

US Complicity? After Vote to Remove Brazil's President, Key Opposition Figure Holds Meetings in Washington

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BRAZIL'S LOWER HOUSE of Congress on Sunday voted to impeach the country's president, Dilma Rousseff, sending the removal process to the Senate. In an act of unintended though rich symbolism, the House member who pushed impeachment over the 342-vote threshold was Dep. Bruno Araújo, [himself implicated by a document](#) indicating he may have received illegal funds from the construction giant at the heart of the nation's corruption scandal. Even more significantly, Araújo belongs to the center-right party PSDB, whose nominees have lost four straight national elections to Rousseff's moderate-left PT party, with the last ballot-box defeat [delivered just 18 months ago](#), when 54 million Brazilians voted to re-elect Dilma as president.

Those two facts about Araújo underscore the unprecedentedly surreal nature of yesterday's proceedings in Brasília, capital of the world's fifth-largest country. Politicians and parties that have spent two decades trying, and failing, to defeat PT in democratic elections triumphantly marched forward to effectively overturn the 2014 vote by removing Dilma on grounds that, as [today's New York Times report makes clear](#), are, at best, dubious in the extreme. Even *The Economist*, which has long despised the PT and its anti-poverty programs and wants Dilma to resign, [has argued](#) that "in the absence of proof of criminality, impeachment is unwarranted" and "looks like a pretext for ousting an unpopular president."

Sunday's proceedings, conducted in the name of combating corruption, were presided over by one of the democratic world's most blatantly corrupt politicians, House speaker Eduardo Cunha (above, center), who was [recently discovered](#) to have stashed millions of dollars in secret Swiss bank accounts that have no possible non-corrupt source and who [lied under oath when he denied](#) to Congressional investigators that he had foreign bank accounts. Of the 594 members of the Congress, as [theGlobe and Mail reported yesterday](#), "318 are under investigation or face charges" while their target, President Rousseff, "herself faces no allegation of financial impropriety."



Pro-government deputies hold a banner that reads in Portuguese "Cunha out!" behind the table of House speaker Eduardo Cunha, seated center, during a voting session on the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, in Brasilia, Brazil, April 17, 2016.

One by one, corruption-stained legislators marched to the microphone to address Cunha, voting "yes" on impeachment by professing to be horrified by corruption. As preambles to

their votes, they cited a [dizzying array of bizarre motives](#), from “the fundamentals of Christianity” and “not to be as red as Venezuela and North Korea” to “the evangelical nation” and “the peace of Jerusalem.” *The Guardian*’s Jonathan Watts [captured just some of the farce](#):

Yes, voted Paulo Maluf, who is on [Interpol’s red list for conspiracy](#). Yes, voted Nilton Capixaba, who is accused of money laundering. “For the love of God, yes!” declared Silas Camara, who is under investigation for forging documents and misappropriating public funds.

It is highly likely that the Senate will agree to hear the charges, which will result in the 180-day suspension of Dilma as president and the installation of the pro-business Vice President Michel Temer from the PMDB party. The vice president himself is, as [the New York Times put it](#), “under scrutiny over claims that he was involved in an illegal ethanol purchasing scheme.” Temer recently [made it known](#) that one of the leading candidates to head his economic team would be the [chairman of Goldman Sachs in Brazil, Paulo Leme](#).

If, after trial, two-thirds of the Senate votes to convict, Dilma will be permanently removed. Many suspect that one core objective in impeaching Dilma is to provide a cathartic sense for the public that corruption has been addressed, all designed to exploit Temer’s newfound control [to prevent further investigations](#) of the dozens upon dozens of actually corrupt politicians populating the leading parties.

THE U.S. HAS been notably quiet about this tumult in the second-largest country in the hemisphere, and its posture has barely been discussed in the mainstream press. It’s not hard to see why. The U.S. spent years vehemently denying that it had any role in the 1964 military coup that removed Brazil’s elected left-wing government, a coup that resulted in 20 years of a brutal, pro-U.S., right-wing military dictatorship. But [secret documents and recordings](#) emerged proving that the U.S. actively [helped plot that coup](#), and the country’s 2014 Truth Commission report [documented](#) that the U.S. and U.K. aggressively supported the dictatorship and even “trained Brazilian interrogators in torture techniques.”



Jair Bolsonaro, a right-wing, pro-impeachment Brazilian politician who is expected to run for president.

Photo: Fernando Bizerra/EPA/Newscom

That U.S.-supported coup and military dictatorship loom large over the current controversy. President Rousseff and her supporters explicitly call the attempt to remove her a coup. One prominent pro-impeachment deputado who is expected to run for president, the right-wing Jair Bolsonaro (whom *The Intercept* [profiled last year](#)), yesterday explicitly praised the military dictatorship and pointedly [hailed Col. Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra](#), the dictatorship’s chief torturer (notably responsible for [Dilma’s torture](#)). Bolsonaro’s son, Eduardo, also in the House, [said he was casting his impeachment vote](#) “for the military men of ‘64”: those who carried out the coup and imposed military rule. The endless invocation of God and Family by impeachment proponents yesterday was redolent of [the motto of the](#)

[1964 coup](#): “March of the Family with God for Liberty.” Just as Brazil’s leading oligarch-owned media outlets [supported the 1964 coup](#) as a necessary strike against left-wing corruption, so too have they been unified in supporting, and inciting, the contemporary impeachment movement against PT with the same rationale.

