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Brazil

The saga of “hope” defeated by “fear”

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The crisis is not yet the event, but it is already the announcement of it, a door opened.... hours are transformed then suddenly into minutes and years into days. Daniel BensaÃd

The world is witnessing with perplexity the political, legal and media coup, called in Brazil “the institutional coup”, which reached its culminating point during the vote which took place in the national legislative chamber on April 17, 2016, for the approval of the opening of the process of the impeachment against President Dilma Rousseff. [1] We are witnessing the sad end of the era of Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores - PT) government, the result of the trajectory that they have taken since Lula’s first term as president. It sent signals to the markets and the right, and sought to assemble a coalition government where all interests and social classes would be represented. Its first major initiative was the “reforma da PrevidÃncia”, the reform of unemployment insurance, of a clearly neoliberal character. Its policy has demobilised the social base of popular support for the PT and strengthened the sectors which today have turned their backs on it.

With the worsening of the economic crisis in Brazil since 2014, the contradictions have deepened between the PT and its original social base. Attacks have been strengthened against social rights, which have been reduced, and an allegedly drastic tax adjustment has been begun, which has largely contributed to the deepening of the recession. The conditions have been created for the chamber of horrors that was seen in the Chamber of Deputies on April 17 (see the statement by Joana MortÃgua, of Portugal’s Left Bloc), which has demonstrated how Brazil has a legislative body which is scandalously conservative, fundamentalist, misogynist, homophobic, corrupt and illegitimate.

Thus a complex and difficult conjuncture has opened for the socialist left and for the Brazilian social movements, who seek outcomes that avoid the people having once again to pay for this crisis.

The sad end of the PT government

There remains to us the irreducible force of indignation, which is the exact opposite of habitude and resignation.
Daniel BensaÃd

How is it possible that such a despicable right (the one that was on view during the explanations of the vote on April 17) has taken on such weight in Parliament? The explanation lies, for a large part, in the choices of the government in two areas: how to govern and with whom to ally.

The victorious campaign of the PT in 2002, at the end of which Lula was elected to his first term, was very different from the campaigns which had previously failed, primarily because it was marked by an explicit alliance with sectors of big Brazilian capital, represented by the Vice President JosÃ© Alencar, leader of a party which is openly bourgeois (the Liberal Party), and head of one of the largest conglomerates in the textile industry. Lula guaranteed that he would not attack the banks and businesses, that he “would respect contracts”; big companies financed his campaign, on a scale far superior to what had happened during previous campaigns [2]. The PT definitively dropped the militant profile of its first election campaigns, prioritizing professional campaign structures, with paid employees. Campaigns cost millions and were increasingly dependent on marketing professionals [3].

Lula was elected, but the PT and the allied parties to its left did not have a majority in the National Congress. The PT then resorted to alliances with parties more to the right, openly bourgeois, and to do this had recourse to the political methods traditional to Brazil - distribution of departments and other public offices as well as other economic benefits. As was later learned, it also made use of another traditional method, the direct payment of money to members of parliament. This was revealed in 2005 with the famous scandal of the “mensalÃ£o” (big monthly payments) [4].

The PT and Lula lost a large part of the prestige that they had, especially among what is called the “middle class”, which imperilled their mandate. However, the strengthening of social policies - in particular the “bolsa famÃ-lia” [5] - and the healthy state of the economy helped Lula recover popularity and he was re-elected for a second term. But already the PT found it difficult to repair the damage caused by the “mensalÃ£o”.

Once re-elected, to obtain a majority during his second term and ensure “governability”, Lula established a preferred alliance with the PMDB (Partido do Movimento DemocrÃ-tico Brasileiro – Brazilian Democratic Movement Party) and since then, the PT and the PMDB have been the main parties in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, with the latter being given important ministries in Lula’s government. This party remained an “ally” to the PT throughout Lula’s second term and chose the vice-presidency of Dilma Rousseff in the elections of 2010 and 2014.

