Dilma as Lula’s Successor: The First 100 Days

By Emir Sader

The first 100 days may or may not be representative of a government. For the first time Brazil has a president who was elected not as an opposition candidate, but as a successor, continuing a government of unprecedented achievement, and following Brazil’s most popular leader since Getúlio Vargas, who led Brazil’s industrialization in the 1930s.

In 1995, the conservative newspaper Folha de São Paulo welcomed Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s inauguration, with a special section announcing the “Cardoso Era”—a recognition that Lula, who truly initiated a new era in the country, did not receive. The commemoration was lost to insignificance when it became clear that Cardoso was simply the Brazilian chapter of the region’s neoliberal presidents; joining Argentina’s Carlos Menem, Peru’s Alberto Fujimori, Venezuela’s Carlos Andrés Perez, and Mexico’s Carlos Salinas de Gortari, among others, in failure and defeat.

The balance of Lula’s first 100 days foreshadowed the pitfalls into which his critics would fall, from both the right and the left. The right-wing sought to tarnish his image as a representative of the popular movement, emphasizing the continuity, and dissolution over the PT’s long announced priorities, especially in terms of social policies. The left-wing critics, in a similar way, rushed to write off the Lula government as a clear continuation of the neoliberal Cardoso government, appealing to the traditional epithets of “treason,” “surrender,” and “reconciliation.” Both sides condemned the Lula government, already within its first 100 days.

The Lula enigma—title of a chapter in my forthcoming book The New Mole, which looks at the “decipher me or I’ll devour you” paradigm that Lula represented to his adversaries—would not take long to bemuse these critics on both the right and the ultra-left, and defeat them both. It is not by chance that they both rallied against him, be it because of the popular support that he had acquired, or because they both raced to be the first to defeat him in their campaign of condemnations.

Both sides were defeated when it became clear that the first 100 days were a transition from the “cursed legacy” of successive right-wing governments to the creation of an economic and social model that would again focus on development and income distribution. This was at the heart of the undeniable success of Lula’s two terms.

The first 100 days of the Dilma Rousseff government are unique because they are the continuation of a government and a leader of unprecedented success in Brazil and, in some ways, the world (as pointed out by British historian Perry Anderson in his March 31 article “Lula’s Brazil,” in the London Review of Books). A few months ago, we debated what to expect post-Lula: whether we would have the opportunism of the conservative presidential candidate, José Serra, or the rigidity of Rousseff. We have had neither one nor the other.

Just as Lula’s announced break with Cardoso pushed critics to emphasize the elements of continuity—ignoring important shifts in both foreign and social policy—now they look to highlight the differences. Both approaches were, and are, wrong: The Lula government was not the continuation of the Cardoso government, and the Rousseff government is not a break from the Lula government.

The essential elements of the Lula government have been maintained and reinforced with Rousseff: The economic and social model has undergone the same adjustments that Lula himself would have made, faced with the changing international reality, such as the situation of the global economy, with the continued importance that foreign exchange has had over the past two years in particular. The government seeks to address these challenges on the narrow bridge between avoiding uncontrolled inflation and balancing trade—a situation in which it is necessary to manage interest rates and other instruments against excessive fluctuation or appreciation of the currency. The Lula

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government would not have done anything much different. It is not by chance that there is continuity between Lula’s and Rousseff’s economic staff, now with even greater cohesion, with the appointment of career economist Alexandre Tombini to head the Central Bank.

In the same way, Rousseff has maintained social policies as central to the government’s fundamental pillar: development while combating social inequality. The Growth Acceleration Program (PAC)—which invested over half a trillion dollars during Lula’s second term—is still protected from budget adjustments, and still holds a leading role in the government’s continued economic expansion and poverty alleviation programs. The adjustments at the heart of the Rousseff government have improved the harmony and capacity to manage this key pillar, which will continue the achievements of the Lula government.

