

Dilma Rousseff: An Interview with Amalia Perez, Professor James N. Green, and The Choices Program

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: What are your memories of April 1964 when the military came to power in Brazil?

Dilma Rousseff: The coup of 1964 was a time when Brazil as a whole was persecuted. I remember people fleeing arrest, going into exile; I recall reports of torture. My deepest feeling at the time was tremendous dismay at how democracy, which enabled the election of a popular president who had a platform based on the Basic Reforms plan [*Reformas de Base*], had been discarded. That dismay was enormous. We had voted for a leadership that wanted to transform Brazil and implement popular reforms and development projects. Instead, we got an unknown and unwanted military junta.

Journal: Were there any particular factors that sparked your decision to participate in the resistance? What values and beliefs motivated your involvement?

Rousseff: I arrived in the world of politics at this point—the moment of the military coup, when students (I was a student) mobilized. Students wanted more participation in politics. Our initial reaction was to oppose the coup, to demand democratic freedoms like the right of assembly, right of expression, right of organization. We even started producing a series of small newspapers. I joined the resistance during this process. Joining the resistance is not something that has a precise moment—you do not know the day, the hour, the minute. There is a process in which your awareness grows, and you realize that your country runs serious risks of backsliding. There are a number of threats hanging over the people. In the case of the students, Decree Law 477 prevented them from protesting. It was said that students should study, businessmen should grow their companies, workers should work, and intellectuals should write their books in silence. The ones behind politics were the military. Resistance begins in society when young people connect with a movement. In Brazil in 1964, that moment was the resurgence of political consciousness (for us, who were young). This was a very rich moment in Brazil involving protests aimed at the military coup.

Journal: Which of these values have been constant since then, and which have undergone transformations?

Rousseff: I think my generation suffered greatly from the military coup. My generation endured a terrible loss of faith in democracy. This disbelief in democracy caused by the coup changed as our resistance intensified. And, after and during the period of political imprisonment in Brazil, we realized more and more that democracy was fundamental for Brazil to be transformed; that democracy is on the right side of history. That is, when you have democracy, Brazil is empowered, people can have better lives, and opportunities are available for all. When democracy is curtailed, those who lose are the poorest, the most fragile. The immense population in Brazil of color—that is black, *mulata*—loses because it loses the children too. Democratic values are not equal to other values; they are values that surpass others. In addition to surpassing other values, they promote development and the expansion of social rights, such as the search for science, technology, and innovation, based on education for all. I think that's the perennial value of democracy.

Journal: How did those values and beliefs change your priorities when you were president?

Rousseff: Look, I think the first thing that is important in a government is to have a project, a plan, and to discuss that plan in the electoral process and have a commitment to accomplish it. I think there was the following motive in all of our programs: "Let's overcome the misery and elevate the poor, which is the majority, to a middle-class level." But besides raising income, we wanted to guarantee education, retirement benefits, and housing. The first thing needed was the guarantee of social rights, and we fully implemented the federal assistance network *Bolsa Família*,

along with other programs to support the elderly and disabled poor. Bolsa Família was aimed at young families that had no protection in Brazil. But not only that: we also needed to have education as its central value because without education two economic goals are unattainable. First, we cannot ensure that our income distribution achievements are perennial unless we offer people a way to earn higher wages themselves. So what is the legacy of a government? Education. That way, our gains in social inclusion have longevity. The other goal is development. Either Brazil enters the knowledge economy, or it loses out in the global economy. What is the basis needed to create basic science? Education. To generate technological development? Basic science and education. And to innovate? Also, you need to have this set of workers with an educational level that can add value not only to production but also to having quality work. This also improves people's lives.

Journal: Science Without Borders [*Ciência sem Fronteiras*] was an initiative of the president that was very important in Brazil. What was the logic behind Science Without Borders?

Rousseff: The logic behind Science Without Borders lies within this second goal that I was talking about—the importance of Brazil entering the knowledge economy. What did we hope to accomplish with Science Without Borders? Well, we needed to give Brazilian students access to the best in education abroad, especially in some technical areas. We had to focus on the areas of engineering, exact sciences, medical sciences; there was a ranking that was prioritized. And then we used a criterion not of privilege, but rather a selection criterion. We created competitive selection processes.

