



'Order and Progress': Brazil after the fall of Dilma

Markus Lehner Tue, 07/06/2016 - 22:00

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After the final ousting of President Dilma Rousseff on 12 May the new interim, President, Michel Temer, claimed the motto on the State Emblem of Brazil - 'order and progress' - would be enforced once again. Indeed 'Back to Order and Progress' was the main slogan of the mobilisations to overthrow the government of the Partido dos Trabalhadores, the Workers' Party, (PT). At his inauguration Temer claimed that after months of confrontation it was now time to end political disputes and work together to overcome the country's terrible political and economic crisis.

One indication of the sort of 'progress' the new government means, is that it is led by the former coalition partner of PT, the Party of the Democratic Movement in Brazil, PMDB. The PMDB is one of the two traditional parties of the Brazilian establishment. Formed as a melting pot of the bourgeois legal opposition under the military dictatorship (1964-1985), its leadership is drawn mainly from the country's old provincial and landowning élites. Despite the fact that PMDB now pledges to lead the 'struggle against corruption', it is actually a cesspit of the system of rampant corruption at all levels of government. It is significant that a large proportion of the PMDB politicians who drove Dilma from office themselves face serious allegations of corruption.

Temer himself was excluded from standing in the next elections by the Supreme Court because of his involvement in corruption cases. The main instigator of the impeachment process against Dilma, the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Eduardo Cunha, was in the process of being relieved of his post because his corruption stank to high heaven. Even conservative newspapers such as the Folha de Sao Paulo could not ignore the fact that the Cabinet of 'order and progress' does not have a single woman, or a single black or indigenous member, in it, and hardly anyone less than 60 years of age. It is a cabinet of old, rich, white men, nearly every one of whom brings a major corruption case in their luggage.

As the Folha put it, such a cabinet has not been seen since the days of Ernesto Geisel (military dictator from 1974-79). The Education Minister belongs to a group that has opposed the PT government's equality policy for women and LGBT people by every possible means. The Minister of Justice made a name for himself when, as security chief of Sao Paulo, he praised the notorious excesses of the military police in the favelas.

The Social Minister made clear his view of the Bolsa Familia (the basic social security payment introduced by the PT) when he described it as a handout to 'the dregs of society'. And Congress is now in the hands of landowners such as Luis Carl Heinz who, referred to blacks, Indians and homosexuals, as a part of Brazilian society 'that one does not need'.

To make it absolutely clear in which direction the new government intends to progress, among the first representatives of 'civil society' Temer invited for talks in the presidential palace, were the leaders of the ever-growing evangelical movement in Brazil. These declared themselves highly enthusiastic that the new government would once more uphold the values of the 'Christian family'.

One of the evangelicals' mantras is that homosexuality is a pervasive 'disease' that must be contained and 'cured'. That the new government honours these reactionaries, who have now attracted one third of the members from Catholic Church, is no surprise. Sections of the Catholic Church, especially priests active in the favelas, played an important role in the early days of the PT and consequently lost the confidence of a large part of the élite and the privileged middle classes. In recent months they have been a major pillar of the movement for the overthrow of the PT government.

The movement against Dilma

The protest movement against Dilma was actually launched by progressive elements two years ago. Brazil has faced a growing crisis since 2012, with growing unemployment and impoverishment. At the same time we saw increasing involvement of many leading PT politicians in corruption scandals so protests were more than justified. The PT not only undermined public services (e.g. raising fares on public transport, and a pension 'reform?'), but was also brazenly engaging in the scramble for jobs and sinecures; i.e. behaving just like the Brazilian establishment. In particular, the involvement of prominent PT officials in bribery allegations related to the semi-state oil and energy company Petrobras was the final straw for many people.

Prompted by protests against fare increases, there was a nationwide wave of demonstrations demanding an end to the corrupt and anti-social system in Brazil. However, the Right wing quickly gained hegemony over this movement and converted it from a general protest against impoverishment and Brazil's corrupt political system into a protest movement against the PT and a 'strong Brazil in which it would again pay to do business?.

The main lever for this change was once again a Latin American media conglomerate (as was also attempted in Venezuela). The Globo group includes 112 television stations, 80 radio stations and four national dailies. Some 91 million Brazilians watch Globo TV every day and for months the talk there has been of almost nothing else but the need to replace the PT government. A country with one of the biggest problems of poverty in the world also has the world's second biggest television and broadcast radio network, and it is under the control of one of the richest and most influential industrial forces in Brazil, the Marinho family.