The changes that Rousseff has made must be addressed in their own specific context. Rousseff has promised to build 500 new urgent care facilities by 2014 and on March 28, launched the Stork Network (Rede Cegonha), a new $5.7 billion program to attend to new mothers and their babies. These steps are clearly positive for public health, which is one of the country’s most serious social problems. Building off of steps under the Lula government, the Rousseff administration has prioritized the creation of a Truth Commission (to investigate the cases of torture and disappearances under the Brazilian dictatorship)—an important added initiative under the Department of Human Rights. The Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA), charged with producing accurate statistical data to improve public policy, has continued its remarkable work. And the Rousseff government has tasked the Ministry of Communications with democratizing

The Lula Government’s Foreign Policy: An Interview With Emir Sader

This interview took place in Rio de Janeiro shortly after Dilma Rousseff took office on New Year’s Day.

What were the most noteworthy characteristics of the Lula government’s foreign policy? And how was it different from Lula’s predecessor?

One of the first defining moments of the Lula government in international policy was when it helped to block the offensive of the U.S.-sponsored Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which would have established a hemisphere-wide free trade zone modeled on NAFTA. Brazil and the United States would have had a fundamental role in the final phase of the implementation and formalization of the FTAA. Nevertheless, the Lula government’s decision to prioritize the regional processes of integration led Brazil to veto the FTAA, opening the space for MERCOSUR to be revived from its state of inactivity, and almost inexistence.

In the same way, this strategic about-face of the new Brazilian foreign policy allowed and promoted the emergence of new forms of integration and regional cooperation, such as UNASUR, the Bank of the South, the South American Defense Council and the South American Community of Nations. A strong association of diverse countries from across the Global South joined this alliance of Latin American nations, among whom, of course, the BRIC nations—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—are an emblematic example.

Under this framework also, without a doubt, the Lula government established a strong cooperation with Africa, particularly with the Portuguese-speaking countries, which were completely rejected in terms of foreign policy under Lula’s predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002). This allowed us to not only begin to repay the historic debt our country has to Africa, but also establish tight connections of economic exchange, supporting large projects in infrastructure and educational and scientific cooperation, from a completely non-paternalistic perspective, and clearly in solidarity and brotherhood. Likewise, in terms of international trade, China became Brazil’s principal partner, with South America second and United States in third place.

In summary, during the Lula government there was a very substantial change in foreign policy from that of his predecessor. It was a very radical break that could also be seen in the other areas of public policy carried out from 2003 to 2010—changes that, without a doubt, will also underscore the foreign policy style of the new president, Dilma Rousseff.

What was the most significant change of the Lula administration in terms of international geopolitics?

Brazil was always the privileged ally of the United States, whether it was during the Brazilian military dictatorship
Brazilian communications by prioritizing community media and more closely regulating television and radio waves.

The problems must be addressed within this context: The Rousseff government’s continuity with the Lula government. We can’t allow critics to isolate partial aspects of the bigger picture or get carried away by simple journalistic motifs—which tend to use descriptive imagery to focus only on the appearances, without the capacity for profound political analysis. The problems are in the economic realm: the difficulties of adjusting internal measures without jeopardizing the objectives of the central government, the obstacles to carrying out the PAC development projects—some of the most serious problems facing the government, the nuances of international politics, and cultural policy.

But the Rousseff government’s greatest achievement is already its capacity to expand the potential of the government. In other words, to maintain the objectives set forth by the Lula government, broadening alliances and legitimizing it politically and socially, extending the capacity for dialogue and interaction with other social sectors—such as the middle class—as well as with the opposition. Herein lies the essential art of constructing alternatives to neoliberalism: to develop an alternative model, guaranteeing the economic, social, political, and cultural conditions for it to be reproduced and consolidated.

The Rousseff government has inherited not just a country in much better shape than Lula did eight years ago, but also a weakened, demoralized, and defeated right-wing—both in its political sphere as well as in the media. That is the context in which the Rousseff government must be assessed, as well as the progress it will make and the problems it will face in the thousands of days to come.

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