For me, Science Without Borders meant this passport for the future, which only the knowledge economy gives to a society. Making Science Without Borders meant building a critical mass of students who would have two gains. One was the very knowledge they would attain. The second was knowing how universities work, the best universities in the world—those in the United States, for example. When they returned to Brazil, they would have a more structured, more elaborate pattern of demand that could serve as a critical movement to change education. We can never accept that you just change from the top down. Change from the bottom up is also very effective. They would make that change from the bottom up.

Journal: Are there attitudes and ideas about women in your country that have affected your government as president? How did you handle it?

Rousseff: Look, my government had an obligation and a commitment. I said in my inaugural address that I had to honor women. But honoring women in my country meant fighting the good fight to ensure that society adopts certain principles or certain movements that women need. For me, the main thing—if you ask me, the first one—is to fight the violence perpetrated against women because they are women. In former President Lula's government, we created the Maria da Penha Law. The Maria da Penha Law criminalized domestic violence against women for the first time. The most frequent type of violence against women is domestic and perpetrated by people close to them, in a relationship. And my government turned that violence into “femicide”—into a heinous crime. It is a crime that merits no discussion; the criminal cannot have habeas corpus and he will not be released from prison. Obviously, this is part of institutional change, but we have made a whole host of practical changes as well. We began a telephone service through which women could report violence, but that was not enough. That's why we made the House of Brazilian Women [*Casa da Mulher Brasileira*]. What was the Brazilian Women's House for? It concentrated all the processes of support for women so that they could denounce violence on not only judicial, but also on all Brazilian institutional levels. We put all these services in the same space, hence the concept of a house. In addition, it was a space that guaranteed the reception of women victims of violence, because women must leave the house in those cases. We also ensured that women had some economic social empowerment that could guarantee them a certain autonomy needed to survive. Obviously, all of this went through our social policies. 92 percent of those receiving Bolsa Família were women. Why? Because the woman has a central role in the family. We gave her the power and the autonomy to decide where to spend the money that complemented the family income. We wanted

the Bolsa Familia to reach children, and because children cannot accept money themselves, we had to do it through a relative. That was an important issue: empowering the poor woman. In the case of houses, we built four and a half million houses and prioritized female homeownership. So women were specifically helped by several government programs. I believe there is a lot more to do for women in Brazil, but I just want to recognize one more thing. The woman, through her own agency, has been responsible for her own recent empowerment and leading role in society. Women, contrary to what they say, are very strong. At least the women I've interacted with. Very strong.

Journal: Did you feel attacked as a woman in the presidency, in campaigns against your presidency? That is, in the vulnerability and prejudices that society has against the strong, executive woman?

Rousseff: I did, yes. I think that during my presidency there was a stirring of misogyny and hatred. Prejudice was used as a weapon of combat against me. This is clear when you look at the adjectives used to describe me and compare them with those directed at men. Stereotypes about men and women are very strong in politics. The man is decisive; the woman is insensitive. The man is reactive; the woman is a fragile person who is alarmed by everything. The man is hardworking; the woman obsessive-compulsive about work. All of these stereotypes were in wide currency during my government. It turns out that all this is part, I think, of a process that is a characteristic of the 21st century, which I think is the century of women. It's important to note that when I was impeached, the greatest solidarity that I received and continue to receive has come from women. Younger women, older women, women of all kinds. They understood that there was this misogynist component to the opposition against me.

Journal: You were arrested and tortured during the military dictatorship in Brazil. How did these experiences influence the decisions you made as president?

Rousseff: I think that my arrest and torture, instead of angering me, impressed upon me the importance of democracy. I came to see democracy as fundamental for my country's success. Democracy is important so that the populace is not tortured and imprisoned like we were. It may be the worker who in some circumstances is turned into a criminal by society because they treat him like a criminal. And the violence within my country is often concentrated in this area. So I think it made me try to combat all forms of violence in every way, mainly state violence. And even today I am encouraged to stop the violence within democracy, called "lawfare." It is the use of the law to destroy an adversary that is turned into an enemy. When this is used, the person is prejudged. Before they are put on trial, they have already been convicted, have already lost their rights, have already been demoralized, and the family has already suffered. Today in Brazil we have a great threat of lawfare, which is the use of the law as a weapon to combat a political enemy or a political divergence. This is something that I try to resist. It was one of the things that life taught me to do.