The spectrum of PT alliances within the Congress also extended to other parties on the right, including some with fundamentalist conceptions, like those who have parliamentarians participating in the Congress’s Evangelical Front. This group currently includes 18% of deputies and has parliamentarians from 22 parties. Its members do not have a specific ideological profile, except that they are very active against human rights, as well as the rights of black people, women and LGBTs. But what animates them in reality is the guarantee of public radio and television licences [6], as well as tax exemption for the churches. Thanks to its weight in the media, this sector has succeeded in reaching massive sectors of society and building a political and religious empire. The current President of the Chamber of Deputies, Eduardo Cunha, of the PMDB, one of the main political enemies of the President Dilma, is part of this evangelical intergroup.

Known as the “intergroup of the Bible”, these parliamentarians, associated with the “intergroup of the bullet” (composed of police and military personnel) and the “intergroup of beef” (parliamentarians related to agribusiness) ensure that the composition of Congress today is the most reactionary and conservative known since the restoration of the general elections after the fall of the dictatorship. More astonishing is the fact that many in these sectors were the direct allies of the Dilma government, and were then among those responsible for its defeat in the vote for the opening of the process of impeachment.

For a long time the PT believed it was possible to “make an omelette without breaking any eggs”. It thought it could favour the poorest strata of the population without harming the interests of the bourgeoisie. For many years this worked. There have been punctual improvements for the poorest, which have responded to some of the expectations raised by the PT’s coming to power. But these improvements have never been based on structural reforms guaranteeing changes in the economy and society.

All this remained dependent on a relatively favourable economic situation, which basically lasted in Brazil up to 2012-2013, dependent itself on an especially favourable situation for “commodities” [7] on the world market. Since the beginning in 1990 of governments of neoliberal economic orientation in Brazil (especially the governments of Collor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Lula and Dilma), the country has suffered a regression in its productive structure: it has experienced an intense process of de-industrialization, and has amplified its role as an exporter of primary products. Thus favourable prices for commodities on the world market have much benefited it. They even allowed a relatively favourable weathering of the first phase of the crisis opened in 2008-2009 (this has also been the case in other South American countries).

The PT in government, in addition to adopting practices associated with the “old politics”, has promoted a development model for the country which is regressive from the economic and social viewpoint, and anti-ecological. Although it has presented its economic policy as neo-developmental, the only real “developmentalist” aspect has been trying to accelerate economic growth (with little result) through increased state participation. In place of the emphasis on industrial development that was the former “developmentalism”, the PT, in continuity with the Collor and Fernando Henrique Cardoso governments, has stimulated agribusiness as a producer of goods for export, to the detriment of agrarian reform and peasant agriculture. It has also promoted and funded, through the PAC (Program of Acceleration of Growth), major dam and mining projects, linked to the big inter-oceanic project of the IIRSA [8]. This ecocidal aspect of the PT project for Brazil has also affected its Bolivarian neighbours (Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela) and has led to the most radicalized and bloody socio-environmental conflicts in Brazilian history since the genocide of the native peoples following the arrival of the colonizers, while causing the most serious environmental disasters recorded in the recent period.

Brazil, governed by the PT, would have been able to play another role in the Latin American context, by stimulating alternatives of regional integration which would have encouraged the sovereignty of the peoples of this continent by confronting the imperialist interests of the United States and Europe.

In recent years, with the deterioration of the economic situation, it has become more difficult to reconcile the irreconcilable, and Dilma’s government has gone further to the right. However, during the election campaign of 2014, faced with the risk of losing, Dilma turned to the left (especially between the two ballots), and attacked the bankers (omitting the fact that the PT governments had been very favourable to them), bosses and the rich in general. She won the election, but she seriously endangered the alliance she had made with big capital.

