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# Brazil's Neoconservative Offensive

How right-wing forces coopted and redirected popular discontent in Brazil to oust democratically elected president Dilma Rousseff

In mid-2013, increased bus fares in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro sparked street demonstrations that included a diverse group of participants and brought a broad range of demands to the political table. Those demonstrations quickly spread throughout the nation's urban centers, mobilizing millions of people over the course of several months. Presidential elections, held in October 2014, brought an apparent return to political stability in the country when, for the sixth consecutive time, electoral polarization between the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) and the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (*Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira*, PSDB) was reestablished. Since then, however, the re-emergence of street protests, both in favor of and opposed to the impeachment of reelected president Dilma Rousseff, have demonstrated that, since 2013, national politics in Brazil has been profoundly transformed. An analysis that begins in 2013, therefore, remains fundamental to understanding the current conjuncture.

Many have compared the movements of 2013 in Brazil to the protests featuring strong youth participation that have taken place along the European periphery and in the Arab world, including in Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, and Spain over the last decade. However, in most of those examples, protest was triggered by crises of authoritarian political systems or by the devastating social impact of economic crisis coupled with structural adjustment policies. In Brazil, to the contrary, the wave of dissatisfaction that took shape around 2013 emerged in a country experiencing arguably the most democratic period in its history, as well as modest reductions in social inequalities.

Given this fact, Brazil's protests are better understood in the context of Brazilian history itself. Going back to the late nineteenth century, problems with public transportation have frequently served as the catalyst for

urban discontent. In 1879, for example, a fare hike on Rio's trams famously sparked major unrest, while public transportation delays, accidents, and the precarious conditions of urban trams, trains, ferries, and buses continued to generate social conflict at various moments in the twentieth century. The destruction of buses by groups of infuriated riders was commonplace until 1985, the year the government first required companies to pay for their employees' transportation fares. The initial protagonists of the 2013 revolt—laborers in the country's informal sector and working-class university students—whose numbers dramatically increased during the PT presidencies of Dilma Rousseff and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva—were excluded from this defined benefit. As the multitudes increased, new social and economic issues were put on the table. The low quality of public services, for instance, visibly contrasted with the amount of state funding that went to international sporting events, particularly the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, both of which Brazil was selected to host.

After just a few weeks of protest, however, the fare hike demonstrations entered a new phase. Notably, a growing number of protests involved individuals from the country's traditional middle classes, many of whom sought to channel their anger with what they perceived as an erosion of their standard of living at the hands of the PT into the larger movement that had erupted. Some were disturbed by the loss of an abundant (and low-wage) source of labor caused by the expansion of work and educational opportunities, as well as the extension of formal labor rights to domestic workers. Many individuals from the country's middling sectors were also indignant about affirmative action policies, which questioned their privileged status and meritocratic ideology. Still others resented the growing presence of poor Brazilians and those of African descent in public spaces,

such as airports and shopping malls, which had long been dominated by Brazil's white upper crust. Although they were neither concerned with the public transportation problems that had provoked the first protests nor sympathetic to the young leftists who led them, these "new protesters" saw the events as an opportunity to criticize—and perhaps even topple—a government that they considered a threat to their social status.

Thus, although the main voices in the streets in early June belonged to the left-wing opposition, when hundreds of thousands joined demonstrators in late 2013, a small but growing number began to advocate for policies that had nothing to do with public transportation matters. Some argued, for example, that the Brazilian military should reassume power and attacked the work of the National Truth Commission. Given the fact that Dilma Rousseff had been a victim of torture herself, many on the Brazilian right accused the then president of using the Truth Commission as a way of seeking personal revenge.

The corporate media, which initially presented the 2013 protests as an example of unjustifiable political turbulence led by a group of marginal radicals, also changed its approach to covering the protests when they began to attract a more diverse set of participants. Starting in late 2013, the media promoted the "fight against corruption" as the unifying mantra that held together protesters hailing from a variety of ideological positions. However, the formulation of a unifying "anti-corruption" narrative was largely instrumental, as it appropriated the real concerns of the 2013 movements over things like bribes paid out to congressional members during Lula's presidency and kickbacks to construction companies for major infrastructure projects in order to legitimize the Right's desire to oust the PT from power. In short, the "anti-PT" sentiment that eventually emerged out of the 2013 protests set the stage for the formation of a new ideological and activist Right in Brazil.

