

Brazil's Political Crisis: The Meaning of Lula's Imprisonment

The soft coup now underway in Brazil shows just how quickly capitalists can turn against democracy.

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This week, both sides of a polarized Brazil were on tenterhooks, awaiting the Supreme Court's judgment on former president [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#)'s appeal for habeas corpus — his right to remain free until all his appeals have been exhausted. Having already been convicted in the second instance — and having had his nine-year sentence increased to twelve — his prospects looked dim. This, in spite of two appeals processes still remaining, which could take months or years.

Into this context sauntered the military top brass. One the eve of the judgment, the commander of the Army Reserves wrote in the *Estado de São Paulo* newspaper that if Lula were left free to run and won the presidency, there would be no option but military intervention. His comments were shortly followed by those of the commander of the Brazilian army, Eduardo Villas Boas, who took to Twitter to ask the public — rhetorically, of course — who it thought had the good of the country in mind, and who was only looking after their own. The Brazilian military, he continued, “shares the longing of all good citizens to repudiate impunity” and is “attentive to its institutional missions.”

As left-wing economist Laura Carvalho [commented](#),

“the revolution won't be televised, but the coup will be tweeted.”

Lula's habeas corpus was duly denied the following day. Whether Lula gives himself up is still to be seen; noises from his camp suggest he may resist arrest. On the night of the judgment, supporters rallied to the headquarters of the metalworkers' union in suburban São Paulo, with more resistance promised from across the Left.

What has made events come to such a head now is the decision by investigating judge Sergio Moro to depart from the constitutional norm and mandate Lula's imprisonment before his appeals process is exhausted. For Moro, this is his triumphal moment, the capture of the [trophy beast](#) he's been hunting for years. According to his logic, sending Lula down would signal the end of political impunity. For Moro's supporters — more anti-Workers' Party (PT) than genuinely anti-corruption — this one imprisonment is the final nail in the coffin of corruption.

One is reminded of George Bush's “Mission Accomplished” stunt aboard an aircraft carrier in 2003: an astoundingly premature declaration of victory, a conclusion to an illegitimate

campaign announced by a vain man, whose results have been nothing but institutional chaos and an even more corrupt state. Tarnishing a perfect analogy, in Brazil the levels of violence sadly predate the campaign.

Whatever happens next — and last week's shooting at Lula's traveling pre-election roadshow seems a very grim foreshadowing of growing political violence — this feels like a decisive moment.

So argues political scientist Felipe Demier in the article presented in translation below. Originally published on [Esquerda Online](#), Demier's essay reflects on Lula's imprisonment, staking out a position between a reflexive defense of Lula's politics and an ultra-left celebration of his arraignment. It also discusses the highly contingent nature of bourgeois acceptance of democracy — a reconciliation that now must be abandoned through the imprisonment of a former political ally, in the name of preserving "democracy" and the constitution.

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Exiting from the ranks and struggles of workers, [Lula as president](#) did not at any moment propose radical reforms to Brazil's profoundly unequal social formation. By continuing to religiously pay off the external debt, reproducing the concentration of income, putting the brakes on agrarian reform, militarizing social life, and breaking up public services (to guarantee profits for big financial, industrial, and agribusiness corporations), his governments — like the first term of his successor, Dilma Rousseff — did what needed to be done, from the point of view of those above.

Concomitantly, while in power Lula significantly reduced unemployment, increased salaries and credit for the consumer market, deliberately increased targeted/compensatory social policies, opened up public sector entrance exams, and advanced affirmative-action policies. By means of this social partnership, through this sociopolitical engineering, Lula erected a party machine that showed itself capable of [managing Brazilian capitalism](#) better, and more securely, than the traditional bourgeois political representatives themselves; and for that reason, he became nearly invincible in the electoral game of our armored liberal democracy. There was not, up until that point, in that conjuncture, a better form of management of the capitalist order in a backwards, peripheral, and socially fractured country like Brazil.



Supporters of former Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva put up banners outside the Supreme Federal Court in March. (Source: Senado Federal / Flickr)

It so happens that, as of the second half of Dilma Rousseff's first term, the economic indices started abruptly to fall. Newly confident, the right-wing opposition was able to win back the love of a significant portion of the "extra-parliamentary mass of the bourgeoisie," which, seduced by financial orgies, had resignedly accepted the PT at the forefront of its state. Now enamored with the neoliberal right, and even flirting with autocratic political tendencies, a large part of the Brazilian bourgeoisie managed rapidly to withdraw from the loveless affair it had been engaged in with *petismo* for the preceding ten years. PT leaders, meanwhile, would always keep alive the dream of breaking from this stable union. Having withdrawn, the bourgeoisie spilled all its bottled-up hate, a hate that can better be explained as a function of what the PT once was than by what it [became while in power](#).

The [deposing](#) of Dilma Rousseff's government without a doubt signified the success of the coup-monger plot, designed by the most reactionary sections of Brazilian society, led by the erstwhile right-wing opposition and its media and judicial allies. In the construction in favor of impeachment, newspaper editorials abandoned any caution they may have had. Lubricated by ancient class hatred, especially that fed by the demophobic middle classes, the coup had as its principal objective swapping the current governmental agents for a more reactionary set — ones who, unconstrained by a combative or trade unionist past, could now implement fiscal adjustment and counter-reforms, and shut up social movements. All this was to be done at the rhythm and intensity demanded by Brazilian capitalism in crisis. In this, and in contrast to the European bourgeoisies, the dominant class in Brazil demonstrated that, in moments of economic crisis, it could not tolerate even the "left wing" of the party of order; that is, it could not tolerate having the moderates of its own party in power.

