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The 2016 *coup d'état* in Brazil: why going international is a key strategy for domestic actors

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The Brazilian society is divided into two main groups. On the one side, we can find those who believe that corruption is the country's worst problem, and that the Workers' Party (the PT) is the main responsible agent (if not the only one) for its dissemination in Brazilian contemporary politics and economics. Fighting against it could include a series of "innovative" instruments and "timely and selective" measures within the police, the judiciary, the media, and the lower house. Brazil needs to be clean, and its cleansing would imply criminalizing the PT and socially condemning all individuals (even Brazilian composer and writer Chico Buarque...), social actors and other political parties connected with any sort of left-wing ideology. Right-wing demonstrations often portray banners such as "No communism", "Against PT", "No socialism", "We are not red, we are green and yellow", etc. as though they were all of the same sort. As a result, even if there is no clear legal justification for President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment, the lower house and the senate should move on, and finally vote for her ousting.

On the other side, we can find those who believe that inequality and socioeconomic human rights violations are the country's most urgent problems to be tackled, and that the political system needs a profound re-foundation, including an electoral reform and a ban on the private funding of campaigns. The media is not a neutral agent, and on behalf of an apparent freedom of expression newspapers, magazines and TV channels (amidst them Globo draws much of the public condemnation) end up manufacturing consent. This second group would emphasize that if there is no proven "crime of responsibility" committed by the President, what is going on within congress is not an impeachment process; rather it is a *coup d'état*.

This binary division does not illustrate the very many heterogeneous positions that empirically one can find in the field, left, centre and right. A rigorous and sociological

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account of the political views would reveal much richer, complex and varied stances, which also reflect the critical remarks many may have on the alliances and practices of the PT during its years of government. However, I argue that such a deep-rooted social cleavage, which reminds us of the Schmittian friend-enemy duality, is politically real when it comes to the question of Dilma Rousseff's ousting: one side is satisfied because it puts an end to an era; another side is worried about the future of the Brazilian democracy.

The crisis can be analysed as a classical class conflict, which is not new in Brazil's history (Vargas in 1954, Goulart in 1964, and Dilma in 2016). The social polarisation goes from the defence of a neoliberal growth model to the continuity of a modest welfare and social development model for the poorest and historically mostly marginalised. Within this context, the Brazilian elite has not been able to reach a consensus on how to solve the economic and political crisis. *Globo*, *Folha* and *Estadão*, Brazil's main newspapers, have contributed to the social polarisation and the radicalisation of political stances. The results of 2014 presidential elections have not satisfied some members of the Brazilian elite's expectations: the PT won its fourth consecutive election with a tight advantage of 51.64% of valid polls, a result which has not been accepted by main opposition leaders since its very announcement. All these factors associated with an important fiscal crisis, a boiling social atmosphere, and political hesitations of President Dilma Rousseff have yielded a 2016 institutional deadlock – Brazil's most serious institutional crisis in the aftermath of the 1988 Constitution. I would even consider this a historical moment of test for the political pact brought about with the promulgation of the Constitution.

What I want to argue in this brief note is that even if opposition parties currently constitute a majority within the parliament, even if a very conservative and oligarchical media dominates the scene, even if judiciary members insist on the idea that Brazil has strong and fully working democratic institutions, domestic actors from all sectors have decided to “go international”. On the left-wing spectrum this behaviour is reasonable, once the domestic instruments of institutional defence have been exhausted. Moreover, going international and building an international legitimacy for domestic policies is part and parcel of the PT's tradition. On the right-wing side of the politics, however, I would argue that going international is a *sine qua non* condition to save the legitimacy of the political process. A dispute on the historical narrative is taking place, and those who defend democracy have gained some advantage. The Olympic Games are approaching, and for political parties, the judiciary, and the media trying to reverse the idea that what is happening is a coup is fundamental from the viewpoint of political legitimacy.

Is it a coup?

2002: Venezuela. 2004: Haiti. 2009: Honduras. 2012: Paraguay. 2016: Brazil. The list is getting long. In the case of Brazil what is at stake is the discussion on whether fiscal misdoings constitute a crime of sufficient relevance to impeach a president, in conformity with the Constitution and the 1950 law on the impeachment. Nowadays, seventeen federate-state governors are known for having used the same budgetary measures, and all presidents before Dilma Rousseff have done so. If such old practices are now to be viewed as a crime of responsibility, then should this new interpretation of the law already apply to Dilma's 2015 acts? Or should these new parameters apply in the future, either to assess her doings in 2016, 2017 or 2018? Can such a new interpretation be applied retrospectively in a democracy and under the principles of the rule of law?

