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Brazil: Dilma's dilemma

SEAN GOFORTH

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Looking back on the momentous gains chalked by Brazil's former President Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva, it is easy to fall into the habit of projecting forward based on past trends. Unfortunately, this is specious reasoning. Brazil's momentum could easily carry the country off the tracks. The hard and thankless task of moving Brazil forward is frustrating President Dilma Rousseff.

Rousseff's troubles span both the domestic and international arenas. At home, the fight against corruption has become a pointed political issue. Last month Agriculture Minister Wagner Rossi got sacked, the fourth cabinet minister to be replaced by Rousseff in 72 days. Below the level of cabinet chief, the trend is even more unsettling: nearly 100 officials from the agriculture, tourism, and defense ministries have been either fired or arrested on corruption-related charges under Rousseff's watch.

Yet Rousseff's attempt to "clean up" is backfiring. Rather than appearing a

dogged reformer, President Rousseff's disapproval rate has doubled to 25% since her inauguration in January, and the overall approval rate for her government recently slipped below the all-important 50% threshold. Elder political voices are charging her with being naïve, incompetent, or both. While this is normal fare in democratic politics, given Rousseff's lack of previous political experience it erodes her authority more than other leaders in such positions.

On a practical level, it is making her coalition harder to manage.

In August the Party of the Republic left Rousseff's coalition. It's a relatively insignificant party whose most salient leader was the Transportation Minister that Rousseff fired. But murmurs are growing that if more officials are sent packing, the PMDB – the largest partner of Rousseff's Worker's Party – will break with the President. The PMDB is widely seen as a beneficiary of graft across Brazil. First, though, erstwhile allies retaliated by leaking reports of corruption among Rousseff's inner circle. José Dias, a political consultant in Brasília, likens Rousseff's actions to hitting a "wasp's nest". In an interview with Reuters, he goes on to say: "This corruption sweep is snowballing out of control, it's extremely dangerous. She's already lost her legislative agenda, and now she risks growing instability". With her allies howling,

on August 24th Rousseff reportedly pledged not to fire any more ministers. Even if she can hold her coalition together, Dilma's honeymoon is over, and the attempt to fossick corruption from government ranks is the reason. To fall from the frying pan into the coals, Brazil's economy is overheating. Inflation is at the outer band that the central bank has set for tolerable price rises, and the government could easily fall into a serious budget deficit should commodity prices fall. Curbing consumer credit, mitigating inflows of hot money, and diversifying Brazil's economy away from iron ore and soybeans will require a sustained commitment by Rousseff's team of truly skilled technocrats.

As domestic pressures mount, Brazil's foreign policy is losing thrust. Lula positioned Brazil as Latin America's superpower, a major financier of African development projects, and an arbiter of Iran's nuclear program. He also set the stage for expansion into a new frontier: Palestinian independence. In December 2010, one month before Dilma took office, Lula recognized the state of Palestine along Israel's pre-1967 borders, causing a snowball of such declarations across South America. Since then, Brazilian foreign policy has gotten mired in efforts to chastise Chinese and US monetary policies.

Presuming Brazil's economy does not come apart at the seams and Rousseff



is able to halt the slide in poll numbers, her reform-oriented agenda may still fall victim to Brazilian voters' inflated expectations. There aren't many parallels in Latin America (because democracy is still relatively new to the region), so perhaps an example from the United States is instructive. President George H. W. Bush (1989-1993) followed Ronald Reagan, a man who received credit for putting America's economy on track for an era of growth that carried it into the twenty-first century, not to mention winning the Cold War. There's a feat. Except Reagan is only partially responsible: the end of stagflation came because Paul Volcker, installed as Federal Reserve chairman by Jimmy Carter, broke the back of inflation by mercilessly jacking up interest rates. Carter paid the political price for Volcker's boldness; Reagan enjoyed the benefit. (On the fiscal front, Reagan's policy decisions produced mixed results, at best.) And the aura of Reagan winning the Cold War is a tad overblown. Sure, the Great Communicator told Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall, but the Soviet Union dissolved under President Bush's watch, and it is Bush – not Reagan – that deserves credit for beginning the re-incorporation of Germany, Eastern Europe, and Russia into the global economy. Like Bush, Rousseff's presidency owes to a predecessor's tailcoats. And like Bush, Rousseff finds herself governing a country with a new mass of soft power; the major question that remains is how to parlay that soft power. Bush chose a meek route; Dilma should become a re-born apostle of Lula. She can ignite a regional free trade agreement, and become the world's sponsor of African development and sustainable energy production. Obviously, the latter two would build on initiatives started by Lula, but making progress on these fronts will prove an easier task than ambling through policy outlets like cracking down on corruption or cajoling monetary policies in Beijing and Washington.