Journal: How could you resist when you were being tortured? How did you resist and survive?

Rousseff: In the beginning, torture is very difficult. I'll explain why: because a minute is a century. Anticipation is itself a form of torture. They'd say: "In half an hour we'll be back. Think carefully, because in half an hour it comes back again." Imagination can often amplify reality. It is a continuous struggle, because the first sensation before torture is immense solitude. We are social beings. We, when we relate to others, become accustomed to it and enjoy it without even noticing the affection shared because we are of the same species, because we are people who think and live in a society. The first feeling is that you are alone. You must have the ability, or inner strength, to at that moment be alone. But there is the second feeling as well: do not think that you will endure the pain indefinitely. You say, "now I can stand it for 10 minutes," or five minutes, or three minutes. When three minutes have passed, you say, "now I can take three more." That's six; you keep going. One thing you learn is that your battle is made of small fights, small wins. No one is a hero. We are all very much alike in everything. The act of heroism is in a way the act of deceiving oneself.

Journal: I want to ask a question that is not on the agenda because I think it's important to the American public, to whom torture is abstract. People may have heard of Guantanamo, for example, but they often don't entirely know what goes on there. How, then, would you describe torture in more concrete terms?

Rousseff: Look, the torture in Brazil was like this: you arrived, and the first thing they did was electric shock. They would throw water on you, you would be dressed, they would take off your shoes, throw water, and apply electric wires all over your body: to the ear, to the toes. And they would stop the electric shock. There was a pause, I do not know for how long, and then they would have you take off all your clothes and would hang you on a *pau de arara* stick. What is pau de arara? It's usually a wooden pole. They make you hang upside down with your hand tied to your legs in an uncomfortable position. This makes the hands extremely sensitive and causes a lot of pain in the arms and legs. Then they throw water on you, and they continue. The worst torture is electric shock; it's a pain that cuts through you. There are also—I did not suffer through it myself—drownings, but the torture that everyone I met reported as the hardest was the electric shock. It is very bad. It is very bad.

Journal: Why is remembering the past and revealing injustices important to Brazil? That is, does the work of the National Truth Commission [*Comissão Nacional da Verdade*] fulfill this role, or is there more to be done?

Rousseff: Unfortunately, the transition in Brazil was done from the top down. The transition, in this case even with the great movement of the *Diretas Já* [Direct Presidential Elections campaign], gave rise to negotiations that led from dictatorship to democracy. One such stipulation was amnesty for the torturers. And this amnesty is recognized by the Federal Supreme Court. What does this allow? It allows, for example, for a congressman to go to the public and say that he voted in favor of my impeachment in the name of the military dictatorship and in the name of the torture that a torturer had inflicted upon me. The first step to changing a country is to understand its history, to understand what is at stake, to understand what the forces in play are. To understand the whys, the hows, and the wheres. Establishing the Truth Commission was our contribution to letting people know that this happened and that we could not allow it to happen again. There cannot be another military dictatorship in Brazil that will torture and kill and arrest. And that does not mean that there is another type of coup, as was the parliamentary coup of impeachment, without crime of responsibility. But from the point of view of human rights, the Truth Commission fulfills the role of making clear what has been done and what can never be done again.

Journal: What makes Brazil special and important to you?

Rousseff: Brazil is my home, my family, my world, my nation. That is, Brazil is where I live my life. Anyone who lives in a country as strong and inspiring as Brazil is important because that person, in a way, is me.

Journal: But you dedicated your whole life to the transformation of Brazil. Why?

Rousseff: Why? Look, I think you choose paths in life. And I think I've chosen a path. It is to do, in the Greek sense of the word, politics. The Greek meaning of the word "politics" is to carry out actions that concern everyone, for the benefit of all. And I think that kind of politics is fundamental in today's world. A world in which politics is not valued undermines the political process. But politics is the only way in which the men and women of the West can transform the world. Not because we will speak on behalf of everyone, but because we will speak for a part while trying to reach the whole. So I think politics is essential, and I worked in it. I wanted to transform Brazil.

Journal: Do you have anything else you would like to say today?

Rousseff: I do. A thousand and one things.