Once elected, her support among the popular sectors suffered a serious blow: an ultra-orthodox economic policy of intense austerity was introduced and has led to harsh attacks against the rights of the working class (including those guaranteed by the federal constitution of 1988), with draft laws for the casualisation of public employment and more general changes to employment law, as well as undemocratic attacks against the right to demonstrate, with the Anti-terrorism Act (introduced using the pretext of the Olympic Games), and with budgetary reductions in education and health spending. However, as the PT still has links with trade union and popular movements, the party opposed certain aspects of this policy, and Dilma was not able to implement it in the way that the bourgeoisie demanded. She turned against the people to search for support among the dominant classes, but this has not worked. As always in such cases, the implementation of austerity policies in an economy already in recession has considerably worsened the latter, without any improvement in public accounts (the situation there has, on the contrary, deteriorated).

The economic crisis has made the PT policy of class conciliation unfeasible and inaugurated a political crisis. In addition, the advancement of the investigations on corruption, in particular (but not only) those of “Operation Karcher” by the Federal Police, has amplified the political crisis, to such a point that it has become a decisive factor in a worsening of the economic crisis.

Some of the main leaders of the PT, including Lula, are involved in these investigations, alongside politicians of several other parties, in particular the main partner of the PT governments until March 2016, the PMDB. Some of the leaders of the PMDB, like the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Eduardo Cunha, are much more involved in these investigations than any leader of the PT (one of the complaints against him has already been taken into account by the Supreme Federal Court; he is therefore already accused in this process). It is possible that the crisis of the PT project precipitates the end of a cycle in South America, because the economic and political crisis besetting the biggest of its countries is accompanied in the other countries by the progress of conservative and right wing sectors, with the aggravating circumstance that the radicalized and rebellious social movements who had been at the origin of these governments and had supported them, are now anesthetized, weakened or disappointed.

“A tomb which you have dug yourself”: the nature of the coup launched in Brazil

There is dignity in indignation, in the unconditional rejection of injustice, even when you don't yet know what the justice of the just could be. [...]

One poses principles before even knowing the rule of calculation of interests and opportunities. Daniel BensaÃd

In the face of this conjuncture of political, media, and legal conspiracies which have captured the Brazilian scene, the PSOL and other social movements that have taken a position against the impeachment of President Dilma characterize it as an institutional coup. There is not a classic coup underway in Brazil, since this is not a change of regime as was the case with the coup of 1964, which began a dictatorship. What has taken place is a great political battle under the command of some PT sectors of the bourgeoisie to replace the PT presidency. A substantial part of the bourgeoisie had supported the PT governments as long as they had been able to promote class conciliation.

Temer, the vice-president, a clearly bourgeois politician, is prepared to apply a much more intensely anti-popular policy than Dilma. Since this is the case, the FIESP (FederaÃo das IndÃstrias do Estado de SÃo Paulo) and other employers' federations have played a role as protagonists in the organization of the impeachment. In this framework, the bourgeois parties have followed their natural course, which is to align with the interests of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois mass media have also taken part in this work. The other aspect which has led all the parties more to the right to support the impeachment is that they believe that this manoeuvre will create far more favourable conditions for doing what Dilma has not succeeded in doing, namely interrupting or, at least limiting, the investigations on the corruption of the Federal Police, especially “Operation Karcher”. At the end of the day, all the major bourgeois parties are threatened by these investigations (and a number of their representatives have already been indicted). They hope that the media, with the new government, will cease to stimulate the continuation of investigations, and that the police, prosecutors and judges, who are already more interested in the investigations on the PT than on the other parties, will become less severe.

The establishment of a process of impeachment, in itself, does not constitute a coup, given that this mechanism is provided for by the Brazilian constitution. Nevertheless, several aspects of the process allow such a characterization.