Sunlight is said to be the best disinfectant. Attacking corruption is an enviable way for Rousseff to improve government services while distinguishing her government from that of her predecessor. Still, for political and pragmatic reasons President Rousseff might consider returning to Lula's shadow.

Equatorial Guinea fakes reforms to enter the CPLP

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Last year, Equatorial Guinea almost became a member of the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (CPLP). The CPLP, an international organization created in 1996, includes the following countries at present: Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Portugal, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Timor Leste. In its statutes, it purports to be an organization of Portuguese-speaking countries which aims to promote cooperation in all policy areas and the Portuguese language.

Despite being cash-poor, the CPLP is a transcontinental organization that has some potential. Brazil sees it as a stepping-stone for its international ambitions, namely in Africa. For Angola, an oil-rich regime with a dismal track record in terms of political liberties and civil rights, it constitutes a forum in which to gain some international credibility. In Portugal, the CPLP is part of a strategy of multiplying alliances (Atlantic, European, Portuguese-speaking) in order to gain some soft power. For the other members, the

CPLP is a source of information, and also of cooperation, namely in terms of educational training and other exchanges. As an organization, and especially with the growing ascendance of Brazil as an economic and democratic giant in the South, the CPLP has the potential to be an important promoter of best practices in all the Portuguese-speaking countries.

Back in 2010, Equatorial Guinea was not accepted as a member in the CPLP plenary meeting, held in Luanda. At the time, the CPLP members issued a statement laying out two fundamental reasons for refusing this petro-dictatorship membership to the club. Firstly, Equatorial Guinea is not a Portuguese-speaking country – it is a Spanish speaking country. Despite the fact that President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo had issued a decree which declared that Portuguese was henceforth to be the third official language a few days before the decision on entry to the CPLP was about to be made, this was deemed insufficient evidence. On the other hand, the regime also has one of the worst records in terms of human rights abuses in Africa.

Over the years, Equatorial Guinea is the country that has been most insistent on joining the club. It is both one of the richest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, and one of the most repressive dictatorships. President Obiang has been in power for the last 30 years. Recently, the country has been trying to gain some international credibility. At present, Equatorial Guinea's membership would send a strong signal to others that only economic criteria matter for the CPLP, whereas political and language requirements can be ignored at will. Despite vetoing its entrance in 2010, the CPLP encouraged Equatorial Guinea to make changes in order to be able to become a member of the CPLP in the medium term. In that context, in May this year a CPLP delegation went to visit the capital of Equatorial Guinea, Malabo, to check on the progress made since 2010.



Following the official visit, head of the delegation ambassador Luís Fonseca made a statement declaring himself very satisfied and indicating that everything is being done to allow Equatorial Guinea's entrance into the CPLP in 2012. It would indeed be excellent if the CPLP exerted a positive influence on Equatorial Guinea's dictatorial political regime. Unfortunately, the announced reforms are far from ensuring this. Do more citizens of Equatorial Guinea speak Portuguese since last year? And have human rights abuses ceased? The answer is no, on both counts. Concerning the use of the Portuguese language, Executive Secretary of the CPLP Domingos Simões Pereira stated during the CPLP summit in Luanda last July: "there is the will for Equatorial Guinea to introduce Portuguese language as lecturerships in universities, and the creation of a center for Portuguese language in Malabo". This seems hardly sufficient to consider a country Portuguese-speaking. As for the issue of political freedoms, ambassador Fonseca highlighted optimistically that a constitutional revision was being prepared to include "a limitation to the number of Presidential mandates, the creation of a Senate, a new legislative Chamber, and the creation of an Accounts Tribunal". Just as last year they tried to make Portuguese an official language by issuing a decree, this year the plan is to institute democracy via constitutional reform, while maintaining the human rights abuses, the lack of political pluralism, and repression intact. It is worth noting that the country's Constitution already safeguards human rights, but they are violated repeatedly. Indeed, the optimism that the CPLP shows in relation to Equatorial Guinea contrasts sharply with international organizations' worries about the state of civic and political freedoms in the country. Freedom House has included the country in this year's "Worst of the Worst" list, which indicates the most repressive societies, and includes the likes of Burma, Eritrea, Libya, North

Korea, Somalia, Sudan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

In Equatorial Guinea there is no freedom of association, all protests are forbidden, arbitrary and illegal detentions are frequent, and there is no freedom of the press. Both in terms of the internal dynamics of the CPLP and its values, the entry of one of the most repressive dictatorships of Sub-Saharan Africa would signal a total lack of respect for political and language criteria to existing members and would undermine the organization's core values, while legitimizing a rogue state.

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