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Interview With Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff

Par Dilma Rousseff et Glenn Greenwald
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Last Thursday, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff was suspended from the presidency when the Senate voted, 55-22, to try her on the impeachment charges, approved by the lower house, involving alleged budgetary maneuvers ("pedaladas") designed to obscure the size of public debt. Although she nominally remains the president and continues to reside in Brasília's presidential palace, her duties are being carried out by her vice president, Michel Temer — now "interim" President Temer — and the right-wing, corruption-tainted, all-white-male cabinet he has assembled (due to Brazil's coalition politics, Temer is from a different party than Rousseff). Rousseff's suspension will last up to 180 days as her Senate impeachment trial takes place, at which point she will either be acquitted or (as is widely expected) convicted and permanently removed from her office.

On Tuesday, I spoke to President Rousseff in the presidential palace for her first interview since being suspended.

The 22-minute interview, conducted in Portuguese with English subtitles, is below. Rather than subdued, resigned, and defeated, Rousseff — who was imprisoned and tortured for three years in the 1970s by the U.S.-supported military dictatorship that ruled the country for 21 years — is more combative, defiant, and resolute than ever.

Interim President Michel Temer waves with Sen. Aécio Neves, left, at a signing ceremony for new government ministers at the presidential palace in Brasília, May 12, 2016.

Photo: Igo Estrela/Getty Images

Since he has taken power, Temer has exacerbated the fears of those who regard impeachment as an attack on democracy or even a coup. Unlike Rousseff, he is personally implicated in corruption scandals. He was just fined for election-law violations and faces an eight-year ban on running for any office (including the one into which he was just installed). Polls show only 2 percent of Brazilians would support him in an actual election, while close to 60 percent want him impeached.Worse, Temer created a worldwide controversy when he appointed 23 ministers,*all* of whom were white and male in a deeply diverse country, and one-third of whom are under suspicion in various corruption inquiries.

And his government — beloved by hedge funds and Wall Street but very few other factions — has begun preparing the groundwork for a radical right-wing attack on the country's social safety net, which could never attract the support of actual voters if it were subjected to a democratic framework. Meanwhile, as the Olympics arrive in Rio in 10 weeks, protests

are breaking out all over the country and are certain to become more destabilizing and disruptive as the Temer government attempts to cut some of the most critical social programs established by Rousseff's party (which has won four straight national elections).

I spoke with President Rousseff about all of these matters, as well as whether it is now justified for Brazilians to use civil disobedience against the government she describes as "illegitimate," and the likely impact on international affairs and economic realignment from this extreme and undemocratic change of ideology in the world's fifth most populous country and seventh largest economy. (Interim President Temer has not yet responded to *The Intercept*'srequest for an interview.)

The interview can be watched on the recorder below. A full transcript appears below that.

TRANSCRIPT

(This transcript has been lightly edited for continuity and clarity)

GLENN GREENWALD: I'm Glenn Greenwald of *The Intercept* and I'm here at the presidential palace, in Brasília, to speak with the Brazilian president, Dilma Rousseff, for her first interview since being suspended last week by the Senate, after it voted to try her on impeachment charges.

Good morning, madam president, and thank you for the interview.

DILMA ROUSSEFF: Good morning, Greenwald.

GG: The last stage of the impeachment proceedings takes place at the Supreme Court, which is constituted of 11 judges; eight of them were nominated by the Workers' Party (PT), five of them by you. Would you say that the court and its decisions are legitimate?

DR: I do believe that the court's decisions have been legitimate. I don't think that the court will judge it; it's not the Supreme Court that will judge the impeachment proceedings. In Brazil, impeachment proceedings are judged by the Senate. The session is conducted by the president of the court, Judge Lewandowski. I hope that his leadership makes the proceedings more consistent. …

The final 55-22 Senate vote to suspend Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and launch an impeachment trial is pictured on a screen inside the Senate in Brasília on May 12, 2016.

Photo: Evaristo Sa/AFP/Getty Images

GG: But if the Senate impeaches you, you could ask the Supreme Court to reject that decision and rule on whether there were indeed high crimes and misdemeanors. Also, the Supreme Court could have interrupted the process, but has not so far. Can a process being conducted under the authority of a legitimate court be considered a "coup"?