The reverberations of 2013 were not immediately felt in the electoral arena. On the one hand, low unemployment rates and the expansion of social programs targeted to fight extreme poverty and expand access to social services helped President Dilma Rousseff to partially recover her popularity as 2014 began. The

unexpected August 2014 death of Eduardo Campos, a longtime ally of the PT who had decided to mount a reformist challenge to Dilma in the 2014 presidential election, led unexpectedly to former PT Minister of the Environment, Marina Silva, entering the presidential race. Silva had been trying to create a new party but had not met the legal requirements to do so on time. She thus agreed to run as Campos's vice president before his sudden death in a plane crash. Depicting herself as an "alternative candidate," opposed to the electoral hegemony of the PT and PSDB, Silva sought to capture some of the diffuse dissatisfaction that had been seen on the streets in 2013. However, after rising from 21 percent to 34 percent in pre-election polls, Silva's cam-

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paign quickly faded under attacks by the PT and PSDB. Silva eventually finished in third place.

The first round of voting in 2014, in which representatives to Brazil's Chamber of Deputies and one third of federal senators were elected, was the first electoral sign of the country's neoconservative turn. Brazil's Right showed surprising strength in the southern parts of Brazil, where some of the most aggressive spokesmen of a new, more extreme conservative movement got the largest share of votes—even in states traditionally seen as strongholds of the Left. The most notorious example was former military man Jair Bolsonaro, who received almost half a million votes in Rio de Janeiro during his bid for a seat in Brazil's Chamber of Deputies, despite his extreme views on nearly every political issue—from same-sex marriage to abortion to gun rights and the death penalty. Bolsonaro's political ideology is best encapsulated by the fact that, while voting in favor of opening an impeachment process against President Rousseff in 2016, he paid homage to Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, a chief torturer responsible for at least 45 deaths during the military dictatorship.

At the same time, abstention in traditional PT strongholds indicated frustration and disenchantment among the PT's base. In the city of São Paulo, for

example, first-round votes for Rousseff fell by 900,000 votes when compared to her 2010 vote totals. At the same time the number of votes for candidates other than Rousseff increased by just 500,000 total votes, meaning that around 46 percent of the PT’s “lost votes” were ones that 2010 PT voters had simply nullified in 2014. As a result, congressional seats apportioned to the political Left—the PT and the Brazilian Communist Party (*Partido do Socialismo*, PCdoB)—declined from 103 seats to just 85. Meanwhile, the Socialism and Liberty Party (*Partido Socialismo e Liberdade*, PSOL),



Brazil's interim president, Michel Temer. ANDERSON REIDEL / CREATIVE COMMONS

the only left-wing opposition party with elected representatives, gained just two additional seats in the 2014 election, suggesting that few former PT voters had simply defected to other left-wing parties.

The second round of voting in 2014 was marked by an unprecedented degree of ideological polarization in the streets and on social media. Defense of the gains won under the two-term presidency of Lula da Silva—such as expanded access to higher education, income redistribution, and support for Afro-Brazilian, women’s and LGBT rights, among others—helped Dilma Rousseff narrowly defeat PSDB candidate Aécio Neves. However, Dilma’s reelection proved to be only the first battle of a much longer war. On the one hand, her government was quickly besieged by corruption investigations into

Petrobras, the state oil company—what soon became known as the “Operation Car Wash” (*Lava Jato*) scandal.

On the other hand, the first measures announced by the Rousseff government at the beginning of her second term created a strong sense of betrayal among the social base that had mobilized to ensure the PT’s reelection. Rousseff appointed neoliberal economist Joaquim Levy and agribusiness leader Kátia Abreu as ministers in her new cabinet and announced a fiscal adjustment plan that included significant cuts to social security benefits. Rousseff’s chief economic advisers justified such

moves by arguing that the time for countercyclical intervention had passed, but many on the Brazilian left saw the new policies as commensurate with adopting an economic program that had been defeated at the ballot box.