In the first place, the heavy mobilization of the media, in association with some of the prosecutors and judges, with a view to destroying the image of the PT (more particularly of Lula) and of the government. For sure the PT and the government are not innocent of the corruption of which they are accused and they have a responsibility for the worsening of the economic crisis (especially in having tried to carry out the austerity policy demanded by the bourgeoisie), but there was a totally unequal treatment between, for example, Lula (who is not innocent either) and Eduardo Cunha, much more compromised than Lula, at least up until now, in the accusations of corruption. Lula was put in custody by the Federal Police, on the order of a judge, when he had not refused to submit himself to questioning, with a huge media resonance; and then there was telephone tapping, even of conversations with his family, very often obtained illegally, that have been published.

In the second place, we must consider the legal inconsistency which characterizes this process. The “crime of responsibility” charged to Dilma (essentially consisting of accounting manoeuvres) has been up to now a common practice of different governments, at both federal and state level, and it has been practiced by Michel Temer when he has temporarily occupied the presidency.

In the third place, it must be noted that the whole conduct of the process is absurd. The initiator is the Speaker of the House, Eduardo Cunha, who should not have been in this position for several months, given not only that he is accused, and has already been charged, for corruption and other crimes, but also that he has lied to the Chamber itself, when he denied having bank accounts abroad (the existence of several of these accounts has since been

proven without doubt). More than half of the members who were part of the Special Commission which has analyzed the accusations against Dilma are implicated in “Operation Karcher”. The same goes for many of the members who have initiated the judgment of Dilma. The impeachment is not only a process of judgment of the PT for corruption. It is a judgment on Dilma Rousseff herself, although she has still not been charged [9], in order to replace her by Michel Temer.

Backs to the wall, Dilma and the PT have attempted to save themselves in a lamentable manner: by trying until the end to offer political benefits to the bourgeois politicians. On this terrain, they did not have the means to beat their opponents: the possibility of a Temer government meant his group had much more to offer. The PT has been the victim of its own “way of governing”.

The vote in the Chamber of Deputies on April 17, 2016, which approved the initiation of Dilma's impeachment process, was a theatre of horrors. It revealed what we suspected already: the Brazilian Parliament is, in fact, fundamentalist, depoliticized, conservative, racist, misogynist and illegitimate, to a point never previously seen in the history of this House. The deputies succeeded each other in their voting statements “dedicated to God, to the family, the children, my country...” and the worst of declarations was uttered by deputy Jair Bolsonaro, who dedicated his vote to Colonel Ustra, one of the main torturers and murderers of the military dictatorship, which tortured the President Dilma Rousseff, when she was trapped in the cellars of this emergency regime, under which hundreds of political activists were murdered.

Many deputies justified support for the impeachment of the President by the great unpopularity of Dilma's government and the corruption associated with the PT. This makes no sense: Temer and the PMDB, according to the polls, are as unpopular as Rousseff and are more directly implicated in the corruption cases that have been revealed. Approximately 60% of the population favours the resignation or dismissal of both Rousseff and Temer.

The PSOL, with its group of six members of parliament, took a position against the impeachment because it believes that this process has no legitimacy and that it is a complete farce. Although the socialist left had generally, and correctly, taken position against the coup and for the defence of existing “democracy” in Brazil (a minority part of the socialist left, without parliamentary representation, advocated abstention in the vote on April 17), all these episodes reinforce the need to think about the differences and limitations that exist between the democratic rights of the people and the defence of the democratic state of law and of representative democracy. A considerable part of the Brazilian population is not familiar with the armed aspect of the state. For them, as José Saramago puts it “democracy is there as if it was some sort of saint in the altar from which miracles are no longer expected”. Workers, youth and black people, massacred in the peripheries of the cities, in a true civil war, in particular under the pretext of the “war on drugs”, do not experience what could be called a democracy or even the democratic state of law. Given that “democracy” was “sequestered, packaged, amputated” and that the rights acquired painfully, guaranteed in the immutable clauses of the constitution, are dismantled by representative democracy, dominated by economic power, it remains only for us to demand real democracy now, to conquer it in the streets and in the struggles of the 99%, to extract it from the 1% of the powerful of this world who do not want it, as an alternative of resistance and possible advances.

