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> Lula Arrested: How Successful a Coup?

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> On April 7, 2018 in Brazil Luiz Inacio “Lula” da Silva was arrested and  
> taken to prison in Curitiba to begin a twelve-year sentence. He was  
> Brazil’s president from January 2003 to January 2011. He was so  
> popular that when he left office in 2011, he had a 90% approval rate.

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> Soon afterwards, he was charged with corruption while in office. He  
> denied the charge. He was however convicted of the charge, a  
> conviction that was sustained by an Appeals Court. He is still appealing  
> his conviction to the Supreme Court.

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> However, under one interpretation of Brazilian law, he can be  
> imprisoned once an Appeals Court has affirmed his sentence without >  
> waiting for the judgment of the Supreme Court.  
> He asked nonetheless for a habeas corpus,  
> which would have kept him out of prison until he had exhausted all  
> possible appeals. The demand was rejected by a vote of 6-5.  
> Thereupon, the judge who charged him initially and who was particularly  
> hostile to Lula, Sergio Moro, moved swiftly to put Lula behind bars.

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> What was the reason for this harsh treatment, which was not applied to  
> many others facing much more serious charges? To understand that,  
> we must review recent Brazilian history and Lula’s role.

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> Lula was a trade-union leader who founded a workers’ party, the Partido  
> dos Trabalhadores (PT). It was the party of the underclass and one that  
> stood for fundamental change both in Brazil and in Latin America as a  
> whole.

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> Lula ran for president in several successive elections. He was probably  
> cheated out of his election at least once. He finally won in October  
> 2002.

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> The Brazilian electoral system leads to a profusion of parties, none of  
> which has ever been able to obtain a plurality of more than twenty-odd  
> percent of seats in the legislature, much less a majority. In order to  
> govern therefore, the party with a plurality has to make deals with  
> other parties of quite different ideological leanings.

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> Despite this limitation, Lula was able to form a government and obtain

> legislative support for significant transfers of resources to Brazil's  
> poorest third of the population, which explains his popularity. He was  
> also able to lead Latin American states to forge new interstate  
> structures that did not include the United States and Canada.  
>  
> The internal redistributions and the geopolitical realignments  
> displeased greatly both the United States and Brazil's right-wing  
> forces. One thing that made it difficult for them to counter Lula was  
> the fact that the state of the world-economy in the first decade of the  
> twenty-first century was very favorable to the so-called newly-emerging  
> economies, also known as the BRICS (B for Brazil).  
>  
> However, the winds of the world-economy turned, and suddenly  
> revenue for the Brazilian state (and of course many other states)  
> became scarcer.  
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> The right found a renewed opening in the financial squeeze that  
> ensued. They blamed economic difficulties on corruption and fostered a  
> judicial drive called lava jato (car wash), which evoked the issue of  
> laundering money, something that was indeed widespread.  
>  
> In 2011, Lula was succeeded as president by Dilma Rousseff, a more  
> conservative leader in the PTB. When some PTB cabinet members  
> were convicted of corruption, the right launched a move to impeach  
> Dilma. She was not charged with corruption herself but charged with  
> inadequate supervision of her subordinates in leadership positions.  
>  
> This was a thin excuse. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos put it, the one  
> impeccably honest politician in Brazil was being successfully impeached  
> for corruption by votes of all the most corrupt officials in the land.  
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> The reason the right engaged in this farce was that the Vice-President  
> who would succeed Dilma after her impeachment was Michel Temer,  
> who had been placed on Dilma's ticket as part of an electoral coalition.  
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> Temer assumed office immediately and rejected the idea of early  
> elections which he would almost surely have lost. One of the first  
> things he did instead was to arrange that the substantial charges  
> against him for corruption be dropped.  
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> The motive for impeaching Dilma seems clear. It was to prevent Lula  
> from running in the next election for president. The consensus view was  
> that Lula would win again. The only way to stop him was to charge him  
> with corruption. And the charge could only be sustained if Dilma was  
> impeached. The strength of the PT was closely linked to Lula's

> charisma.

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> Any other candidate would probably be unable to command support  
> anywhere near the level that Lula could obtain.

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> Once Lula was threatened with immediate imprisonment, Brazil's two  
> major popular forces expressed their strong opposition to what they  
> asserted was a political coup d'état. One was the Central Única dos  
> Trabalhadores (CUT), which Lula had once led, and the Movimento dos  
> Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), Brazil's largest rural  
> organization.

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> The leader of the MST, João Pedro Stedile, explained the reasons for  
> their support. The MST had had many disagreements with Lula and had  
> been disappointed with his refusal to break with many neoliberal  
> policies. But those who were trying to prevent Lula from running were  
> truly antagonistic to all the positive things Lula had achieved and would  
> institute severe retrogressive measures.

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> The MST and CUT organized significant mobilizations against his  
> imprisonment. But, faced with the threat of the armed forces to  
> intervene (and possibly restore a military regime again), Lula decided  
> to present himself for arrest. He has now been imprisoned.

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> The question today is whether this right-wing coup can succeed. This no  
> longer depends on Lula personally. History may absolve him but the  
> current struggle in Brazil and in Latin America as a whole depends on  
> political organization at the base.

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> The Temer government will pursue neoliberal policies fiercely. And  
> Temer will no doubt present himself as a candidate for election. Temer  
> knows no shame nor any limits. He risks going too far too fast.

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> One of the principal characteristics of the structural crisis of the  
> modern world-system in which we find ourselves is the high volatility of  
> the world-economy. Should it run even further downward than it is at  
> present, there may well be an upsurge of popular sentiment against the  
> regime. If it began to include large parts of the professional strata,  
> an alliance with the underclasses is quite possible.

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> Even then it will not be easy to change the political realities of  
> Brazil. The army stands ready probably to prevent a left government  
> from coming to power. Nonetheless one should not despair. The army  
> was defeated once before and evicted from power. It could be again.

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- > In short, the outlook for Brazil and for Latin America as a whole is
- > highly uncertain. Brazil, given its size and its history, is a key zone
- > of the middle-run struggle for a progressive outcome of the struggle
- > between the global left and the global right for resolving the
- > structural crisis in their favor.
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- > Brazil merits our collective close attention and our active solidary
- > participation.