Those who support Dilma's impeachment reaffirm that she has not been able to govern properly, and that the economic model that she has defended would no longer be viable. Nonetheless, for a legal impeachment there is a need for a legally proved crime of responsibility. And a crime of responsibility has no relationship with her very low popularity (11% of support), neither with the government's shortcomings in implementing public economic policies. After all, in view of the current huge global economic crisis not so many presidents enjoy high rates of popular support elsewhere. There is no need to remind you of France's President 13% of support in national opinion polls. Had the vice-president and the Brazilian congress acted in a more responsible way in the aftermath of 2014 presidential elections, would Dilma Rousseff have had the same difficulties to control the fiscal crisis and define anti-economic recession policies? Had the vice-president (Michel Temer) not started to construct a "*conspiration de palais*", with the support of the President of the National Assembly (Eduardo Cunha), would all this have been possible?

Political actors and root causes

First: corporate funding of electoral campaigns has allowed for the election of 594 congressmen and women (both in lower house and senate), 318 of whom are nowadays under investigation for wrong doings. Corporate funding contributes to the lack of representativeness of the lower house: most of the deputies do not reflect the Brazilian society; they represent the interest of those who have funded their campaigns.

Second, institutions of political control (public ministry, general attorney's office, federal police) have gained autonomy and capacity of action, and increased their funding (and salaries) in recent years. For a professional who is beginning his/her career as federal police manager ("*delegado*"), today the initial salary is of approximately 15 thousand reais (17 times higher than the minimum salary in Brazil). However relevant their investigations and judicial operations, they have been very selective in terms of fighting against corruption. They have also been closely linked to the media through leaks of judicial operations in order to gain public opinion's support, but also condemning politicians before due process of law. Between 1995 and 2002, the federal police had implemented 48 operations, whereas between 2003 and today they have already implemented 2,226.

Third, the judiciary has adopted different tracks and time criteria for analysing judicial process, being very slow in some cases, and extremely quick in others. That may be a coincidence, but this time gap has drawn attention of the citizenry. It took the Supreme Court more than four months to decide on Eduardo Cunha's ousting from the presidency of the lower house, but less than 24 hours to prevent Lula from being nominated minister. Moreover, Supreme Court judges (whose average salaries are 50 times higher than the minimum salary...), federal judges (whose initial salaries are 27 times higher than the minimum salary...), and federal prosecutors (45 times higher...) entertain ambiguous relationship with the media, though selective and timely leaks, as well as by accepting prizes from media lords and participating in talk shows – instead of being low-profile and keeping impartiality as well as neutrality as a rule of social conduct. The Supreme Court has not so far examined the case in order to assess and affirm whether or not the President has committed a crime of responsibility. It is true that in Brazil's history the Supreme Court has never acknowledged that a coup was a coup. So it is not a big surprise. Between 1937 and 1945 (Getulio Vargas's Estado Novo) and 1964 and 1985 (military dictatorship), court judges were always aligned with regimes of exception. The ruptures were always considered "constitutional".

Fourth, the vice president who had been elected together with Dilma Rousseff (i.e. within the same electoral coalition) behaved like a political traitor. His party, the PMDB, has been an ally of the PT for 13 years, and has implemented policies and has partial responsibility for the good and bad results of what has been achieved. It is true that in politics alliances may change. The problem is how and why? While he was still vice-president and Dilma Rousseff, his coalition companion, was still being heard for the alleged impeachable crimes, Mr. Temer had already started building “his” government, and negotiating ministries, prospecting political parties’ support, and defining policies to be implemented “the day after”. What is the legitimacy of such a stance taken by Michel Temer?

Going international: intergovernmental organisations, regional leadership and global media

Several international organisations and leaders, as well as foreign media have expressed their concern about the undemocratic conduction of the political process against President Rousseff. The Organisation of the American States, the Inter-American Human Rights Court, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL), several United Nations agencies (Un Women, UNHCR, for instance), just to cite some of them. In the last weeks OAS director Luis Almagro visited Brazil twice in order to express his support to Dilma Rousseff. Several chiefs of state and former presidents and prime ministers (Tabaré Vazquez, Vladimir Putin, Nicolas Maduro, Michelle Bachelet, Ricardo Lagos, Felipe González, Rafael Correa, Pepe Mujica, Massemo d’Alema) have also denounced the coup. Intellectuals and Nobel Prize winners have joined in this denunciation. Political parties (Frente Amplio in Uruguay, SPD in Germany, the French Communist Party, for example) have published notes of support for Dilma Rousseff.

The global media has also criticised the conservative and putschist Brazilian media for its coverage of the political facts since the crisis began. Not only leftist media such as the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* and the Argentine *Page 12* have covered the political crisis in Brazil, but also mainstream newspapers and weekly magazines such as the *New York Times*², *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, *The Washington Post*, *The Independent*³, *The Guardian*, *Die Zeit*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *El País*, and *O Público*.

