

# Brazil: democratic normalisation, but little enthusiasm

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According to the opinion polls, a majority of Brazilians seem inclined to think that the presidential change marks the beginning of a new phase for the country. [Espanol Português](#)

A demonstrator, holding a sign with a message that reads in Portuguese; "Temer out", takes part in a rally in support of Brazil's suspended President Dilma Rousseff in Sao Paulo. June 10, 2016. AP  
Photo/Andre Penner



After reaching its peak during the days preceding the decision of the Brazilian Senate to preliminarily push aside Dilma Rousseff on May 12, 2016, the "counter-coup" movement that had presented the president as a victim lost momentum. Today, it is maintained for convenience. The slogans "Temer out" and "I do not recognise the coup government" were used with the aim to damage and delegitimise the interim government

that took power while the Senate deliberates over the Dilma impeachment, but they didn't manage to inspire public debate or political life. The movement wasn't based on realistic analysis and trivialised the idea of the "coup", emptying it of meaning. Their slogans began to take on the sole purpose of acting as background music for some acts of protest and meetings to write up demands.

Gradually, Brazilian public opinion, the country's politicians and even the parties that comprised Dilma Rousseff's government - starting with the PT - were bowing to circumstance and to political reality, which are setting another course for and perspective towards the country's democratic governance and political institutionality.

After a juttering start, in which it showed little skill and formed a fragile and inexpressive ministerial cabinet, full of individuals suspected of corruption and accused of obstructing justice, the government of interim president Michel Temer managed to achieve a modicum of stability, especially in its relations with the political and partisan world. They consolidated an improvement in their position on July 17, with the election of the new president of the Chamber of Deputies. Chosen by a qualified majority, the centre-right deputy Rodrigo Maia (DEM-RJ) not only replaced the departed Eduardo Cunha (enveloped in numerous processes of corruption), but exposed crony parliamentarians (who make up an independent bloc together with defectors from major parties) to a new parliamentary dynamic, in which the parties that opposed the Dilma government (PSDB, DEM, PPS, PSB) stand out, together with the PMDB, Temer's party. Maia's victory, it should be said, was born of a coming together which had not been seen for a long time in Brazilian Congress, opening doors to the recovery of a more programmatic politics and the recovery of the deputies' image.

The House election also revealed the PT and other leftist parties' operational difficulties and political leadership errors, they were not only defeated but also took on a lesser role, opinionless and without a political project to serve as a guide.

Altogether, the interim government won a better and more consistent base of support.

The battle over the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff is not, of course, finished. It is expected that her definitive removal will not be submitted to vote on the Senate floor before the end of August. Although it is still within the realm of possibility that Dilma could be acquitted, the current political calculations grant her definitive removal practically as given. Public opinion seems to hold that, today, a presidential change will mark the beginning of a new phase for the country.

According to research conducted by the Datafolha Institute on the 14th and 15th June, 50% of Brazilians believe that it would be in the country's interest for Temer to continue in office until 2018, while only 32% hold that it would be a good idea for Dilma to return to Palacio del Planalto. Although Temer's time in office has not received enthusiastic reviews, after two months in office, his popular approval rating is much higher than Dilma before she was removed. Research also shows that Dilma's definitive removal is supported by 58% of Brazilians, while 35% oppose her departure. Regardless of their position on the matter, 71% believe that Dilma will be definitively removed from the presidency, while 22% believe that she won't.

Normality and routine seem, then, to return to Brasilia, with a new government pushing through many obstacles and difficulties.

It is a return to normality marked by a chill, with no room for expressions of euphoria or statements of support and admiration. Society seems numbed, waiting for acts that will help it reposition and eventually reach accords again with politics and politicians. Citizens look to the Planalto - the executive and legislative branches - with boredom, disappointment and disdain, as if it were a distant planet, whose threats bring a feeling of unease to everyday life. There is not, strictly speaking, reasons to celebrate: functional democracy, its rites and institutions, were respected, but the system does not show itself to be agile enough to respond to societal demands and expectations.

The interim government, however, joins its forces and gains momentum to execute its flight plan, though with much trepidation. It keeps the focus on the formation of a broad parliamentary base and the recovery of the economy, asserting the idea of bringing back "confidence", both among politicians and economic agents, without forgetting public opinion. It believes that, with this process, it will be able to obtain approval for Dilma's definitive removal, and from there, reorganise its support, its ministries and its policies.

If the plan will succeed or not remains to be seen. The government continues - and it doesn't seem as though this will change - with many sharp edges and ill-defined profiles: has not yet been "rounded out" and might never be harmonious. If it is able to go beyond the final test of finishing with Dilma, it is likely to continue to fluctuate as an irregular convex polygon, powered by an unstable base, inexpressive ministers, by the difficulties of coordinating a society without axis, the lack of competent leaders and articulators in Congress, by the pressures of political cronyism. Traditional political practice is under fire: delegitimised by society and fought by *Operation Lava-Jato* - the set of actions of the Public Ministry of Justice and the Federal Police who are dedicated to identifying and penalising acts of corruption, illicit enrichment and diversion of public funds to finance the party's performance. Ongoing investigations keep politicians in state of suspense, threatening the situation and the opposition, right, centre and left. This is an independent variable, which cannot be politically controlled.

