Political Corruption in Brazil
The “Mensalão” Corruption Scandal and the Future of the PT

The current corruption scandal in Brazil, known as the “escândalo do mensalão,” has dominated Brazilian politics since it first came to light in June, 2005. It has threatened to bring down the administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva who, until recently, was seen as immune from the cronyism and clientelism that have plagued Brazil for years. On October 21, 2005, Brazil @ the Wilson Center hosted a conference that brought together experts from the United States, Brazil, and Canada to debate the ramifications of the political scandal in Brazil and address broader issues of corruption, good governance, and the very future of Lula’s Workers’ Party, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT).

Leading experts who participated included Paulo Sotero, Washington Correspondent for O Estado de São Paulo, Wendy Hunter, associate professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin, and Riordan Roett, director of Western Hemisphere Studies at The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Catherine Conaghan, professor of political studies at Queen’s University, moderated the discussion.

Paulo Sotero began on a somber note, claiming that this was one of the “saddest talks he has had to give.” While he described the current state of affairs as depressing, he said that he remained optimistic, predicting that Brazil would continue to grow and prosper as a democratic nation. He outlined two main arguments the Lula administration has put Lula defended the egregious acts of his fellow party members as behavior accepted by and expected of any other political party in Brazil.
forward to “spin” this recent corruption scandal. First, during a July interview in France, Lula defended the egregious acts of his fellow party members as behavior accepted by and expected of any other political party in Brazil. Sotero called this claim disappointing on many levels, but especially offensive in that the PT was elected in part on the basis of its claims to rise above the usual clientelistic practices of other Brazilian political parties. The second argument made by the Lula administration concerned the role of the media. The PT has tried to paint the scandal as a media conspiracy that has blown the evidence of impropriety out of proportion. To this argument, Sotero stated that the PT is “absolutely wrong,” pointing out that the evidence in this case speaks for itself.

In one of the more humorous moments of the discussion, Sotero referred to a popular Brazilian expression, “everything ends in pizza,” a phrase alluding to the strong Italian immigrant influence in Brazil’s southern regions. That is, when two parties are disputing a matter, they make peace at the end by sharing a pizza. Sotero emphasized, however, that the public will not let this scandal end “in pizza.” They are demanding that action be taken to penalize the parties involved with the scandal, pleading that the incident not be swept under the rug as in past dark periods of Brazilian history.

Wendy Hunter reflected on the history of the PT and politics in Brazil, asking how it was that a party that claimed to be so clean and ethical could be caught buying votes in the Congress. In essence, she concluded that the PT has become just like other political parties in the country, reflecting a larger, systemic problem for politics in Brazil. She went further to illuminate the severity of this particular crisis within the PT, explaining that, while it makes up 17 percent of the Brazilian Congress, over 60 percent of ministerial seats went to the party. This is a departure from standard practice in Brazil, in which ministerial appointments have been typically granted to other political parties in order to build alliances and reach across the political spectrum. For example, prior to Lula’s election, Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s administration enjoyed 23 percent of congressional representation, but possessed only 19 percent of ministerial seats. Hunter also pointed out that Lula’s administration, more often than not, has rewarded so-called “political competencies” rather than “technical competencies,” which, some have argued, has weakened the government as a whole by placing individuals in high-ranking positions based on their ability to play party politics.

Hunter also addressed the effects of the corruption scandal on the PT and on Lula’s political career, noting the shifting support base of the...
...the political turmoil has not compromised the sound macroeconomic policies of the Lula administration.

That the PT would continue to receive support from the less educated, working class segments of society. Social programs that target this bloc of voters will continue to attract support, regardless of whether or not the policies are sound. If Lula runs for reelection in 2006, panelists predicted that he would reach out in a more populist fashion to stimulate support from the working class base of the party. His approach will be more about image and less about concrete programs. The panelists agreed on one certainty: that the next time around, Lula will not be claiming that the PT is more ethical than other political parties in Brazil.

NOTES

1. “Escândalo do mensalão” refers to the monthly kickbacks politicians received from the Workers’ Party for voting a particular way. “Mensalão” is an augmentation of the word for “monthly salary” in Portuguese.
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