

Brazil Is Engulfed by Ruling Class Corruption — and a Dangerous Subversion of Democracy

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Mar. 19 2016, 12:31 a.m.

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

THE MULTIPLE, REMARKABLE crises consuming Brazil are now garnering [substantial Western media attention](#). That's understandable given that Brazil is the world's fifth most populous country and eighth-largest economy; its second-largest city, Rio de Janeiro, is the host of this year's Summer Olympics. But much of this [Western media coverage](#) mimics the propaganda coming from Brazil's homogenized, oligarch-owned, anti-democracy media outlets and, as such, is misleading, inaccurate, and incomplete, particularly when coming from those with little familiarity with the country (there are numerous Brazil-based [Western reporters](#) doing [outstanding work](#)).

It is difficult to overstate the severity of Brazil's multi-level distress. This short paragraph yesterday from the *New York Times*'s Brazil bureau chief, Simon Romero, [conveys](#) how dire it is:

[Brazil](#) is suffering its [worst economic crisis in decades](#). An enormous [graft scheme](#) has hobbled the national oil company. The [Zika epidemic](#) is causing despair [across the northeast](#). And just before the world heads to Brazil for the [Summer Olympics](#), the government is fighting for survival, with almost every corner of the political system under the cloud of scandal.

Brazil's extraordinary political upheaval shares some similarities with the Trump-led political chaos in the U.S.: a sui generis, out-of-control circus unleashing instability and some rather dark forces, with a positive ending almost impossible to imagine. The once-remote prospect of President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment now seems likely.

But one significant difference with the U.S. is that Brazil's turmoil is not confined to one politician. The opposite is true, as Romero notes: "almost every corner of the political system [is] under the cloud of scandal." That includes not only Rousseff's moderately left-wing Workers Party, or PT — which is rife with serious corruption — but also the vast majority of the centrist and right-wing political and economic factions working to destroy PT, which are drowning in at least an equal amount of criminality. In other words, PT is indeed deeply corrupt and awash in criminal scandal, but so is virtually every political faction working to undermine it and vying to seize that party's democratically obtained power.

In reporting on Brazil, Western media outlets have most prominently focused on the increasingly

large street protests demanding the impeachment of Rousseff. They have typically depicted those protests in idealized, cartoon terms of adoration: as an inspiring, mass populist uprising against a corrupt regime. Last night, NBC News's Chuck Todd re-tweeted the Eurasia Group's Ian Bremmer [describing](#) anti-Dilma protests as "The People vs. the President" — a manufactured theme consistent with what is being peddled by Brazil's anti-government media outlets such as Globo:

Chuck Todd Retweeted
ian bremmer @ianbremmer · 15h
The People vs the President. #Brazil



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That narrative is, at best, a radical oversimplification of what is happening and, more often, crass propaganda designed to undermine a left-wing party long [disliked](#) by U.S. [foreign policy elites](#). That depiction completely ignores the historical context of Brazil's politics and, more importantly, several critical questions: Who is behind these protests, how representative are the protesters of the Brazilian population, and what is their actual agenda?

THE CURRENT VERSION of Brazilian democracy is very young. In 1964, the country's democratically elected left-wing government was overthrown by a military coup. Both publicly and before Congress, U.S. officials vehemently denied any role, but — needless to say — [documents and recordings](#) subsequently [emerged](#) proving the U.S. directly supported and helped plot critical aspects of that coup.

The 21-year, right-wing, pro-U.S. military dictatorship that ensued was brutal and tyrannical, specializing in torture techniques used against dissidents that were taught to the dictatorship by the U.S. and U.K. A comprehensive 2014 Truth Commission report [documented](#) that both countries "trained Brazilian interrogators in torture techniques." Among their victims was Rouseff, who was an anti-regime, left-wing guerilla imprisoned and tortured by the military dictators in the 1970s.