Not coincidentally, the Marinhos are also part of the most powerful employers' organisation in Brazil, the Industrial Association of the State of Sao Paulo, FIESP. Since its campaign against the Dilma government's Financial Transaction Tax, the FIESP has been one of the main financers of the opposition movement. No surprise either that the attempt to legislate to break up the concentration of ownership of the media in Brazil was met by a huge campaign 'to defend the Freedom of the Press?. Because of the dominance of a small number of private companies over virtually all major media outlets in Brazil, the country is now ranked 104 on the Reporters Without Borders' index of press freedom.

Just how powerful the media millionaires are was clearly seen in the two years leading up to the overthrow of the Dilma government. While the PT government was portrayed as responsible for almost all Brazil's problems, hundreds of professional journalists found it impossible to link even a single example of corruption directly to Dilma. Instead, rumours, half-truths and completely fabricated reports were mass produced. Significantly, shortly before the impeachment process, the evening news devoted 14 minutes to speculation about a wiretapped telephone conversation between Dilma and the former president Lula.

The same day saw the publication of a list exposing 200 leading politicians who received 'cash gifts' from construction giant Odebrecht. This however, did not warrant even a two minute report. This was probably because they were all right-wing politicians such as the Leader of the Opposition, Aécio Neves of the Social Democratic Party of Brazil, PSDB, the other major bourgeois party. Since then, this list has disappeared entirely from the media reports.

The proponents of Dilma's impeachment do not even deny that their original plan, to have her dismissed from office on charges of corruption, had to be abandoned for lack of actual evidence. Meanwhile, they had to admit that the impeachment was not for any legal reason, that is any constitutionally relevant actions, but because Dilma had become 'politically unacceptable?. As a fig leaf the silly charge of budgetary manipulation was pulled out of the hat before the election, but deferred payment for the financing of budget items on a date after the elections is a globally common practice and has not yet led to dismissals anywhere else. Since the Brazilian constitution has no parliamentary procedure for dismissal of the directly elected president, a legally constructed impeachment has to be a cold coup by another constitutional body using a compliant judiciary.

Left governments in crisis

The fact that the "international community" has accepted this scantily clad coup with wide media support, is a result of overall developments across Latin America. After a certain degree of recovery after the turn of the millennium and the calming of the situation in Argentina, South America as a whole found itself in a phase of economic recovery. This, combined in many countries with the establishment of "left-wing governments", created a corresponding "social peace" and secure conditions for investment. With the decline in world trade after 2009, Brazil entered, step by step, into a severe economic crisis and the South American recovery lost its locomotive. Across the continent, capital is looking once again for right wing governments with strong ties to US capital, which is signaling that greater political compliance would bring widespread dollar investments.

In Brazil, the PT was indeed prepared to implement neoliberal "reforms" during its coalition with the PMDB; however, with the intensification of the economic crisis over the last three years (last year's recession with more than 3 percent drop in GDP is set to continue this year) the PT turned to Keynesian countermeasures again. Instead of the required budgetary restraint, they tried to stimulate the economy through state investments and preservation of purchasing power by making no cuts in social assistance and imposing restrictions on mass redundancies. It was this direct refusal to implement the directives of the IMF and World Bank, or take the "advice" from the US and EU, that made Dilma a "politically unsustainable" factor for the country's establishment and for the institutions of global capital. The major theme of the Temer government programme is that a "business friendly" government is back and that the necessary "reforms" demanded by the IMF will be implemented and thus big investments could be expected from abroad, which will overcome the crisis.

The actions to be expected from the business friendly government, then, are cuts in employment rights, the right to strike and in the social security systems. Quite apart from the talk about the "unity of the nation", it is clear that the Temer government will be primarily a government of confrontation with the trade unions and social movements. This is what should be understood by the "conservative revolution" and the emphasis on order in "Ordo e Progresso".

Brazilian society must be prepared for a wave of repression and discrimination against minorities. Even at present, the extent of police violence against favela residents and those oppressed because of their ethnicity or their sexual orientation, is tremendous. Police shootings of black people or people without officially registered housing, happen almost daily. It is no accident that there has been a big increase in the postings of videos of rapes of favela women on social media since the change of government. This generally reactionary climate is now reinforced by the "putschists". Meetings against the new government have been banned in universities. Such contraventions of university autonomy have been taboo since the military dictatorship. The police have also closed down union meetings on the grounds that they would be "abused" for political purposes. Demonstrations against the coup plotters have attacked, sometimes brutally, as happened at a meeting of the MST, the movement of landless workers, when a speaker was shot. The escalation of protests against Temer will doubtless mean a qualitative increase in police repression. In extreme cases the business friendly political elite will certainly not hesitate to call on the military to "secure investment".