The coup-mongers' offensive — that is, the lancinating withdrawal of rights and the elevation of fiscal austerity to the highest degree possible — must continue. It cannot stop. However, in its insatiable counter-reformist march, the Brazilian bourgeoisie encounters

something that, deriving from nothing more than the pages of the calendar, presents a modest obstacle, and one constitutive of its own form of political domination: *elections*. As is well known, for even minimalist liberal democrats, the existence of periodic elections that allow for the choice of rulers is an inexpugnable criterion of any liberal democracy — including its most limited and squalid versions. Such is the habitual control of electoral processes by economic and media powers, and such is the anti-popular armory of contemporary [Brazilian democracy](#), that universal suffrage, far from being a problem, has been for the past decades the way in which political legitimacy was guaranteed for class domination in the country. Now, exceptionally, things have changed, which seems to demand exceptional solutions, from the point of view of capital.

The coup program must continue to be implemented, however, by means of a government supported by the ballot box. Here's the rub of it, then. The bourgeoisie not only considers Lula incapable of applying such a program according to the standards demanded by it, but also cannot find any trustworthy candidate capable of safely defeating the *petista* at the ballot box. The basic criteria of "one person, one vote" (be it a resident of São Paulo's posh *Jardins* neighborhood or someone in the semiarid northeast), accepted by those at the top for forty years, appears to them today as a horrifying phantasm. As such, in a very peculiar historical contradiction, the simple continuity of the liberal-democratic regime — that is, ordinary elections — appear as a problem for the proper continuity of the liberal-democratic regime. The simple *normality* of the regime — that is, compliance with its own laws, designed to guarantee the regime's continuity — now translates into a political anomaly.

Paradoxically, obedience to constitutional norms appears to lead to the elimination of these same norms; compliance with the constitution appears to lead inexorably to the end of this same constitution; and, finally, the realization of a simulacrum of elections (without Lula) — or even suspension of these — appears today as the only means of preserving a political regime based on elections. In an era of social fragmentation without precedent and exorbitant counter-reforms, the preservation of the universal suffrage regime appears only possible, for the bourgeoisie, if universal suffrage itself were tainted or voided, and if the election were to become nothing but a counterfeit. It is this that explains, fundamentally, Lula's condemnation and his imprisonment, decreed by judge Sérgio Moro. Triplex apartments, ranches, and minor fiscal maneuvers were as decisive for the judicial sentencing as leaving the cap off the toothpaste or dirty clothes on the floor are for the end of a relationship.

Fortified by newspaper editorials, the ordinary bourgeois, taken on his own, with his narrow-minded and mean mentality, never recognized himself in the image of the left-wing administrator of neoliberal capitalism, who once waved red flags and led strikes. Now he cannot even tolerate him. The ordinary bourgeois treats Lula as a nobleman does with a plebeian arriviste who won the heart of his beautiful daughter: without any other viable option, the gallant may even be accepted into the home, but never into the family; and at the first conjugal crisis, the young man is to be expelled from where he should never have been permitted entry in the first place. For all that he might have performed enormous services for the Brazilian bourgeoisie, Lula is not a legitimate son and never will be. In the same way as a domestic maid might eventually be allowed into the dining room, she should never dare to converse with the people only preoccupied with "[being born and dying](#)." In the same way, Lula should never have dared show to the politicians of our oligarchical dominant class that it was possible to combine high profits with reduction of extreme poverty. For our

“illustrious” conservative middle sectors, our “reputable men,” and our courtly socialites, the ex-machinist should never have allowed that *their* shopping malls become places of leisure and consumption for black people, that *their* airports become bus terminals, that *their* universities open their doors to the ignorant rabble.

Lula [will enter his cell](#) as an establishment politician, rejected by the same bourgeoisie he courted and, at the end of the day, helped. In our gloomy times, the Brazilian bourgeoisie has revealed itself to be not only ungrateful, but also vindictive and exclusive. From now on, it goes back to wanting only those that do it good. The Lula that will shortly go to prison is not the one who distanced himself from an emancipatory working-class project, but rather the one who tried again to provide the working class with three square meals a day within capitalism. The Lula who will find himself behind bars is less the adversary of a socialist project and more the defender of a capitalism with fewer poor. Lula is not being punished by workers in their struggle for social emancipation but rather by the cruelest adversary of that struggle.

As such, for the socialist left, the moment is one of defeat and therefore one in which to prepare a response and resistance. Let us leave it to [Merval Pereira](#) and his right-wing consorts to find theirs for their hysterical libations in the great halls. The longing for a world without corruption or mafioso schemes cannot be realized by the same judges who leave in liberty [corrupt former presidents] Collor, Sarney, [current illegitimate and corrupt president] Temer, [failed 2014 center-right corrupt presidential candidate] Aécio, and their kind. Our desires cannot be confused with those of others, otherwise we lose our own identity. There cannot be politico-juridical substitutionism here. Washing one’s hands of the punishment of an adversary at the hands of an enemy — as some reckless types on the Left do — is nothing other than the feeding of a reactionary, inquisitorial wrath that, at the end of the day, [has us as its principal target](#).

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