

Five Years Since Brazil's 2016 Coup: An Interview with Dilma Rousseff

The 2016 coup was ground zero. It was the inaugural act, but the process continues

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*Five years after being removed from the Presidency of the Republic during an impeachment in which no crime of responsibility was established, economist **Dilma Rousseff** has a clear vision of the process that culminated in her downfall, that led to former president **Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva**'s political imprisonment and the rise of the right-wing extremist **Jair Bolsonaro** to the Planalto Palace.*

From her home in Porto Alegre, where she has remained since the beginning of the pandemic, the former president remains attentive and closely follows the developments of the political crisis that the country has been going through for the past year. After half a decade, she says the picture is one of general deterioration: economic, social and institutional.

For her, the drama that the country is experiencing today is a direct result of the 2016 Coup, a process of democratic erosion that began on August 31 of that year, when the Senate approved her removal. “The coup enabled two immediate crimes against the country: the spending freeze — which crippled social programs and investments — and the destruction of the Amazon rainforest”, she says.

“The coup was not soft. There was nothing soft about it. And remember, coups come in stages. It’s a process”, she points out. “The 2016 coup was ground zero. It was the inaugural act, but the process continues. It is the original sin of this crisis that the country is going through. It is from there that the whole coup process unfolds”.



In this interview with *Focus Brasil*, Dilma analyses the situation and predicts that Bolsonaro's defeat in the 2022 elections will be the first step in the country's reconstruction, but emphasises that the road **Brazil faces will not be easy.**

"There will be a lot of problems. In the environmental area, for example, some effects of the devastating policies currently promoted may be permanent. I don't know... The deterioration, for example, regarding the indigenous reserves, is worrying. I'm worried," she says.

Olímpio Cruz Neto: Five years after the fraudulent impeachment, is there room for a new coup?

Dilma Rousseff: You have to understand the game. The coup took place on August 31, 2016. What we are experiencing now is the possibility of a new coup based on forms derived from hybrid warfare. The 2016 coup was parliamentary, judicial and mediatic but, above all, it was executed by the financial sector, by financial capitalism. It was a neoliberal coup. There was no classic military intervention- it was done through manipulation of laws. Although they appeared to respect the legal procedures, they broke the law and fabricated crimes where none existed. It was a violent break with the democratic status quo.

OCN: Why?

DR: Because it led to all of the measures that led to the return of poverty and unemployment in Brazil. It enabled measures that compromised national sovereignty, whether through the sale of state-owned companies or the dismantlement of Petrobrás, or that nonsense of trying to privatize Eletrobrás, which is a scandal! They held an Eletrobrás fair, as if it could be auctioned off in a county fair.

OCN: And now there is an energy crisis...

DR: We are currently run an immense risk of rationing, blackouts, and energy bills are already nearing all time highs. All this without even getting into Petrobras' pricing policy which is now entirely tied to the international oil market and financial interests. This is why cooking gas is now R\$ 120 per cylinder. It is the dismantling of Petrobrás that enabled this. Petrobras was created to be an integrated energy company, vertically integrated from the oil well to the gas pump... It was Petrobras that allowed the country to have combined cycle thermo-electric plants. When President Lula took office, we were still suffering from the crisis of 2001...

OCN: The blackouts

DR: ...of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

OCN: But they built thermal plants.

DR: But they didn't build natural gas pipelines, which made it possible to build thermal plants where they were needed. [The FHC administration] built the thermal plants in the Northeast without installing pipelines to delivering enough natural gas to power turbines. It was during the Lula administration that the Northeast gas pipeline, the well-known Gasene, was built to take natural gas from the Santos Basin to the Northeast, in partnership with China.

OCN: That Bolsonaro privatized, right?

DR: Yes. They sold Gasene. That is a crime.

OCN: Everything was only possible with the 2016 Coup.

DR: That's why you can't say it was soft coup. It wasn't a soft coup at all.

OCN: It reminds me of Folha de São Paulo's talk about Brazil's "soft dictatorship".

DR: Exactly. There is no soft coup, just as there is no soft dictatorship. The coup not only eroded democracy, as we are seeing, but it is responsible for the increase in poverty because, even before the pandemic began, in 2020, there was already an extraordinary increase in the poverty rate and the first signs of the return of hunger.

OCN: Systematic setbacks...

DR: Because the coup enabled two immediate crimes against the country: the public spending ceiling — which crippled social programs and investments — and the destruction of the Amazon rainforest.

OCN: The rich prefer to have control over the public budget.

DR: Yes. And the freeze is for a long 20 years. What is really decided in elections after all? Where public resources will be spent and how money should be allocated for public policies. When that possibility is taken away for two decades, as it is through the spending freeze which will decide where the resources will go for five elections — it means that our democratic system was invaded. In short: they put the fiscal austerity into the Constitution.

