

Leader of Brazil impeachment drive sacked over corruption

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The Brazilian Supreme Court justice in charge of the “Lava Jato” (Car Wash) investigation into the massive Petrobras kickback and bribery scandal ordered the removal Thursday of Eduardo Cunha from his position as the speaker of the lower house of the Brazilian parliament. Cunha, one of the country’s most powerful politicians, is the chief architect of the impeachment drive against Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT) president Dilma Rousseff.

The order by Judge Teori Zavascki came in response to a request from Brazil’s prosecutor-general, Rodrigo Janot, who last December issued an 11-point indictment calling Cunha a “delinquent” who used his political position to “prevent investigations against him from progressing...as well as in order to continue his criminal behavior.”

It further charged that the speaker’s actions were incompatible with a “democratic state governed by the rule of law.”

In March, the Supreme Court voted unanimously to place Cunha on trial on charges of corruption and money laundering in connection with the Petrobras scandal. He is accused of personally receiving US\$5 million in bribes stemming from contracts with the giant state-run oil conglomerate and of funneling tens of millions of dollars more in kickbacks to his political allies.

Investigations into Cunha’s activities led to the discovery of secret Swiss bank accounts containing millions of dollars. The evidence presented by Janot included accounts of international junkets by the lawmaker and his family which involved levels of spending far beyond the reach of a deputy’s salary. This included Christmas holidays in Miami in 2013 in which the family spent US\$42,258. This was followed over the course of the year with similar trips to New

York, Paris, Switzerland, Barcelona and Russia that involved similar levels of spending.

Cunha is an evangelical Christian radio commentator and among the most right-wing figures in what is the most reactionary congress seen in Brazil since the end of the military dictatorship. He has been accused of using a mega-church to launder Petrobras kickbacks.

The latest move to suspend Cunha from both his speaker’s position and as a deputy came as the Senate moved closer to the impeachment of Rousseff. Senator Antonio Anastasia, a member of the right-wing PSDB (Brazilian Social Democracy Party), who was nominated to evaluate the impeachment charges, presented his findings Thursday to a 21-member Senate impeachment committee, declaring that there was “sufficient evidence” to try Rousseff.

The Brazilian president is not charged with personal corruption or in connection with the Petrobras scandal, but rather for violating budget laws by allegedly transferring state bank funds to continue financing government programs and conceal a deficit in the run-up to the 2014 presidential election.

It is virtually certain that the impeachment committee will vote to bring the matter to the full Senate, which is expected to vote next Wednesday on whether to try Rousseff. There likewise appears to be little doubt that the Senate will muster the simple majority vote needed to begin impeachment, a process that would lead to Rousseff’s suspension for 180 days until her final fate is decided.

In the meantime, Vice President Michel Temer, a close political ally of Cunha and fellow member of the PMDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party), would assume the presidency. Temer, who has also been accused of involvement in the Petrobras scandal, though as yet not charged, has already unveiled plans to

carry a wholesale replacement of ministers and other government officials upon assuming the presidency.

His plans are aimed at meeting the demands of both Brazilian and foreign capitalists for sweeping changes in government policy and class relations under conditions of the deepest economic crisis to face the country since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

While Rousseff and the ruling PT have denounced the impeachment drive as a “coup,” they have worked behind the scenes to win support from the country’s most right-wing parties, while claiming that only they would have the “legitimacy”—as well as the collaboration of the CUT union bureaucracy and the so-called “social movements—to force through the drastic attacks being prepared against the working class

In his decision, Judge Zavascki stressed that he intervened in large measure to stop Cunha from becoming first in line of succession—and acting president if Temer traveled abroad or were suddenly removed from office—because such a position was incompatible with being “a defendant in a criminal case under way in the Supreme Court.”

In reality, the sacking of Cunha raises all the more directly the specter of a full-blown constitutional crisis of the Brazilian state as a result of the corruption that pervades the entire government and every major party. While not yet charged, both Temer and Cunha’s successor as speaker of the lower house, Waldir Maranhao, are also under investigation in connection with the Petrobras scandal.

Among the formal charges against Cunha was that he attempted to bribe and intimidate fellow deputies in order to stymie a move within the parliamentary Ethics Committee to remove him from office.

A principal element of this intimidation was Cunha’s threat to bring impeachment charges against Rousseff unless she and the PT leadership convinced members of the ethics panel in the House of Deputies to vote against his removal. When the PT failed to deliver the votes, he immediately moved to impeach the president.

Seizing on this connection, Rousseff’s attorney general, Jose Eduardo Cardozo, announced Thursday that he would make a formal request to the Supreme Court to annul the entire impeachment process. “Cunha threatened the president of the republic that he would begin the process of impeachment if the PT did not come up with the votes to save him in the Ethics

Committee,” he said. “What the Supreme Court decided today is exactly a demonstration of his *modus operandi*.”

It appears unlikely that the court will intervene to halt impeachment.

Meanwhile, Janot, the prosecutor general, is pursuing Petrobras corruption cases against both Rousseff and her predecessor, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. In charges submitted to the Supreme Court in support of a criminal investigation against Lula, Janot charged that the pervasive corruption involving politicians, Petrobras executives and private contractors “could never have functioned for so long and in such a broad and aggressive manner in the sphere of the federal government without the participation of former president Lula.”

Janot is basing his request largely on the testimony of Senator Delcidio do Amaral, the former leader of the ruling PT in the Senate, who was arrested last November for trying to bribe former Petrobras executive Nestor Cervero into staying quiet about his own and his political allies’ involvement in the scandal. Amaral has since told prosecutors that both Lula and Rousseff knew about the kickbacks and bribery.

While Rousseff has not been charged directly with offenses related to the Petrobras scandal, she chaired the energy conglomerate’s board of directors between 2003 and 2010, when much of the bribery and kickbacks took place.



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