The streets are boiling again, but they no longer have the same “colours”

Indignation is a beginning. A way to rise up and get oriented. We are indignant, we are outraged, and then we see.
Daniel Bensaid

Brazil has already had the experience, in its recent history after the military dictatorship, of a process of impeachment against a President of the Republic. In 1992 the then president, Fernando Collor de Melo, lost his mandate after having been convicted in a trial similar to that which was begun on April 17 against President Dilma. At the time, as today, the country was plunged into an economic and political crisis, although, unlike Dilma, Collor was directly accused of several counts of indictment.

The other fundamental difference is that, in 1992, the “Caras Pintadas” [10] took to the streets in a unified way, because there was a unanimous opinion in the country that Collor should go. Today, in relation to the events underway, the country is divided between supporters and opponents of the impeachment, in relation to supporters or opponents of the government, in addition to the fact that there are demonstrators opposed to tax adjustments and other government measures, and there are still more variants in the demonstrations.

There are four positions that associate, in different ways, sectors of the left (parties, social movements, sectors of the government and so on) and sectors of the bourgeoisie and the conservative right. The bourgeois front is relatively unified. Three fronts have been created in the camp of the left: Frente Brasil Popular, Frente Povo Sem Medo and Espaço Unidade de Ações. In Frente Brasil Popular we find organized political parties and social movements, such as the PT and the PC do B, the CUT (Central Única dos Trabalhadores), the UNE (União Nacional Dos Estudantes), the MST, with other sectors that have the strongest link to and are the least critical of the government. The Frente Povo Sem Medo only includes social movements; its action and its composition are more autonomous in relation to the government, while its slogans are more critical with regard to the government’s austerity policies and the restriction of the rights of the working class. Here we find the MTST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto), the youth movements Juntos!, Rua-Juventude Anti-Capitalista and UJS, the trade union movements Intersindical, CUT and CTB, as well as intellectuals such as the liberation theologian Frei Betto and political leaders of parties such as the PSOL. The other front which has been created is Espaço Unidade de Ações, under the leadership of the trade union federation CSP-Conlutas, the student organization ANEL, parties such as the PSTU (which advocated abstention in the vote on impeachment), and some sectors of the PSOL. The abstentionist position of this sector on the impeachment question has led it to distance itself from the others.

The development of the right has led to a large popular mobilisation against the impeachment, including left sectors opposed to the Dilma government. There is a sector of the national bourgeoisie and the conservative right (including a fascist sector), which constitutes the right-wing opposition to the government and heads the mobilizations for the impeachment of Dilma, like the FIESP for example, and which has financed the entire infrastructure of the marches and camps mounted in some cities to protest against the President. These are massive demonstrations, where the number of participants has exceeded that of the participants in the demonstrations against impeachment. Sectors of the extreme right, openly fascist, participate in this movement for impeachment.

A survey published after the largest of the pro-impeachment events revealed that the majority of participants belonged to a layer of the middle class which is dissatisfied with certain actions of the federal government, which has lost purchasing power with the crisis. However, even if there are working class people involved, who are well intentioned and have only revolted against the government’s adjustment policies, there is not the slightest doubt that these actions have been carried out under the leadership of the right. One of their forms of protests is to use the green and yellow colours (in reference to the defence of the “homeland” against Communism) and to take exception to the colour red, even going so far as to attack persons wearing this colour.

