

A US Hand in Brazil's Coup?

The ouster of Brazil's left-of-center president was the latest right-wing victory in Latin America, but was this "quiet coup" driven by local politics or part of a broader U.S. strategy to reclaim dominance over its "backyard," asks Ted Snider.

By Ted Snider

There can no longer be any doubt that the impeachment of Brazil's democratically elected President Dilma Rousseff was an illegitimate act of power politics. The maneuvering by opposition politicians has been revealed for what it clearly was all along: a quiet coup dressed in the disguise of good governance.

The recent publication (by Brazil's largest newspaper, *Folha de São Paulo*) of transcripts from secret conversations that took place in March, just weeks before the impeachment vote, has done for Brazil what the intercepted phone call between Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt did for Ukraine: it provided proof that the removal of the elected president was a coup.

The call – between Romero Jucá, who was a senator at the time and is currently the planning minister in the new Michel Temer government, and former oil executive Sergio Machado – lays bare "a national pact" to remove Rousseff and install Temer as president. Jucá reveals that not only opposition politicians but also the military and the Supreme Court were conspirators in the coup.

Regarding the military's role, Jucá said, "I am talking to the generals, the military commanders. They are fine with this, they said they will guarantee it." And, as for the Supreme Court, Jucá admitted that he "spoke with and secured the involvement of numerous justices on Brazil's Supreme Court," according to The Intercept's Glenn Greenwald (who lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil).

Jucá further boasted that "there are only a small number" of Supreme Court justices that he had not spoken to.

What the Romero Jucá phone call does not do, unlike the Victoria Nuland phone call, is reveal U.S. involvement in the coup. The Jucá transcript does not name the United States as a participant in the intrigue. Neither did President Rousseff when Greenwald interviewed her. She pinned the blame securely on the lapel of lower house president Eduardo Cunha.

Rousseff's ouster was dressed up as punishment for her obtaining loans to cover budgetary shortfalls. There were no allegations that Rousseff personally

profited from these transactions, but it appears that some of the coup plotters hope the new regime will kill off a corruption and money-laundering investigation that implicates some of them, including the phone-call participants Jucá and Machado.

But there are three lines of evidence suggestive of U.S. involvement as well. In chronological order, there is suggestive historical evidence, there is a suggestive pattern of evidence in other Latin American countries, and there is current suggestive evidence in Brazil.

The Historical Evidence

Over the years, there have been a number of well-documented American coups in Latin America. The most well known are the 1954 CIA overthrow of Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz and the 1973 overthrow of Chile's Salvador Allende. But the little known 1964 Brazilian coup was significant, too.

Noam Chomsky explains that in 1962, amid Cold War tensions over Cuba, Kennedy made the policy decision to transform the militaries of Latin America from defending against external forces to "internal security" or, as Chomsky puts it, "war against the domestic population, if they raised their heads."

The Brazilian coup was significant because it may have been the first major manifestation of this shift in America's Latin American policy. The Kennedy administration prepared the coup, and it was carried out shortly after Kennedy's assassination. Chomsky says that the "mildly social democratic" Goulart government was taken out and replaced by a "murderous and brutal" military dictatorship.

Though not often included in the list of significant U.S. coups, the evidence that it was a U.S. coup is solid. The CIA station in Brazil's field report shows clear U.S. foreknowledge of the coup: "a revolution by anti-Goulart forces will definitely get under way this week, probably in the next few days." President Lyndon Johnson also gave Undersecretary of State George Ball and Assistant Secretary for Latin America Thomas Mann the green light to participate in the coup: "I think we ought to take every step that we can, be prepared to do everything that we need to do."

And the steps were substantial. Ambassador Lincoln Gordon told CIA Director John McCone, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk that those steps should include "a clandestine delivery of arms . . . pre-positioned prior any outbreak of violence" to the coup forces as well as shipments of gas and oil.

Ambassador Gordon also told the senior officials to "prepare without delay

against the contingency of needed overt intervention at a second stage" after the covert involvement. Rusk would then send Gordon a list of the steps that would be taken "in order [to] be in a position to render assistance at appropriate time to anti-Goulart forces if it is decided this should be done."

The list, sent in a telegram on March 31, 1964, included dispatching U.S. Navy tankers with petroleum and oil, an aircraft carrier, two guided missile destroyers, four destroyers and task force tankers for "overt exercises off Brazil." The telegram also lists as a step to "assemble shipment of about 11 tons of ammunition."

The significance of this historical record is the demonstration that the last time Brazil had a "mildly social democratic" government, the U.S. cooperated in its removal. The next social democratic government would be the now removed PT government of Presidents Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff.

Since Lula da Silva took office in 2003, government policies have been credited for lifting millions of Brazilians out of poverty and making Brazil a powerful independent player on the world stage.

In 2009, Lula da Silva was a key figure in the creation of the BRICS organization of emerging economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), representing a challenge to the dominance of the U.S.-based International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Among other initiatives, BRICS has called for a new global reserve currency, a direct threat to the power of the U.S. dollar.

Now, Lula da Silva's successor, Dilma Rousseff, has been removed from office, creating uncertainty about the BRICS future.

Pattern of Evidence in Latin America

The next line of evidence is the recent pattern of right-wing or reactionary movements reclaiming power across Latin America. After a powerful swing to left-wing governments in the first decade of the new century, conservative forces have been re-establishing their control over the past few years.

For the U.S. government, which was uncomfortable with the leftist trend, the surge to the right has been welcome news since Washington has long viewed Central and South America as its strategic "backyard" with compliant states accepting U.S. hegemony and granting American companies easy access to natural resources.