The character of the PT

Faced with this assault what is the PT doing? Unlike the parties of Kirchner in Argentina, Morales in Bolivia, or the late Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, the PT is a "bourgeois workers' party", that is, a party whose social roots are in the working class and the urban and rural poor. But, as part of the bourgeois system of government, operating bourgeois politics, when push comes to shove it will defend the rule of capital. However it originated from courageous workers' struggles against the military dictatorship, especially those of the industrial workers of Sao Paulo and the region around it. At first, it even contained some important centrist currents but, as the party developed into a possible party of government, these were marginalised or pushed out of the party altogether.

When its longtime chairman, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, known as Lula, became president in 2003 the turn into a regular social democratic party was completed. A combination of neoliberal pension reform alongside some social reforms, such as the introduction of the Bolsa Familia, fit into the image of the post-2000s social democracy. The PT was also increasingly involved in the bribery related to the awarding of contracts and well paid posts in state corporations. In particular, the party became part of the multi-billion dollar corruption associated with the statified

energy economy, a system that in Brazil earned the nickname "Jet Wash", symbolising the effective and swift money laundering system. However, not even a quarter of those who are now facing charges are PT members, most of them come from the very parties that have now taken over the government.

Forced out of government, the PT now projects itself primarily as an innocent victim. Even Lula, in view of his impending trial, has mutated back into the workers' leader of yesteryear, fulminating hoarsely to mass demonstrations against capital, the conformist media and judicial systems. We know what we can expect from such leaders of the working class; above all, the defence of their own sinecures. On the other hand, the PT, via its affiliated trade union federation, the CUT, has undeniably close ties with the now aroused working class. The CUT is by far the largest of the union confederations and can mobilise large numbers, the second largest federation, Força Sindical (FS), is close to the present government and acts as a strikebreakers' organisation. The left union federations, such as Conlutas, which is close to the PSTU (Partido Socialista dos Trabalhadores Unificado) only play an important role in a few regions and plants and cannot really act effectively on a national scale without the CUT. The PSTU is a leading force in the International Workers League (LIT) from the Moreno tradition.

In the aftermath of the change of government, the CUT and PT leaders held back from taking any action and relied on legal arguments. The PT emphasised the illegitimacy of the way the Temer government was installed and looked to the courts and bringing pressure to bear on MPs and senators to set aside the suspension of Dilma and return to office the 'constitutional' government of the PT. For too long, the CUT leaders basically followed a similar policy but, on May 24, the federation's Executive adopted a resolution calling for the preparation of a general strike. Branches are to hold assemblies and plenary meetings before the end of June as part of this preparation. Clearly, a general strike does need preparation but the danger is that this could become an extension of the previous policy, another form of pressure, rather than the all-out fight that is necessary.

On the other hand, it is undoubtedly the case that the fall of the PT government, the reactionary declarations of the ruling parties and the looming attacks in all fields have led to a large counter-mobilisation from the Brazilian working class, the landless peasants and many socially oppressed sections of the population. During and after the proceedings to remove the government, hundreds of thousands took to the streets to demonstrate against the new rulers. Resistance formed not only around the PT and the CUT but particularly around certain social movements. These included the MST, although recently it has become more and more connected to the PT for years. For that reason for some years an organisation of the urban poor, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto - the Homeless Workers Movement (MTST), has been formed to fight for housing.

These organisations have formed broad alliances (especially: Povo sem medo - people without fear and Frente Brasil Popular, the Brazilian Popular Front, which have their own local structures and organise political action at all levels. Although the names of the organisations are strongly reminiscent of 'popular fronts', there are no significant bourgeois forces in them except for minor Left Catholic social initiatives. They are primarily based on the PT, CUT, MST and MTST, the PSOL, some Maoist organisations and a number of initiatives or youth organisations associated with these organisations. Nevertheless, they do not constitute workers' united fronts in the strict sense, as united fighting alliances of workers' organisations, but rather organisations to build cross-class alliances 'to protect democracy'.

The situation is crying out for a consistent revolutionary force that can present a socialist alternative and show the mass protests the way there. In the Brazilian radical left there is currently great disagreement, both over the analysis of the events (coup or business-as-usual), the behaviour of the PT and the mobilisations it has led, and the relationship to the different mobilisation alliances.