The coup itself and the dictatorship that followed were supported by Brazil's oligarchs and [their large media outlets](#), led by Globo, which — notably — depicted the 1964 coup as a noble defeat of a corrupt left-wing government (sound familiar?). The 1964 coup and dictatorship were also supported by the nation's extravagantly rich (and overwhelmingly white) upper class and its small middle class. As democracy opponents often do, Brazil's wealthy factions regarded dictatorship as protection against the impoverished masses comprised largely of non-whites. As *The Guardian* [put it](#) upon release of the Truth Commission report: "As was the case elsewhere in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, the elite and middle class aligned themselves with the military to stave off what they saw as a communist threat."



Angela Milanese
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He's done again! [#Brazil](#) Globo TV reporter was trolled live on air
"Globo coup monger, wants to inflame the country"

Malu



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Florianópolis, Brazil

These severe class and [race divisions](#) in Brazil remain the dominant dynamic. As the BBC [put it](#) in 2014 based on [multiple studies](#): "Brazil has one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world." The *Americas Quarterly* editor-in-chief, Brian Winter, reporting on the protests, [wrote this week](#): "The gap between rich and poor remains the central fact of Brazilian life — and these protests are no different." If you

want to understand anything about the current political crisis in Brazil, it's crucial to understand what Winter means by that.

DILMA'S PARTY, PT, was formed in 1980 as a classic Latin American left-wing socialist party. To improve its national appeal, it moderated its socialist dogma and gradually became a party more akin to Europe's social democrats. There are now [popular parties to its left](#); indeed, Dilma, voluntarily or otherwise, has [advocated austerity measures](#) to cure economic ills and [assuage foreign markets](#), and just this week enacted a [draconian "anti-terrorism" law](#). Still, PT resides on the center-left wing of Brazil's spectrum and its supporters are overwhelmingly Brazil's poor and racial minorities. In power, PT has ushered in a [series of economic and social reforms](#) that have provided substantial government benefits and opportunities, which have lifted millions of Brazilians out of poverty.

PT has held the presidency for 14 years: since 2002. Its popularity has been the byproduct of Dilma's wildly charismatic predecessor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (universally referred to as Lula). Lula's ascendancy was a potent symbol of the empowerment of Brazil's poor under democracy: a laborer and union leader from a very poor family who dropped out of school in the second grade, did not read until the age of 10, and was imprisoned by the dictatorship for union activities. He has long been mocked by Brazilian elites in starkly classist tones for his working-class accent and manner of speaking.



Lula and Dilma campaign together in the 2010 election. Photo: Eraldo Peres/AP

After three unsuccessful runs for the presidency, Lula proved to be an unstoppable political force. Elected in 2002 and re-elected in 2006, he left office with [such high approval ratings](#) that he was able to ensure the election of his previously unknown hand-picked successor, Dilma, who was then re-elected in 2014. It has long been assumed that Lula — who [vocally opposes](#) austerity measures — intends to run again for president in 2018 after completion of Dilma's second term, and anti-PT forces are petrified that he'd again beat them at the ballot box.

Though the nation's oligarchical class has successfully used the center-right PSDB as a counterweight, it has been largely impotent in defeating PT in four consecutive presidential elections. Voting is compulsory, and the nation's poor citizens have ensured PT's victories.

Corruption among Brazil's political class — including the top levels of the PT — is real and substantial. But Brazil's plutocrats, their media, and the upper and middle classes are glaringly exploiting this corruption scandal to achieve what they have failed for years to accomplish democratically: the removal of PT from power.

Contrary to Chuck Todd's and Ian Bremmer's romanticized, misinformed (at best) depiction of these protests as being carried out by "The People," they are, in fact, incited by the country's intensely concentrated, homogenized, and powerful corporate media outlets, and are composed (not exclusively but overwhelmingly) of the nation's wealthier, white citizens who have long harbored animosity toward PT and anything that smacks of anti-poverty programs.

