'I was impeached not for what I did wrong, but what I did right'

Former Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff discusses her country's political crisis

Read this interview in German/Russian

On 31 August 2016, Brazil's senate voted to oust the president Dilma Rousseff from office, ending 13 years of Workers' Party rule. She was found guilty of moving money between government budgets – which is illegal in Brazil. Rousseff has always denied breaking the law, maintaining the impeachment procedures constituted a 'coup' by political opponents who wanted to remove her from office before the end of her term.

As Brazil's politics sinks further into crisis amid Operation Car Wash, the biggest corruption probe in the country's history, Rousseff has sought to clear her name. Speaking to International Politics and Society, the socialist politician and former Marxist-guerrilla fighter highlights the achievements of her party's long rule, and warns that moves by current president Michel Temer to scale back social programmes will lead to Brazil's ruin.

Not long ago Brazil was seen as a poster child for development, and it played a significant role on the international stage. Now its population appears to have lost confidence in politics and politicians. What needs to happen for Brazilians to regain confidence in the democratic system?

> Brazil is facing a crisis of representation because of a putsch carried out by parliament and the judiciary, which not only toppled me as president but is now also enabling a government programme to be implemented that has no legitimacy at all and is increasing inequality. 54 million votes [for me as president in 2011] are being nullified. The population has every reason to be unhappy.
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> When the will of the electorate and the needs of the population are disregarded like this, and progress we made previously is rolled back, the people will inevitably turn away from politics.

What is happening now may be typical for Brazil, but we are also facing a global crisis of parliamentary democracy. The financial sector dominates the economy everywhere these days, holding all the wealth and causing growing inequality. This inequality threatens democracy as it calls into question the equality of all before the law, the very basis of our democratic principles.

But surely the current leadership in Brazil cares about what people think. Elections are coming up next year, so won't it be pushing popular policies to win votes?

What explains this indifference of [Brazil's] leaders towards the voters is the fact they don't have any votes anyway. Without the impeachment they would never have got into power. What we have here is the most recognisably corrupt political group in the history of our country. You have to realise that us Brazilians have a long tradition of oligarchy, going back to the era of slavery, which was only abolished in 1888.

In the long term this impeachment will fail. But for now, the group [behind it] has managed to get rid of me as president without any real wrongdoing on my part. They have also managed to implement their own agenda: limiting people's rights and bringing in downright criminal flexibility into labour legislation, which will make work insecure and reduce wages. They have lifted all restrictions on slave-like working conditions. An amendment to the constitution has frozen social, health and education spending for the next 20 years. Even expenditure on science, new technologies, basic sanitation, urban mobility, etc. could fall.

We're now likely to see the emergence of various 'saviours of the homeland' who want to use the dire situation [in Brazil] to their own advantage.

A direct consequence of [these recent political developments] is the rise of the far-right in Brazil. Its main representative, Jair Bolsonaro, has a military background, but that doesn't indicated that the movement came from the armed forces. I'm convinced Brazil's armed forces support democracy. No, this movement is a consequence of the impeachment, which took place in an atmosphere of intolerance, witch-hunts and misogyny. For the first time, we're seeing a right-wing mass movement in Brazil.

On the conservative side, there are just two other contenders [for the presidency in 2018]: the manager João Doria – our version of Trump – who thinks the country can be run like a business, and the TV presenter Luciano Huck, who renovates houses and auctions them off to the public.

How is your own Workers' Party faring in Brazil's current political climate?

The impeachment was meant to ruin the Workers' Party, but it didn't succeed in doing so. In every [opinion] poll we get the majority of [support]. This is why some people are trying to prevent our former president, Lula da Silva, from being able to run again. For this to succeed he has to be convicted by the second instance judge. If that happens, he cannot stand as a candidate.

However, this complex country will only solve its problems when there is a genuine, democratic process. I am not saying the Workers' Party is the only solution. There needs to be a coalition – but one that actually wants to solve the country's problems and that doesn't just go after its own interests.

You say the current government is running the country into the ground when it comes to social rights. If that's true, surely it should be easy for the Workers' Party to win next year's elections. What does it need to do to convince Brazilians it should be running the country?

Even when you consider that [the Workers' Party] managed to lift 36 million people out of poverty, there's still an enormous amount of work left to do. We achieved a lot in terms of technical training, not least because we partnered with Germany, the leader in this field. We carried out one of the biggest redistributions of land in Latin America and initiated a programme to create housing for the poor. Of course, you cannot simply give people land: you also have to improve production conditions by means of technical support.

We sought improvements for pensions and the promotion of education. But we also need a better social and transport infrastructure. There are still parts of Brazil where one in four people have no access to water.

In view of these immense challenges, we need to ensure money remains available for these services. When people now say that we wasted money and that Brazil was bankrupt, then I ask you, what on earth are they talking about? You are bankrupt when you cannot pay your debts, but this is not the case with Brazil. The country has currency reserves of 380 billion US dollars. We are creditors of the International Monetary Fund. We produce oil, food and ores. But Brazil does not just have raw materials: we also produce aeroplanes, we have an industrial sector.

Yet we can only tackle the challenges if we spend money on social issues. You cannot govern this country just for 35 per cent of the population. This will not create social stability. Indeed, crime and

instability are now rising along with the cuts to social spending. These are things we had already dealt with [under the Rousseff administration]. Now the UN is predicting that, if things continue going downhill, more and more people will fall back into poverty. Spending on infrastructure, logistics and social matters are currently being cut from around 60 billion Brazilian real in 2015 to 2 just billion (approximately 515 million euros) in 2018.

Finally I would like to say: we did not do everything right. Of course we made mistakes as well. But I was removed from office not for what I did wrong, but for what I did right.



Dilma Rousseff
Brasilia

Dilma Rousseff was the first female president of Brazil from 2011 to 2016.

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