UK’s newspaper *The Guardian*, through very critical articles written by David Miranda and Glenn Greenwald, has even received a letter from Mr. Marinho, the media baron from *Globo*, accusing the British newspaper and the journalists of impartiality and lack of rigour. Greenwald, 2014 Pulitzer Prize winner, has called Marinho’s letter “a joke”. It is important to recall that NGO Reporters without Borders, which measures the freedom of press globally, had ranked Brazil 58th in 2010, whereas in 2016 the country’s ranking dwindled to 104th. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* used the term “cold coup” to refer to what was going on in Brazil. News broadcast, documentaries and interviews on CNN⁴, BBC, and Al Jazeera also called the attention of the public opinion in Brazil. One cannot neglect the relevant role played by bloggers and alternative media such as The

² <http://www.ocafezinho.com/2015/08/17/ny-times-faz-duro-editorial-contra-o-golpe-no-brasil/>

³ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/brazil-lawmakers-expected-to-vote-on-presidents-impeachment-a6988766.html>

⁴ <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2016/04/18/intv-amanpour-glenn-greenwald-dilma-rousseff-impeachment.cnn/video/playlists/amanpour/>

Intercept⁵, OCafezinho, Tijolaço, Conversa Fiada, Agência Pública, Mídia Ninja, among others. The Brazilian conservative mass media's prestige has been shaken by what international coverage has labelled as clear political preferences for opposition parties and strong bias against Dilma, Lula and the PT in general.

Geopolitics and Obama's silence

The coup does not only have a domestic politics, it also has an international, and geopolitical agenda. In 2003 Brazil's foreign policy once again moved away from a previous trajectory of alignment with the Western world in general, and the United States in particular. Based on a different interpretation of the world order (less hegemonic, and more multipolar), and on the defence of the national self-esteem and Brazil's political autonomy in terms of development model, Lula-Dilma's foreign policy, irrespective of the differences between them, has since 2003 pushed an idea of a rising power whose major priorities were regional integration (Mercosur, Unasur, Celac), diversified South-South relations (IBSA, ASPA and ASA summits), fostering new coalitions of power through the BRICS grouping, and demand for the reform of global governance institutions. Brazil's foreign policy has proposed mediation (together with Turkey) for the Iran nuclear problem; it has also built the trade G-20 group with WTO; it has refused to sign the free trade agreement of the Americas. China has become one of Brazil's major trade and investment partners, including in the exploitation of oil from the pre-salt layer resources.

Having this broad context in mind, it is surprising not to have heard President Obama, one single time, making reference to the political turmoil in Brazil as a threat to the building of democracy and to the rule of the law in the region. Obama paid Argentina's President Macri an official visit on the same week of the 17 April vote in the Brazilian National Assembly, and expressed his confidence in the Brazilian political institutions. Weeks later spokesman of the White House reaffirmed "our confidence in the durability of Brazil's democratic institutions"⁶. On 23 April, the very same day Dilma Rousseff was in New York at the United Nations telling worldwide journalists that there was a coup going on in Brazil, US deputies from both Democrat and Republican parties sent a letter to the Brazilian congress saying that they were praying for the best solution possible for the Brazilian nation.

This letter was sent after PSDB Senator Aloysio Nunes, president of the Foreign Relations Commission within the Brazilian Senate, had visited Washington. During this visit Senator Nunes held a meeting with Undersecretary of State and former ambassador to Brazil, Thomas Shannon. Shannon is also the most influential decision-maker as far as Latin America is concerned in the Department of State. Senator Nunes also held meetings with the chairman and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Corker (Republic) and Ben Cardin (Democrat). He then attended a luncheon organised by Albright Stonebridge Group⁷. How should one interpret the holding of all these meetings one or two days after the 17 April vote in the Brazilian national assembly? Does this show an option made by the US decision makers in favour of one the sides that are in dispute?

⁵ <https://theintercept.com/2016/03/18/brazil-is-engulfed-by-ruling-class-corruption-and-a-dangerous-subversion-of-democracy/>

⁶ https://www.whitehouse.gov/videos/2016/May/20160511_Press_Briefing_HD.mp4

⁷ <https://theintercept.com/2016/04/18/after-vote-to-remove-brazils-president-key-opposition-figure-holds-meetings-in-washington/>

President Obama does not hesitate to talk publicly to the British society in order to convey a message of support for the UK's strategic links with the European Union; nor does he avoid defending democracy in Ukraine when the US interests are at stake in that region. Obama's silence on Brazil's *coup d'état* is astoundingly revealing. The State Department kept the very same profile during the coups in Honduras (2009) and Paraguay (2012). History matters, and one should never forget another Democrat's role in intervention in domestic politics in Brazil: JFK's held several dialogues with US ambassador to Brazil in 1964 (Lincoln Gordon) and his top aides to consider policy options and strategies to support Goulart's deposition and the installation of an allied military government⁸. The Cold War is over, it is true, but have US interests and profile changed in the region or do officials in Washington still consider Latin America as the United States' backyard? Another silence is also thought provoking, and it lies on the Brazilian side: how do the Brazilian military, particularly those who have been supported in the modernisation and professional development of the armed forces in the last years, envisage the current context, both domestically and internationally? That could be the topic of another note.

⁸ <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB465/>. For further documentation on the implications of the US government in the 1964 coup in Brazil, see the final report of the *Truth National Commission*, available at <http://www.cnv.gov.br>.