Brazil's corporate media outlets are acting as de facto protest organizers and PR arms of opposition parties. The Twitter feeds of some of Globo's most influential (and very rich) [on-air reporters](#) contain non-stop anti-PT agitation. When a recording of a telephone conversation between Dilma and Lula was leaked this week, Globo's highly influential nightly news program, *Jornal Nacional*, had its anchors flamboyantly re-enact the dialogue in such a [melodramatic and provocatively gossipy fashion](#) that it literally resembled a soap opera far more than a news report,

[prompting widespread ridicule](#). For months, Brazil's top four newsmagazines have devoted cover after cover to inflammatory attacks on Dilma and Lula, usually featuring ominous photos of one or the other and always with a strikingly unified narrative.

To provide some perspective for how central the large corporate media has been in inciting these protests: Recall the key role Fox News played in [promoting and encouraging attendance at the early Tea Party protests](#). Now imagine what those protests would have been if it had not been just Fox, but also ABC, NBC, CBS, *Time* magazine, the *New York Times*, and the *Huffington Post* also supporting and inciting the Tea Party rallies. *That* is what has been happening in Brazil: The largest outlets are owned and controlled by a tiny number of plutocratic families, virtually all of whom are vehement, class-based opponents of PT and whose media outlets have unified to fuel these protests.

In sum, the business interests owned and represented by those media outlets are almost uniformly pro-impeachment and were linked to the military dictatorship. As Stephanie Nolen, the Rio-based reporter for Canada's *Globe and Mail*, [noted](#): "It is clear that most of the country's institutions are lined up against the president."

Put simply, this is a campaign to subvert Brazil's democratic outcomes by monied factions that have long hated the results of democratic elections, deceitfully marching under an anti-corruption banner: quite similar to the 1964 coup. Indeed, much of the Brazilian right longs for restoration of the military dictatorship, and factions at these "anti-corruption" protests have been [openly calling for the end of democracy](#).

None of this is a defense of PT. Both because of genuine widespread corruption in that party and national economic woes, Dilma and PT are [intensely unpopular](#) among all classes and groups, even including the party's working-class base. But the street protests — as undeniably large and energized as they have been — are driven by those who are traditionally hostile to PT. The number of people participating in these protests — while in the millions — is dwarfed by the number (54 million) who voted to re-elect Dilma less than two years ago. In a democracy, governments are chosen by voting, not by displays of street opposition — particularly where, as in Brazil, the protests are drawn from a relatively narrow societal segment.

As Winter reported: "Last Sunday, when more than 1 million people took to the streets, [polls indicated](#) that once again the crowd was significantly richer, whiter, and more educated than Brazilians at large." Nolen similarly reported: "The half-dozen large anti-corruption demonstrations in the past year have been dominated by white and upper-middle-class protesters, who tend to be supporters of the opposition Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), and to have little love for Ms. Rousseff's left-leaning Workers' Party."

Last weekend, when massive anti-Dilma protests emerged in most Brazilian cities, a photograph of one of the families participating went viral, a symbol of what these protests actually are. It showed a rich, white couple decked out in anti-Dilma symbols and walking with their pure-breed dog, trailed by their black "weekend nanny" — wearing the all-white uniform many rich Brazilians require their domestic servants to wear — pushing a stroller with their two children.

As Nolen [noted](#), the photo became the emblem for the true, highly ideological essence of these protests: "Brazilians, who are deft and fast with memes, reposted the picture with a thousand snarky captions, such as 'Speed it up, there, Maria [the generic 'maid name'], we have to get out to protest against this government that made us pay you minimum wage.'"

TO BELIEVE THAT the influential figures agitating for Dilma's impeachment are motivated by an authentic anti-corruption crusade requires extreme naïveté or willful ignorance. To begin with, the factions that would be empowered by Dilma's impeachment are at least as implicated by corruption scandals as she is: in most cases, more so.



Alex Cuadros

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Making Judge Moro into an idol contradicts a virtue he's supposed to represent: the impersonality of institutions.