It must be remembered that the support for Dilma began to drop with the application of the adjustment plan against the majority of the population, and not with the revelations about corruption. The demonstrations that took place in Brazil in 2013, remembered as the “days of June” already showed dissatisfaction against the economic measures taken from the arrival of the international crisis in Brazil. In addition to these mass demonstrations, strikes in the civil service and in the universities have been part of the development of the political crisis which has led to the current scenario. If the PT and the government have had difficulties in mobilizing against the impeachment, there are

reasons for this: loss of support in the middle class because of corruption and austerity policies, the successive scandals involving the national leadership of the party, the transformation of the PT into an electoral machine, among others. Abandoning the historical slogans of the left and of the PT has had the result that the working class is disarmed in the current ideological battles against the dominant classes.

Alternatives and challenges: “The way out is to the left”

For the socialist left, there is no doubt: this crisis is not ours, and that is why we must not fail in our task of denunciation of the reasons which have led to it and which penalize the poorest. The PSOL, as its leaders and spokespersons have stressed, is against the tax adjustment and the restriction of the rights of workers, against the development of subcontracting and the new reform of unemployment insurance, against the developmentalist project and the criminalization of struggles, among other measures initiated by or supported by the government. It is certain that a new stage of resistance and change is coming: Dilma is still president until the Senate confirms the opening of the impeachment process (which it certainly will). But it is obvious that already she no longer governs.

This will not however be the end of the process: the political and economic crises will sharpen. The probable Temer government will face strong resistance, and will resort to increased repression, making use of the laws voted through under the Dilma government. Given the illegitimacy which hangs over the Congress and Temer, it should be the people, consulted by mechanisms like plebiscites, referendums or general elections, who decide who will lead the destiny of the country. However, the chances of turning the situation round at the institutional level are slim; we must combine efforts to do so with the street occupations, struggles and campaigns already underway. Any process of struggle and resistance will go through the movements which have been at the political forefront in this period of our history.

A key question, naturally, is that of unification of the left, which is currently difficult. The sectors which have been in the left opposition to the PT governments, today divided, should reunite. But what should be said to the sectors which still identify with the PT, when it is no longer the federal government? How will they act? It's necessary to articulate denunciation of the coup with a struggle for the rights of the people, for the realisation of the real reforms Brazilian people are struggling for. These are agrarian, urban, fiscal and political reforms, as well as historical demands which have not been met, like the demarcation of indigenous lands and quilombolas [1], and a radical reorientation of environmental and climate policy for example. Resistance is fundamental, including resisting the criminalisation of these movements and popular struggles. What the conjuncture demands of us is a broad vision to construct, simultaneously, the unity of the left and popular forces, and a platform of struggle which takes these challenges into account.

22 April 2016)

[1] Since this date the saga has continued, the Senate vote on 11 May will decide if the impeachment goes ahead. See [Reuters](#).

[2] From 1994 the PT accepted financing from private companies

[3] This process, begun in the 1990s, has sharpened since 2002

[4] More recently, with the “Operação Lava Jato” (Operation Karcher) investigations by the Federal Police, the enormous extent of corruption

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inside the main Brazilian publicly owned company, Petrobrás, from the beginning of Lula's government and before, has been revealed. This corruption has certainly been one of the main sources of financing of electoral campaigns and the distribution of money to parliamentarians and the leaders of their parties

[5] A programme of transfer of benefits which helped d more than 12 million of the poorest households

[6] An example: the powerful media network Record is owned by Edir Macedo, the billionaire bishop of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God who is currently being investigated in Brazil and the USA for tax fraud

[7] Mining and agricultural raw materials, as well as manufactured products of low added value

[8] The Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America (IIRSA) is intended to integrate all the existing and projected means of communication (roads, airports, waterways, railways, fibre optic links and so on) in South Americas so as to promote trade. The members of IIRSA are Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile, Venezuela, Guyana and Surinam

[9] Although the financing of her electoral campaign in 2014 is the subject of another parallel investigation, this would lead to the annulment of her election and that of Temer, and the calling of new elections

[10] “Painted faces” - the term used for protesters favourable to the impeachment of Collor

[11] Lands occupied by descendants of escaped slaves who created communities in then uninhabited areas in the interior of the country