As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger put it, if America could not control its own backyard, it could hardly hope "to achieve a successful order

elsewhere in the world.”

Key to this reclamation of Latin America is the repossession of Venezuela after the death of populist leader Hugo Chavez in 2013. Chavez’ successor, Nicolás Maduro, is not considered nearly the skilled political leader that Chavez was but Maduro did continue the run of Bolivarian Revolution victories, albeit by a narrow margin over Henrique Capriles, Washington’s choice.

Though some 150 international monitors observed the election and an audit of more than half the vote tally found no problems, the United States refused to recognize the election results, the only country to do so. Since then, political pressure on the Maduro government has continued, often cheered on by the U.S. news media and made worse by the drop in world oil prices that contributed to an economic crisis.

President Maduro recently declared a state of emergency, accusing the U.S. of conspiring with right-wing groups in Venezuela to overthrow his government. Maduro said, “Washington is activating measures at the request of Venezuela’s fascist right.”

But Venezuela’s leftist government has hardly been alone in facing hostility from Washington. On June 28, 2009, Honduras’ democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya was seized at gunpoint by hooded soldiers and forced onto a plane that, after refueling at the U.S. military base of Palmerola, took him to Costa Rica.

Zelaya immediately declared that he was the victim of a coup, an assessment shared by almost all the international community and the Organization of American States (OAS). But then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton accepted Zelaya’s ouster and supported the new Honduran regime’s moves to select a replacement. The Obama administration refused, publicly, to use the word “coup.”

But it was a coup and Washington cooperated with it. Zelaya complained that “after the coup d’état . . . the U.S. has increased its military support to Honduras.” Despite a demand from the OAS and the United Nations for Zelaya’s return, Clinton’s State Department refused to follow that course.

Later, the U.S. recognized the coup leaders as the winners of an election that the OAS, the Latin American Mercosur trade bloc and the 23-nation Rio Group refused to accept. So illegitimate was the election that the U.N. refused to even bother monitoring it.

Latin American expert Mark Weisbrot told me that “the Obama administration acknowledged that they were talking to the [Honduran] military right up to the day of the coup, allegedly to convince them not to do it.” But, he added, “I

find it hard to believe that they couldn't convince them not to do it if they really wanted to: the Honduran military is pretty dependent on the U.S."

Despite the refusal to call it a coup and the insistence on recognizing the new government as legitimate, the U.S. knew it was a coup. By July 24, 2009, less than a month after Zelaya's ouster, the White House, Clinton and many others were in receipt of a cable sent from the U.S. embassy in Honduras. Clearly never meant to be public, the cable was titled: "Open and Shut: the Case of the Honduran Coup."

In it, the embassy said, "There is no doubt that the military, Supreme Court and National Congress conspired on June 28 in what constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup" and "none of the . . . arguments [of the coup defenders] has any substantive validity under the Honduran constitution."

So, the U.S. had foreknowledge of the coup, cooperated in the coup – at least by helping the rendition plane to refuel – and provided crucial diplomatic cover for the coup.

A similar pattern occurred in Paraguay where democratically elected Fernando Lugo was removed in a right-wing coup in 2012 while the U.S. was negotiating for a new military base. Again, the U.S. refused to call Lugo's impeachment a coup, though as early as 2009, U.S. embassy cables noted that Lugo's political opposition has as its goal to "Capitalize on any Lugo missteps" and "impeach Lugo and assure their own political supremacy."

The cable noted that to achieve that goal, the opponents are willing to "legally" impeach Lugo "even if on spurious grounds." So, the U.S. knew that was a coup because they had been tipped off about the strategy and told what it would look like.

A slightly different strategy has been pursued in Bolivia where WikiLeaks cables revealed that Washington had approved 101 grants worth over \$4 million to help regional governments "operate more strategically" to cause a shift in power away from the national government of Evo Morales to regional governments. The idea was to rebalance power and weaken the Morales government.

That Brazil was going to be a part of this Latin American pattern was clear as early as 2005 when, Mark Weisbrot said, the U.S. intervened in Brazilian politics to undermine the government.

Current Suggestive Evidence in Brazil

Though the precise U.S. role in Brazil's current political crisis remains unclear, there has been some suggestive, though not conclusive, evidence.

Weisbrot said, “there is no doubt that the biggest players in this coup attempt – people like former presidential candidates José Serra and Aécio Neves – are U.S. government allies.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Professor of Sociology at the University of Coimbra in Portugal and Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said Brazil is awash in financing from American sources, including “CIA-related organizations.”

Perhaps the most direct implication is that the day after the impeachment vote, Senator Aloysio Nunes of the coup government began a three-day visit to Washington. Nunes is no small player. He was the vice-presidential candidate on the 2014 ticket that lost to President Rousseff and helped spearhead Rousseff’s impeachment in the senate.

Nunes scheduled meetings with, among others, the chairman and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Corker and Ben Cardin, respectively, as well as with Undersecretary of State and former Ambassador to Brazil Thomas Shannon. Though Nunes denies it, there are reports that his trip to Washington was ordered by acting President Michel Temer.

The willingness to go ahead with the planned meetings with Nunes right after the impeachment vote suggests at least tacit acceptance or approval on the part of Washington.

President Evo Morales of Bolivia has called on the remaining left-wing governments of South America to counter American plans to retake control of the region. Morales said, “It is the plan of the American empire that wants to regain control of Latin America and the Caribbean, and especially in South America, and there surely is an ambition to establish a United States presence in these countries and recover subservient governments as a model, as a system.”

So far, the U.S. government has been conspicuously silent about the coup in Brazil.

Ted Snider writes on analyzing patterns in U.S. foreign policy and history.