5:05 AM - 5 Mar 2016



364



286

Five of the members of the impeachment commission are themselves being criminally investigated as part of the corruption scandal. That includes Paulo Maluf, who faces an Interpol warrant for his arrest and has not been able to leave the country for years; he has been sentenced in France to three years in prison for money laundering. Of the 65 members of the House impeachment committee, 36 currently face pending legal proceedings.

In the lower house of Congress, the leader of the impeachment movement, the evangelical extremist Eduardo Cunha, was found to have

[maintained](#) multiple secret Swiss bank accounts, where he stored millions of dollars that prosecutors believe were received as bribes. He is the target of multiple active criminal investigations.

Meanwhile, Senator Aécio Neves, the leader of the Brazilian opposition who Dilma narrowly defeated in the 2014 election, has himself [been implicated at least five separate times](#) in the corruption scandal. One of the prosecutors' newest star witnesses just [accused him](#) of accepting bribes. That witness [also implicated](#) the country's vice president, Michel Temer, of the opposition party PMDB, who would replace Dilma if she were impeached.

Then there's the recent behavior of the chief judge who has been overseeing the corruption investigation and has become [a folk hero](#) for his commendably aggressive investigations of some of the country's richest and most powerful figures.

That judge, Sergio Moro, this week effectively leaked to the media a tape-recorded, extremely vague conversation between Dilma and Lula, which Globo and other anti-PT forces immediately depicted as incriminating. Moro disclosed the recording of the conversation within hours of its taking place.

But the recorded conversation was released by Judge Moro with no due process and, worse, with clearly political, not judicial, purposes: Namely, he was furious that his investigation of Lula would be terminated by his appointment to Dilma's cabinet (high officials can be investigated only by the Supreme Court). His leak sought to embarrass Dilma and Lula and trigger street protests, and thus provoked criticisms, even [among his previous fans](#), that he was now [abusing his power](#) by becoming a political actor. Worse, the recording itself seems to have [been illegally obtained](#) since it was made [after the expiration](#) of Judge Moro's warrant. The head of Rio de Janeiro's bar association, Felipe Santa Cruz, [called](#) Moro's actions a "nauseating embarrassment." All of this raises the very clear danger that the criminal investigation and impeachment process are not a legal exercise to punish criminal leaders, but rather an anti-democratic political weapon wielded by political opponents to remove a democratically elected president. That danger was even more starkly highlighted yesterday when it was [revealed](#) that a judge who issued an order blocking Lula's cabinet appointment by Dilma had days earlier [posted to his Facebook page](#) numerous selfies of him marching in the anti-government protest over the weekend. As Winter wrote, "Convincing the public that the Brazilian judiciary is 'at war' with the Workers' Party will be an easier task than it was two weeks ago."

There is no question that PT is rife with corruption. There are serious questions surrounding Lula that deserve an impartial and fair investigation. And impeachment is a legitimate process in a democracy provided that the targeted official is actually guilty of serious crimes and the law is scrupulously followed in how the impeachment is effectuated.

But the picture currently emerging in Brazil surrounding impeachment and these street protests is far more complicated, and far more ethically ambiguous, than has frequently been depicted. The effort to remove Dilma and her party from power now resembles a nakedly anti-democratic power struggle more than a legally sound process or genuine anti-corruption movement. Worse, it's being incited, engineered, and fueled by the very factions who are themselves knee-deep in corruption scandals, and who represent the interests of the richest and most powerful societal segments long angry at their inability to defeat PT democratically.

In other words, it all seems historically familiar, particular for Latin America, where democratically elected left-wing governments have been repeatedly removed by non-democratic, extra-legal means. In many ways, PT and Dilma are not sympathetic victims. Large segments of the population are genuinely angry at them for plainly legitimate reasons. But their sins do not justify the sins of their long-standing political enemies, and most certainly do not render subversion of Brazilian democracy something to cheer.

Additional reporting: Cecília Olliveira