

Rousseff: A victim of circumstances or responsible for her own demise?



Dilma Rousseff (Photocredit: [Rede Brasil Atual](#))

On 12 May 2016, the Brazilian Senate voted to impeach and suspend Dilma Rousseff, Brazil's first female president, 55 votes to 22. [Professor Francisco Panizza](#) discusses the reasons behind her suspension and upcoming trial, and asks whether Rousseff is responsible for her own downfall or is the victim of economic and political circumstances outside of her control.

President Rousseff has been temporarily suspended from the presidency of Brazil and, most likely, she will be thrown out of office for good when the Senate delivers its verdict on the impeachment against her within the next six months. So, the question arises, of whether she is the victim of circumstances beyond her control or has to bear significant responsibility for her own downfall. Economic and political factors can be listed among the former. On the economy, the end of the supercycle of commodities brought to an end years of relatively high economic growth that together with progressive social policies lifted millions of Brazilians out of poverty. On the politics, it could be argued that she is being the victim of a politico-judicial coup in which a politically-biased and highly autonomous judiciary conspired with the right-wing press and conservative members of parliament to get rid of her on, to say the least, flimsy criminal charges.

Political miscalculations and mistakes

Of course Rousseff bears no responsibility for the fall in commodity prices that made inevitable an economic slowdown that to a lesser or higher degree is affecting all countries in the region irrespectively of the colour of their governments. She also had no control over the judiciary or the press that, particularly the latter, is clearly biased against her and her government. Yet, there is no question that a mixture of political and economic mistakes and miscalculations has contributed to her very likely demise.

After campaigning in 2014 against the opposition's candidate alleged plans to cut public spending, once re-elected Rousseff appointed a finance minister whose ideas were closer to those of the opposition than to the economic policies of the ruling Workers' Party. Attempts by [Finance](#)

Minister Levy to cut fiscal spending and raise taxes were opposed by members of the Workers' Party in Congress and perceived by the citizens as a betrayal of Rousseff's electoral promises. Facing mounting opposition to austerity, she withdrew support from Levy's economic programme forcing his resignation. The new U-turn lost the government the confidence of the business sector and did little to regain congressional support for the government economic initiatives, effectively leaving Rousseff with no political or economic weapons to address the mounting economic crisis.

Moreover, congressional opposition to the government's economic policies was not so much a matter of principle but of Rousseff's political failure to manage the government's unwieldy multi-party alliance. Rousseff came to office with a reputation as a competent administrator. But with little experience or disposition to play the political games required to keep her congressional alliance together, her unpopularity made it even more difficult to maintain a parliamentary majority in a Congress considerably to the right of her government.

The perfect storm

The Petrobras and other corruption scandals of which she has not been accused of being a part of were the last components of the perfect storm that led to Rousseff ousting from office. It has been argued that an over-zealous judiciary disproportionately targeted members of the Workers' Party, included former president Lula da Silva. This may well have been the case but the leadership of the Workers' Party must assume responsibility for the party's involvement in the wave of corruption that is engulfing the entire political system. In opposition the Workers' Party defined itself as an "ethical party" to distinguish itself from the corrupt political establishment. However, the PT –led governments in office since 2003 failed to promote a political reform that would have addressed the root causes of corruption. Instead, they choose to use the same illegal methods of campaign financing as the right-wing parties and to buy votes in Congress, as evidenced by the so-called *mensalão* scandal of 2005.

Corruption was not particularly important politically when the economy was booming and some may argue that it was a price worth paying for implementing a progressive social agenda that benefitted millions of Brazilian poor. After all, former president Lula survived the *mensalão* to win the 2006 election and led office with record popular support. But the costs of the failure to reform a rotten political system and of adopting the same instruments of governance of the political establishment are being paid today.

A bitter irony

It is a bitter irony and a travesty of justice that Rousseff has been suspended from office by the vote of senators, a majority of whom are being investigated for corruption. But the whole impeachment process has been driven by political considerations rather than, as it should be, by legal ones. Rousseff should assume her share of political responsibility for the mismanagement of the economy and for her inability to keep the governmental coalition together. Above all, the Workers' Party should reflect hard on why it failed to live up to the promise to be an "ethical party" and its implications for the promise of change that brought Lula da Silva to office in 2002 and ended with the impeachment of Rousseff in 2016.



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