Not surprisingly, the centrist left who are still in the PT, such as O Trabalho, generally support the protests called by the PT leadership, without criticising the mistaken perspective and with illusory hopes for a change in PT, should it get back into government.

The radical Left

The PSOL (Party for Solidarity and Freedom), which consists mainly of centrist tendencies that left the PT during the 1990s and 2000s, supported the protests against the impeachment. The PSOL (in which the sister organisations of RSB, ISL, SAV and other currents are now active as tendencies) was electorally the most successful party on the left in the last few years (with some recent notable regional results) and also has 6 seats in Congress. They voted against the impeachment and made clear in Parliament the relationship between the impeachment and the real objective of preparing a general attack. The PSOL is also part of various movement alliances in which it increasingly plays a role as an alternative to the PT. However, their political declarations are limited to the condemnation of the coup and the defence of democratic and social rights. The need to respond to the general attack with a corresponding counter-attack like a general strike and the question of the building of alternative organs of power and, ultimately, the struggle for a revolutionary overthrow of the putschist regime, is completely absent. This makes the PSOL a kind of Brazilian version of the German Left Party. Its ally, the smaller Brazilian Communist Party, PCB, the remnants of the traditional CP, only link this PSOL-line to the long-term objective of "Socialism" in the abstract, currently focusing on the "stage" of defending democracy.

The Communist Workers' Party, PCO, originating from the Jorge Altamira tradition of Latin American Trotskyism, which has some important bases in workplaces, has been one of the prophets of an impending coup for years and now believes its time has come. However in their mobilisation for the protests they express no criticism of the PT and its strategy, or any perspective that goes beyond protests. Although they see the need for "organs of popular power", these are still a long way from any workers' united front and the question of working class power.

On the other side of the spectrum are the organisations coming from the Nahuel Moreno tradition such as the, PSTU, and the Revolutionary Workers' Movement, MRT, the Brazilian section of the Fracción Trotskista - Cuarta Internacional (FT-CI) associated in Germany with Revolutionäre Internationalistische Organisation (RIO). Neither of these recognise the character of the PT as a bourgeois workers' party and its specific role in the current confrontation with the bourgeoisie. Consequently the PSTU, which, in terms of membership is the biggest radical left organisation in Brazil, sees the impeachment as only a conflict between two wings of the bourgeoisie in which the working class should remain neutral. They see the voting by the PSOL deputies as a kind of 1914 for that party. For them, attacks on the working class are all that can be expected from either party, and between Temer and Dilma there is, ultimately, no difference. Therefore, the slogan of the PSTU during the political crisis was for a general strike against the PT government and against the possible Temer government, with the aim of forcing - new elections! Conlutas also tried to take this line into their workplace organisations in Sao Paolo but it proved impossible to apply and the PSTU / Conlutas effectively isolated themselves from the large, PT-led, protest movement.

The MRT did recognise the right wing coup for what it was and declared the protests fully justified. On the other hand, like the PSTU, their belief that a united front with the PT is impermissible under any circumstances, meant they intervened in the protests by calling on the CUT to break with the PT. Even if this is a correct long term aim, to propose a united front with thousands of PT supporters with the ultimatum "break with the PT, then we will fight with you", is sectarian and lacks any perspective for how to reach that goal with such abstract propaganda.

In the current situation it is essential to unite with all the workers and their organisations who are willing to resist the attacks of the coup in a common front. Our starting point has to be the recognition that a substantial portion of the Brazilian working class continues to follow the leadership of the CUT and the PT, albeit with great scepticism. Even where the PT and other reformist or petty bourgeois radical forces dominate the mobilisations, we must take a step together with the mass of the militant workers, the youth, the socially oppressed and small farmers. We need to show that the popular front perspective and a legalistic "defence of democracy" are illusions, given the real purpose of the coup. We must also demonstrate in practice that the leadership of CUT and PT are not capable of taking the necessary actions of generalised resistance.

In this struggle, the Brazilian comrades of the League for the Fifth International, the Socialist League, believe that fighting in the CUT and in the mobilisation fronts, for the preparation of a general strike against the approaching attacks, and to form the fighting organisations necessary for the enforcement of this strike is an important lever.

Ultimately, the situation of the Brazilian left, and the escalation of the authoritarian threat shows the absolute necessity of building a revolutionary combat party of the working class that can lead the resistance beyond the question of defence into the struggle for power.

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