OCN: They have institutionalized austerity.

DR: And the fiscal adjustment policy and the role of the State in the economy, reduction of social education, science and health spending. They decided to put reduction of investments that created social infrastructure into Constitution.

OCN: And the second thing?

DR: The destruction of the environment in Brazil. This state policy that has now been officially adopted by the Bolsonaro government. And this is perhaps the biggest tragedy, because there is no going back, right?

OCN: Is there no way to recover?

DR: There are things you destroy in nature that take decades and sometimes even centuries to rebuild. What they are doing on Amazon is horrible. They opened the Amazon reserves to something that we have never allowed and no previous government has allowed: the entry of large mining companies.

OCN: [Former environmental minister] Ricardo Salles' herd.

DR: Yes. That's why I say the coup was not soft. The coup was anything but mild. And remember, coups come in stages.

OCN: Just like during the dictatorship.

DR: Yes... In the 21 years of the military dictatorship, you had first 1964, then 1968 — Institutional Act 5 on December 13, 1968 — then came the April 1977 Package, with the tough dispute between General Geisel General Frota. Geisel got the better of it and the hard line was defeated, but he tried again to harden the regime with the attacks on the Brazilian National Lawyers Guild, newsstands and Riocentro convention center [in April 1981, a bomb exploded in the convention center in Rio de Janeiro, in a terrorist offensive armed by agents of the hard-line military repression apparatus].

OCN: A dispute within the military regime.

DR: Remember that every dictatorship is a process. That's why I say that the 2016 Coup was act zero of the coup, it was the inaugural act but the process continues. It was the original sin of this crisis that the country is going through. It was from there that the entire coup process unfolded.

OCN: And it also has several outstanding moments.

DR: I call them "acts". The first act following the impeachment coup was Lula's arrest [in April 2018]. That was done to make it impossible for him to run for office. This guaranteed the process of reproduction of the coup. If Lula was elected, the coup would have been stopped. But arresting him was not enough. After all, he hadn't lost his popularity. He was still competitive [from behind bars]. He hadn't lost the peoples' trust. So there was a new act of the coup: the removal of Lula from the electoral process. He was convicted, imprisoned, and finally removed from the 2018 elections. He was barred from speaking publicly or campaigning. The blow deepened. And they had already taken the genie out of the bottle...

OCN: How?

DR: When I say the genie in the bottle, I mean the military. Remember how the Temer government they gave so much importance to the military. Temer reestablished the Institutional Security Cabinet (GSI), handing it over to General Sérgio Etchegoyen. And he appointed a soldier to head the Ministry of Defense. This had never happened since the return to Democracy. Even Fernando Henrique refused to appoint a military officer to head the Ministry of Defense.

But there is also another important aspect in the Temer government: the military intervention in Rio de Janeiro. This was an unmistakable mark of the military's return to

politics. So, look, there were two movements taking place parallel to Lula's political imprisonment.

OCN: The action was due to the security situation in Rio.

DR: But it wasn't a typical GLO (Law and Order) military operation. They took it a step further -it was an occupation.

OCN: And the man who led the operation is now Defense Minister General Braga Netto...

DR: — [interrupting] More importantly is that everything that existed there in the criminal world, in terms of its power to contaminate, exploded on top of the officers. I'm not talking about the soldiers but the officers. They had never done any policing before and suddenly they had to do this type of action on the streets... making the rounds. And we still don't know, at that time of the military occupation, what really happened to Marielle [PSOL city councilwoman Marielle Franco, who was assassinated on March 14, 2018]. The process had radicalized. Why did the militias decide to assassinate a city councilor? And it doesn't matter if [Bolsonaro's] children are involved with their father [the President of the Republic]. Suspicions remain, but what I say is that this process of the country swinging to the right was being set up then and there. The 2016 coup enabled it all. Unequivocally, a trajectory was set in Brazil for the right to grow. We need to remember that even the integralists are returning now. We have a strong integralist matrix returning and let's not forget that the architect of the Cohen Plan [against the alleged uprising of the communists in 1937] was the integralist captain Olímpio Mourão, who later became a general and one of the conspirators in the 1964 coup. The integralists have their own conception of the internal enemy within the Armed Forces, which dates back to the Cold War era. So, there is a group behind the scenes working to generating dislike of social inclusion in Brazil that dates back to slavery. Slavery is responsible for having such unimaginable patterns of poverty in the 21st century and this situation of contempt that part of Brazilian elites have for the people.

I had always thought that parrot's perch [a torture instrument used during the military dictatorship against political prisoners] came from the Algerian war. But I saw a 19th Century painting by Jean-Baptiste Debret that shows a slave on the ground attached to a parrot's perch. So, look, the parrot's perch was our thing - a remnant of slavery.