DR: Look, these are two completely different things. The proceedings, according to Brazilian

law, are conducted by the Senate. I can appeal to the Supreme Court, and that will happen at the appropriate time for my defense. But, in the meantime, it will go through the court. It will be undertaken by the Senate. The Senate is the appropriate court. After that, I can debate whether the proceedings were carried out accurately, whether they were correctly accepted, whether we were given a fair trial, and whether there was any interference in the proceedings. We are appealing this.

We have not been granted an injunction, but the Senate is analyzing the request, which will be presented to the full Supreme Court. It has not been accepted by the judge. … He has not granted a suspension of proceedings. Now, they will have to deliberate.

GG: But will you have the opportunity to ask the Supreme Court to define whether there were high crimes? …

DR: The merits [of the impeachment charges]!

GG: After …

DR: Afterward.



Brazilian Supreme Court President Gilmar Mendes on Nov. 18, 2009.

Photo: Evaristo Sa/AFP/Getty Images

GG: On the day after the Senate voted, [Supreme Court] Justice Gilmar Mendes suspended the investigation of Aécio Neves, defeated by you in the last election. Many people saw that and thought, "The court is behaving like a political actor. The suspension paves the way to bury the Car Wash investigation." Would you agree with that? What does this suspension mean?

DR: I think the suspension is strange; as far as I know, no proceedings have been suspended up until now. No Car Wash investigations have been suspended. But Justice Gilmar Mendes is not the only judge on the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court is composed of 12 [sic] members. Not all of the 12 [sic] members have similar dispositions, that of a real militant, an obvious militant, as Judge Gilmar Mendes does. His actions will be judged over time by the Brazilian people.

GG: Do you think there's a risk …

: We should not have double standards in our country. If you're investigating one, you have to investigate them all. No one should be spared from the investigations.

GG: Do you think there's a risk, after you leave office — if it comes to that — that Operation Car Wash will be swept under the carpet?

DR: That might be a threat, but I believe that there are many parties interested in the continuation of the Car Wash investigation.

So I don't think that it will be simple to bury Operation Car Wash. I am more concerned about reverting back to the previous situation, in which the prosecutor general was not

chosen from a list of three nominees, but was selected on the basis of their political alignment, which led to lots of inquiries being "filed away." So much so that the prosecutor general of the republic became known as the "filing clerk of the republic."

After President Lula took office — and I carried on the same practice — what procedure did we adopt? We generally chose the first name on the three-nominee list. Why? To give the Prosecutor's Office more investigative autonomy and to stop the filing away of inquiries. I believe that there is a structure today — the Prosecutor's Office, the Federal Police, and segments of the judiciary branch, like the Supreme Court and the Superior Court of Justice — that is willing to undertake investigations. Now, no institution is immune to the political process. They all suffer the consequences of the country's political climate.

Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and Glenn Greenwald on May 17, 2016.

Photo: Erick Dau/The Intercept

GG: Regarding the allegations against you: I know that other presidents, including Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and some governors also performed the budgetary maneuvers that you did, although perhaps not to the same extent as you, but they did use them. I know you insist that the budgetary maneuvers are not high crimes and misdemeanors that deserve an impeachment.

DR: They are not high crimes just as much as they are not crimes against the budget. They are not crimes.

GG: But would you agree that the Fiscal Responsibility Act prohibits them?

DR: No, because it is not prohibited by the Fiscal Responsibility Act. What is considered a budgetary maneuver? The appropriation bill authorizes the process known as complementary credits. And what does it say? It says that if you expect to collect a surplus in taxes from a specific initiative, the surplus can be re-invested. So let me ask you this: Where do these decrees come from? The Superior Electoral Court. The credit I authorized was requested by the Justice Department, by the court.

This is not a surplus from the general pot; it was an extra credit from individual headings, which is something extremely technical. Nothing was concealed. It crossed everyone's desks. The court has always done that sort of analysis.

Interim President Michel Temer, center, held the first cabinet meeting to discuss the first steps of the government at the Planalto Palace in Brasília, Brazil, on May 13, 2016.

Photo: Agencia Estado/AP

GG: I'd like to switch gears now. You were the first female president of Brazil, and your interim replacement, Michel Temer, revealed his cabinet of 23 ministers last week: not a single woman or black person and one-third are accused of corruption. How did you react when you saw his team?

