectacularly to draw in the working class, which is ever more alienated from the PT by recent austerity measures, the hemorrhaging of jobs, deep attacks on labor rights and pensions, and the party’s longtime alliance with these same reactionary forces that now seek its ouster. In a speech last Tuesday after the charges cleared the lower house’s special impeachment committee, Rousseff underscored these positions once more, remarking that a Temer government would “lack legitimacy to demand sacrifices from the country.”

Vice President Temer, who has been locked for the last week inside the vice-presidential palace negotiating pro-impeachment votes and future government posts, has indirectly, in endless backdoor talks, already made clear his willingness to completely overhaul the cabinet to appease the financial markets, which have regularly gone up with every step advanced in the impeachment drive.

The whole impeachment process represents as well a damning indictment of the entire spectrum of Brazil’s pseudo-left. From the PSOL’s Luciana Genro, who praised the process, insisting it posed no threat to Brazilian democracy, to the PSTU, which gave backhanded support for the impeachment with its slogan of “out with them all,” to REDE, which voted for the impeachment, all of them bear responsibility for the coming attacks on the Brazilian working class.

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