The recovery of the economy itself - with the return of better indicators of employment, lower inflation and interest, the easing of the fiscal crisis and return to growth - is not liquid or certain, as it will always depend on what happens in the international arena. The interim government put together a trained and competent economic team, attuned to the market and knowledgeable of public accounts, but their reforms and adjustments designed to overcome the crisis must be discussed and approved at the political level, where the obstacles are not insignificant.

There is, beyond this, the overall situation of the country: its extreme social inequalities, its not entirely effective public systems and policies, particularly in the field of education, healthcare and living, its infrastructure and productivity deficits. All this reduces economic competitiveness, raises production costs and leaves the population without adequate social protections and without basic care services.

In the new government's favour, however, is the size of the domestic market and the strength of the Brazilian economy, the strategic importance of the country in the world and the population's willingness for sacrifice, which continues although the disarticulation and passivity of the majority has not been overcome. The political crisis itself may, paradoxically, contribute to the government taking action, to the extent that it may come to compel the government to grow through selective negotiations, favouring firstly one, then another of the more than 30 political parties, without being categorially disliked by the opposition, which shows itself today badly structured and in disorder.

These are, however, relative advantages. The state and society disjuncture will never favour democracy and good governance, especially if it continues over the long term. Both the head and the body of the nation must feedback into each other. If, in the current moment, there is a new political climate in Brazil, derived from the straightening out of those disruptive factors that came about as side effects of the last 13 years' PT governments, what emerges as the main challenge at the moment is knowing how the country will come to the forthcoming presidential elections, in late 2018.

Will there be, on the horizon, some virtuous movement to reform politicians' and their parties' practice and culture, while helping to reduce parliamentary fragmentation, cronyism, the high cost of election campaigns, citizens' passivity towards the realm of decision making? What effective innovations will the new government bring? Will it bring better government procedures, more efficient administrative structure, new habits and attitudes, that aid in guiding state conduct and improving it? Not in the neoliberal sense, that is, by cuts that bleed social programmes and policies, but by eliminating waste, sumptuous expenses, privileges and concessions to those who are already socially privileged? Will democracy again see a more substantive, higher quality energy, so that political activity is valued and the public debate includes different strands of opinion? None of these questions has a categorical answer today.

A small but important test will take place during the municipal elections that will be held in October this year. In these, the main parties will compete for voters and demonstrate, or not, their capacity for renewal and their understanding of how much Brazilian society has changed in its structures, in its moods and in the population's mode of being. Candidates will have to adapt to the new electoral rules, which restrict campaign financing and reduce radio and television advertising timeslots, which are guaranteed by law in Brazil. The population itself will demonstrate its willingness to support new proposals and critically examine the commitments and promises of the different candidates.

Because of its shortcomings, its characteristics and structural problems, the current Brazil is a society that cannot coexist with governments that are unilaterally market-orientated or that implement policies that are not aimed at a better distribution of income, justice and opportunities. The country calls for a renewal of political practices and government guidelines. It can continue to accept that it is not forthcoming in the short term, but it does not show itself willing to wait too long, especially because time is measured, nowadays, at an ever faster rate. Dynamic, heterogeneous societies wanting equal rights and opportunities as Brazil does, do not tend to be particularly tolerant or always proceed rationally.

Of the several issues for which we have no clear answer in Brazil, one must be highlighted: which path will the parties follow to manage the effects of judicial investigations and recover, minimally, their links with the forces of the nation? Who will survive and recover themselves in order to block the germinations of an "anti politics" that threatens to contaminate the population? What kind of left will emerge from the crisis of the PT?

So far, the party that ruled the country for the past 13 years on a social reform programme ticket did not show

themselves to be prepared to carry out a theoretical and cultural critical evaluation of their performance, their errors and limitations. With the exception of a few isolated voices (such as former governor of Rio Grande do Sul, Tarso Genro), the PT is still paralysed, painting itself as the victim of the beatings and ruses of selfish elites and concentration of the media, without exercising any effort to look within, analysing the society and the state that have established themselves in Brazil and, from there, to develop a new political project for the party. Even its rhetoric exhibits little force or clarity.

The left's paralysis, contributing more to turmoil than to political development, divests Brazilian democracy of a protagonist who could make a difference. And it leaves the interim government - as the government defined itself after the final vote on the impeachment of Dilma - without a necessary counterweight, which would be essential to make the country stronger by 2018.

Especially because, contrary to what many leftist activists think and say, there is no "rightist hegemony in the country", and neither is political life under the control of oligopolistic media. Society is increasingly plural, people move as individuals, opinions are expressed freely and political democracy prevails in full. The game is open, ready to be played by those who prove themselves to be qualified, both theoretically and politically.

*Translated from Spanish by Katie Oliver, member of Democracia Abierta's Volunteer Program.*