

Brazil: Lula-a symbol of resistance

Corruption charges, violence and imprisonment of ex President Lula might yet unite the progressive left says **Thomas Zicman de Barros**

They want to stop me from talking, but I will talk, throw your voices". With this statement, former president and leading presidential candidate Lula da Silva alerted thousands of supporters that rallied in front of the metallurgical union where he started his political career almost five decades ago. His imprisonment may well jeopardize his ability to travel and make speeches, but instead of killing him politically, it is transforming him. Lula is no longer a simple leader. He is now an idea – which makes him much more powerful. Like others in the past, it is in the moments of apparent weakness and defeat that he gets stronger.

What makes Lula's support even more extraordinary is that it takes place after more than four years of constant political attacks. Lula, the first and only working class candidate to be elected president in the country, left office in 2010 with an indisputably positive record. Despite the contradictions while in power, his almost 90% approval ratings were the result of a government that transformed Brazil into a global player and generated economic and social prosperity, removing tens of millions from poverty.

For years now, however, the media in collusion with important sectors of the judiciary incited right-wing groups by depicting Lula as the root of all evil and corruption in Brazil – despite sufficient evidence of any wrongdoing on his part. Hate was irresponsibly inflamed to the point that, for a growing far right, Lula became a scapegoat that must be eliminated at any cost – leading to a shooting of his convoy in the south of Brazil on March 27th. This fury against him established the background for his controversial – and sometimes Kafkaesque – high-speed condemnation. Like the Queen of Hearts in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the judges decided Lula's sentence first, their verdict coming afterwards. A right-wing clamour followed pressuring the Supreme Court to enforce Lula's immediate imprisonment – against the con-



Former president Lula da Silva idolised by crowds
Photo: Francisco Proner Ramos (Midia Ninja)

stitution that guarantees the right to appeal before gaol. In a scene that reminds us of darker moments, even the Army commander, general Eduardo Villas Bôas, implied that troops could intervene to avoid possible "impunity". The goal is clear, and has been openly declared many times: Lula must be arrested because, if he runs again, he might well win.

Lula's imprisonment is, in many ways, a new step in the con-

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servative hold on the country. The process is complex, with many expressions and actors. It got traction during the parliamentary coup that overthrew president Dilma Rousseff in 2016, when a circumstantial and sometimes paradoxical alliance was formed. It involved notoriously corrupt politicians from catch-all crony parties – such as the former Speaker of the House, Eduardo Cunha, and Michel Temer, Rousseff's vice-president – fringe extreme-right leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro, the big media groups, and an hypertrophied Judiciary that frequently violates the constitution in order to "make justice".

After Rousseff's unseating, this alliance weakened, but while sometimes fighting each other, the participants continued to push the country to the edge. The

new all-white-men conservative government approved privatizations and rudimentary austerity reforms – such as a constitutional amendment that freezes the total amount of public expenditures for the next twenty years. On February 16th, facing growing popular dissatisfaction, Michel Temer decided to make an audacious political move to set a new agenda, declaring a federal military intervention in the state of Rio de Janeiro to solve a so-called "security crisis" in the region.

As usual, to every complex and delicate problem there is always an easy, demagogic, authoritarian – and wrong – answer. It was clear from the beginning that the federal intervention was a pyrotechnical move to produce positive media coverage. The reality on the ground, however, was the absence of control and the lack of any action plan. It was from this intervention that Marielle Franco, a left-wing, slum-dwelling, black, lesbian city councillor was brutally executed with her driver when leaving a debate on black feminism in downtown Rio on March 14th.

It may seem that Marielle Franco's assassination and the witch-hunt against Lula are not directly related. However, there is now a growing consensus on the Left about their connection. On April 2nd, in a rare moment of unity, politicians and political activists from the entire progressive spectrum gathered in Rio. The message was clear: all forms of persecution against the Left are fruits of the same anti-democratic ambience, and define a common adversary.

Lula's arrest was not the result of a fair trial, but a symptom of the slow death of democracy, where those elected are removed from power, those who protest are silenced or killed, and those who dare to mobilize a popular resistance are imprisoned. Those who welcome his imprisonment ignore, however, that they might inadvertently unite progressive struggles. The future is uncertain, the Left can still make mistakes, but, like Lula, it remains alive. **C**