With the Left’s base demobilized, Brazil’s media, together with militant coup-mongers on the Brazilian right, carried out a relentless counteroffensive. The widespread economic optimism, based on government estimates that the extraction of Brazil’s “pre-salt” oil layer would be the driving force behind a new period of national development, dissolved quickly as the global price of oil fell. With the position of Brazil’s Left weakened in the country’s Chamber of Deputies, an ambitious and unscrupulous neoconservative politician named Eduardo Cunha won the presidency of Brazil’s lower house in February 2015. Under Cunha’s watch, the Brazilian Right put forward an agenda that included the “tough-on-crime” measure of reducing the age for criminal responsibility from 18 years old to 16 years old, repealing the gun-control law of 2003, legalizing the outsourcing of manual labor for what in Brazil are known as *atividades-fim* (the “core activities” of a given firm or business), and attacking policies, such as affirmative action, that aimed to promote justice and equality—no matter one’s sexual orientation or race.

Drawing from the lessons of 2013, and united around the goal of ending PT rule, the Right came to mobilize its own masses starting around March 2015, something that had not occurred since the early 1960s.

Then, in April 2016, Brazil's Chamber of Deputies served as the stage for an embarrassing spectacle, in which hundreds of anti-PT representatives gave bizarre political performances as they declared their support for opening impeachment proceedings against Rousseff. As many commentators have since noted, nearly all of those who voted in favor of impeachment failed to even to mention the alleged legal justifications for removing Brazil's elected head of state. As a result, important voices, both inside and outside Brazil, denounced the proceedings as "parliamentary coup." At the 2016 Latin American Studies Association conference in New York City, for example, Luiz Carlos Bresser-Pereira, a founder of the PSDB and an ex-minister under Fernando Henrique Cardoso, argued that Dilma's ouster was generated by sectors of Brazilian society that control the country's wealth and who seek to end the recent cycle of social development and redistribution brought about in Brazil during four PT presidential administrations. Brazil's interim president, Michel Temer, and his cabinet of all white men, many of whom have been accused of corruption, became the physical expression of major political and social retreat in Brazil.

The mass mobilizations of recent years—stretching from the left to the right—have clearly signaled the end of an historic cycle in Brazil. At the end of the military dictatorship in 1984, social movements associated with the country's democratic resistance established new conceptions of citizenship and were guided by a commitment to universal social rights and the active participation of society in public policymaking. The threat to this conception of citizenship, which began with the neoliberal restructuring of the 1990s, helped form a new generation of political actors who soon assumed important roles in rebuilding institutional politics in Latin America's largest country. Allied with bourgeois sectors, the PT first seized the presidency in 2002 and reopened the debate over how to achieve independent forms of national development. Twelve years later, a commitment to progressive social policies, income redistribution, affirmative action, an independent foreign policy, and the recovery of the state's regulatory capacity transformed Brazil in significant ways. However, a willingness to accommodate elements of a corrupt political system too often separated the new political leadership that emerged during

the presidency of Lula da Silva from its formative experience in social struggles. Simultaneously, a failure to break with neoliberal economic policies prevented deeper and more enduring social change.

The ongoing dispute over hegemony in Brazil raises great challenges for the Left. The first challenge is a programmatic one, and it involves the formulation of a new national project for democratic, equitable, and sustainable development that overcomes both the remnants of neoliberalism and the authoritarian and environmentally destructive features of traditional developmentalism. The second challenge is to recreate the capacity of progressive mass mobilization in order to provide the political support necessary to carry out such a program—and expand the boundaries of the "possible" beyond the strict limits currently imposed by institutional politics. Otherwise, it will be impossible to break down the structural barriers that prevent Brazil from consolidating its democratic experience and overcome the various forms of inequality that persist in the country. ■

*Translation by Emma Young*

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