This is an example of the process I was talking about. Letting the genie out of the lamp, bringing the military back into politics. And they liked it and don't want it to go back to the bottle. Hence the tweets made by Army Commander General Villas-Boas on the eve of the Supreme Court's order of imprisonment of Lula.

OCN: The STF accepted his "suggestion".

DR: Yes. His pressure worked on the Supreme Court. They accepted it. The Chief Justice at the time was being advised by General Luiz Azevedo [who went on to serve as Bolsonaro's defense minister from January 2019 -I March 2021]. There is no democracy in the world where the Supreme Court takes orders from the Army.

OCN: The 2016 Coup is also similar to 1964 in the sense that elites never admitted that it was a coup.

DR: As in 1964, people refuse to acknowledge the coup from the first moment. Even during the impeachment process there were congressmen who filed charges against me in the

Supreme Court because I was calling a coup a coup.

OCN: The mainstream media still refuses to call 2016 a coup.

DR: Correct. Nor has it engaged in any self-criticism on its role.

[Brasil Wire's editors' note: For more on coup denial in the Anglo media see [here](#) and [here](#)]

OCN: And you are still banned by TV Globo. You have never been heard and are never invited to any program... And this same media now warns of the possibility of a coup by Bolsonaro.

DR: As if we hadn't already experienced the coup, which has already happened. What we are experiencing are the stages of a possible hardening of the political regime in Brazil. The government flirting with the possibility of an auto-coup.

OCN: [5 years ago] you warned that the coup would lead to the erosion of democracy. This has happened, as demonstrated by the growing deterioration of the country's institutions. And now the Judiciary itself is making a fuss...

DR: And why has the judiciary only just noticed?

OCN: What is your take?

DR: Because it's finally affected them. When I said five years ago that the coup would end there, it was because I knew there would be a rapid advance against all institutions.

OCN: Like in that poem by Brecht?

DR: Yes. First it was the Communists... Then the Social Democrats. Then the conservatives, and finally, I was taken. What happened with the Supreme Court is that, from a certain point on, for example from the episode of placing an army general as advisor inside the office of the Chief Justice, there were a series of concessions. This was already an absurd, unprecedented thing.

OCN: Not even during the dictatorship, when cabinet ministers such as Evandro Lins e Silva and others were removed from office, was an army officer ever nominated as advisor to the Presidency of the Supreme Court...

DR: Exactly. And so why is the Supreme Court only beginning to radicalize now? Because the Executive branch is trying to bring the STF to its knees ordering organizations like the Federal Police to investigate Court Justices. It's fomenting fake news against Justices and Eduardo Bolsonaro is making violent threats like: "It only takes one soldier to close the Supreme Court". And now, they are planning a demonstration [on September 7] to shut down the Supreme Court ...

OCN: Until recently, there was the illusion on the part of the Brazilian establishment that it was possible to moderate the president...

DR: He doesn't have a moderation chip. Conflict is intrinsic to his being. He needs conflict. In March 2019, he declared in the United States that he did not take power to rebuild. He didn't come to rebuild anything, remake anything. He's not interested in that. What he

always said he wants is to put an end the “communists and leftists” operating in Brazil. That’s it. The phrase he said was: “Brazil is not an open land where we are going to build things for our people. We have to deconstruct a lot”. He was crystal clear. Also, Bolsonaro has this conflict strategy. He is a neo-fascist. It’s that strategy: put the goat in the room. And then take it off. Then he puts two goats in the room and takes one out. Further on, there are four goats in the room. And he comes back and takes a... So, they keep getting more goats, successively. And Bolsonaro has always done that. From the start.

He doesn’t manage anything. There is no dialogue within the government about science or the environment... There is no policy or management, just emptiness. This is the stage of the process we are at now: He’s set a date to see if they can pull off a coup dress rehearsal, September 7th. If he said he’s going to appear in person in both São Paulo and Brasília on that date, he’s established it for a test.

OCN: — And there has been infiltration Bolsonarismo in the state police apparatus and in several sectors.

DR: He will test his ability to mobilize.

OCN: Faced with so many setbacks, do you think it will be possible for a new government to rebuild the country in 2023?

DR: It will be hard. In the environmental area, for example, some effects of Bolsonaro’s devastation may be permanent. I don’t know... The deterioration in the indigenous reserves is troubling. I’m worried. The indigenous people’s march is important. The dismantlement of Petrobras will have great consequences. What needs to be undone is the spending freeze. This is clear. Another thing: we still don’t know the level of deterioration at the Brazilian National Socioeconomic Development Bank, the BNDES. This is an important instrument for the resumption of growth. Not even the private sector holds that kind of power because it makes no investments in equity.

OCN: What about Petrobras anticipating bonuses to its directors this year?

DR: This is a scandal. It doesn’t even happen in the United States.

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