DR: Look, I think that … it seems to me that this interim and illegitimate government will be very conservative from every aspect. One of which is the fact that it is a government of white men, without black people, in a country that, in the last census in 2010, and I think this is very important, more than 50 percent of the population self-identified as being of African origin. So, I think that not having any women or black people in the government shows a certain lack of care for the country you are governing.

GG: Would you say that we have arrived at the end of Brazilian democracy?

DR: No, I wouldn't. Why wouldn't I say that it's the end of democracy? Because today, institutions can be disrupted, but they're stronger than you think. I'm apprehensive now, because what happens under an illegitimate government? An illegitimate government tries to dress itself in the veil of pseudo-order; it bans protests and freedom of expression and, above all, shows an enormous willingness to cut social programs.

GG: OK. Since you classify this government as illegitimate, do you believe it's correct for Brazilians to fight against this government with civil disobedience, as you did after the coup of '64?

DR: I think they are completely different situations …

GG: I understand. But should Brazilians engage in civil disobedience to fight against this? I know the situations are different. But have we arrived at the point in which it is justified for Brazilians to fight against this government, which you're classifying as illegitimate, with civil disobedience?

Mug shot of Dilma Rousseff.

DR: I think that, in Brazil, we need to fight against it, protest it, and also exert some pressure on members of Congress. I think we need to urge all social movements to engage …

GG: And with Bolsa Família [social program for the poor] now …

DR: No, I'm just trying to give the example.

GG: But I want to ask only about …

DR: Because we need concrete battles — not a generalized civil disobedience. There will be some concrete struggles. People will have to organize in the most diverse ways. If you call protests civil disobedience, then I'd say, yes, civil disobedience. Now, it depends how you define it.

GG: OK, but many people are now going to the streets to protest in your defense, in defense of democracy, and they are very worried that they can be caught up in this anti-terrorism law that you approved just two months ago.

And when I interviewed ex-President Lula last month, he said he's against this law, because it gives powers to the government that are unnecessary and dangerous and subject to abuse. Now that these powers are in the hands of another president, do you think it was a

mistake to approve this law?

DR: No, I don't think so. Do you know why? Because I vetoed all the items in the law that would make that sort of use possible. This law was approved in Congress; it is about the Olympic Games. It …

GG: That's what it's for, but it can be used …

DR: I know, but it doesn't have the scope to be applied to social movements or political protests. Everything that was somewhat vague we vetoed. So, I'm sorry, I slightly disagree with President Lula on this matter. He would be completely right if it had been approved in the format sent by Congress.

Children stand outside a small store in Olinda, Brazil, on Jan. 20, 2016.

Photo: Rafael Fabres/Bloomberg/Getty Images

GG:The Temer government said that it would "focus" on Bolsa Família [social program] only for the poorest 5 percent.What impact would this have and how would the population react to that, in your opinion?

DR: Greenwald, I think people will not receive it well. Why? If you focus on only 5 percent in a country of 200 million people, 204 million, that would be 10 million people. Today, Bolsa Família reaches around 47 million people. We need to clarify what the target audience of Bolsa Família is. It's not aimed at adults. It's basically designed for children.

The programs require a key condition: Keep children in school, vaccinated and provided with medical care. With that, we reduced child mortality. With that, we brought children back to school. It's not possible to create programs for the children without caring for their parents, families and mothers. And I think this clearly shows the regressive nature of conservatism.

GG: There's an American journalist, based in Brazil for a long time, Alex Cuadros, who wrote an article in the *Washington Post* three weeks ago with this headline: "How the Workers' Party Lost the Workers." He pointed out that the Workers' Party has transferred a significant amount of money to billionaires, to the richest, to large corporations, and at the same time, has imposed austerity measures on the poorest. Is it because of these policies that a large part of your party's base has abandoned you?

DR: Well, firstly, I don't think that my party's base has abandoned me …

GG: But there are many supporters who now are not supporting you …

DR: Well, I have not observed this, quite the opposite, actually. I have seen a lot of support from my party's base and from the progressive base in Brazil. One of the results of this process was a vast regrouping movement. See, let's understand the scenario we currently live in. Brazil, as all other countries in the world, is now facing an economic crisis that started in 2014.

Obviously, when a crisis emerges, the growth rates begin to decline, rather than rise, and you lose the instruments needed to implement counter-cyclical policies. We implemented

counter-cyclical policies: in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014. In 2014, the fiscal capacity necessary for these counter-cyclical policies was depleted.

Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and Glenn Greenwald on May 17, 2016.

Image: The Intercept

GG: I know, but during this period you helped many billionaires, many large corporations …

DR: I'd like it if you would explain to me where I helped billionaires and large corporations. Why? Because of the following: We did not adjust to the crisis by cutting social programs. We preserved Bolsa Família, we preserved the PROUNI and FIES [higher education funding programs], we preserved all of the policies for small-scale agriculture, the food acquisition program, all funding for this small farming, our policies for women, for communities founded by former slaves, for the indigenous — all of these things they are trying to take apart.

GG: You said earlier that Michel Temer is building a very conservative government, and also that he is a leader of this coup, or least involved in it. Also, two weeks ago, Eduardo Cunha was removed from the presidency of the lower house of Congress because of corruption. Why did you choose these two people as such close allies?

DR: Let's be clear … I was even looking at this today. In Brazil, you have a process that, I believe, is perhaps one of the most distorted in the world. The number of parties is systematically increasing and every successive government needs more parties to form a simple majority and a two-thirds majority in Congress. To form a coalition you have to have a base of alliances. Larger coalitions cause decreased ideological alignment on policy. And you have to build very broad alliances. This is an extremely complex process. Beyond that, it has another feature. This coup has a leader. It was not the interim president.

GG: But he was involved.

DR: No. Wait. The leader is not the acting president. The leader is the president of the lower house of Congress [Eduardo Cunha], who is now removed from office. A little late, but better late than never, as I said. This leader, he represents a conservative sector, extremely conservative.

GG: But he was your ally for a long time, wasn't he?

A supporter of Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff with a sticker reading "Cunha out," in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Dec. 8, 2015.

Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP/Getty Images

DR: Hold on. He was my ally because he was with the centrist party '99, built the majority with the governments. He is not part of … It's a complex party; it's not an ideological party. So, you have to understand the fact that inside this party one finds many different characteristics. He inexorably, was, quote-unquote, my "ally." We began to have friction

from the first day of my government, of my second government. During my first term, we had systematic friction with him. So this is an issue that is very important to be understood, because he will act … he works … under the cloak of darkness. He's very good at acting in the dark.

GG: In your opinion, could the change of government and foreign policy damage Brazil's relationship with the BRICS [association of emerging nations: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa] and Mercosul [multi-lateral Latin American trading group]?

DR: I hope they don't do something this absurd to the country. I hope. I think that UNASUL, Mercosul, and the BRICS are some of Brazil's greatest accomplishments. To assume that it's possible for a country of Brazil's dimension not to have a close relationship with the countries of UNASUL, Mercosul, and the great achievement of multilateralism that is the BRICS, would be reckless. It is reckless. I think it would be, at the very least, greatly ignorant. It would reflect a huge ignorance of international affairs.

GG: You've said many times that you will fight until the end against the impeachment proceedings, but if you do end up losing and have to leave office, what would be better: that Michel Temer stays in office without the approval of voters or holding new elections?

DR: Please forgive me for not answering that question.

GG: Because you're still fighting.

DR: Because I'll fight until the end.

GG: I understand.

DR: Don't ask me … Because you'll understand that if I asked myself that question, I'd be giving up.

GG: You are known to be a very strong woman and have mentioned many times that there's no comparison between what you went through in the past and what is happening now, but the crisis has been very harsh on the country, and on you as well. Is this affecting you and your family?

DR: Look, I think it does affect us, it affects you personally, I even mentioned that the other day. On the day I lost the status of acting president — I'm still the incumbent president of Brazil, and the legitimate one. I think it affects me in this sense: because it's unjust. Maybe the hardest thing for someone to withstand, besides pain, illness, and torture, is injustice. Why? Because you feel like you're trapped.

Of course, after a while they said that I was a person — a woman — I think they assumed that I would simply resign. Why did they want me to resign? Because my presence unsettles them. Because I don't have foreign accounts. They totally took apart my affairs: I have never received a bribe. I refuse to consent to corruption. One of the reasons why they say I'm tough is because it's very difficult to approach me and propose anything illicit.

The injustice of this situation, the political injustice of this, the personal injustice, it affects me, it affects my family, and it affects all of us. The other day I said I was a victim, not a sacrificial victim, but a victim of injustice. I am a victim of injustice.

GG: Madam president, thank you very much for the interview.

DR: Thank you.

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