Dilma’s relationship with the U.S. was strained for years, significantly exacerbated by her vocal denunciations of NSA spying that targeted Brazilian industry, its population, and the president personally, as well as Brazil’s close trade relationship with China. Her predecessor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, had also alienated many U.S. officials by, among other things, joining with Turkey to negotiate an independent deal with Iran over its nuclear program when Washington was attempting to assemble global pressure against Tehran. Washington insiders have been [making it increasingly clear](#) that they no longer view Brazil as safe for capital.

The U.S., of course, has a long — and recent — history of engineering instability and coups against democratically elected, left-wing Latin American governments it dislikes. Beyond the 1964 coup in Brazil, the U.S. was at least supportive of the [attempted 2002 overthrow](#) of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, played a central role in the [2004 ouster of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide](#), and then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [lent vital support](#) to legitimize the 2009 coup in Honduras, just to name a few examples. Many [on the Brazilian left believe](#) that the U.S. is actively engineering the current instability in their country in order to get rid of a left-wing party that has relied heavily on trade with China, and instead usher in a more pro-business, pro-U.S. government that could never win an election on its own.

ALTHOUGH NO REAL evidence has emerged proving this theory, a [little-publicized trip to the U.S.](#) this week by a key Brazilian opposition leader will likely fuel those concerns. Today — the day after the impeachment vote — Sen. Aloysio Nunes of the PSDB will be in Washington to undertake three days of meetings with various U.S. officials as well as with lobbyists and assorted influence-peddlers close to Clinton and other leading political figures.

Sen. Nunes is meeting with the chairman and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Corker, R-Tenn., and Ben Cardin, D-Md.; Undersecretary of State and former Ambassador to Brazil [Thomas Shannon](#); and attending a luncheon on Tuesday hosted by the Washington lobbying firm Albright Stonebridge Group, headed by former Clinton Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former Bush 43 Commerce Secretary and Kellogg Company CEO Carlos Gutierrez.

The Brazilian Embassy in Washington and Sen. Nunes’s office told *The Intercept* that they had no additional information about the Tuesday luncheon. In an email, the Albright Stonebridge Group wrote that there is “no media component” to the event, which is for the “Washington policy and business community,” and a list of attendees or topics addressed would not be made public.

Nunes is an extremely important — and revealing — opposition figure to send to the U.S. for these high-level meetings. He ran for vice president in 2014 on the PSDB ticket that lost to Dilma. He will, notably, now be one of the key opposition figures leading the fight to [impeach Dilma in the Senate](#). As president of the Brazilian Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee, Nunes has [repeatedly advocated that Brazil](#) once again move closer to an alliance with the U.S. and U.K. And — it almost goes without saying — Nunes has [been heavily implicated in corruption allegations](#); in September, a judge ordered a criminal

investigation after an informant, a construction company executive, told investigators that he gave Sen. Nunes R\$ 500,000 (US\$ 140,000) for his campaign — R\$ 300,000 above board and another R\$ 200,000 in illicit bribes — in order to win contracts with Petrobras. It is [hardly the first such accusation](#) against him.

Nunes's Washington trip was reportedly ordered by Temer himself, who is [already acting as though he runs Brazil](#). Temer is furious by what he perceives to be a radical, highly unfavorable change in the international narrative, which has increasingly depicted impeachment as a lawless and anti-democratic attempt by the opposition, led by Temer himself, to gain unearned power.

The would-be president ordered Nunes to Washington, [reported Folha](#), to launch “a counteroffensive in public relations” to combat this growing anti-impeachment sentiment around the world, which Temer said is “demoralizing Brazilian institutions.” Demonstrating concern about growing perceptions of the Brazilian opposition's attempted removal of Dilma, Nunes said that, in Washington, “we are going to explain that we're not a banana republic.” A representative for Temer said this perception “is contaminating Brazil's image on the international stage.”

“This is a public relations trip,” says Maurício Santoro, a professor of political science at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, in an interview with *The Intercept*. “The most important challenge that Aloysio faces is not the American government, it is American public opinion. That is where the opposition is losing the battle.”

There is no doubt that international opinion has turned against the impeachment movement of Brazil's opposition parties. Whereas only a month ago Western media outlets depicted anti-government street protests in glowing terms, they now routinely highlight the fact that the legal grounds for impeachment are dubious at best and that impeachment leaders are far more implicated in corruption than Dilma.

In particular, Temer was reportedly concerned about, and furious over, the [denunciation of impeachment](#) by the U.S.-supported Organization of American States, whose secretary-general, Luis Almagro, said the group was “concerned over the process against Dilma, who hasn't been accused of anything” and because “among those pushing impeachment are members of Congress accused and guilty of corruption.” The head of the Union of South American Nations, Ernesto Samper, [similarly said](#) that impeachment “is a serious reason to be concerned for the security of Brazil and the region.”

The trip to Washington by this leading corruption-implicated opposition figure, the day after the House votes to impeach Dilma, will, at the very least, raise questions about the U.S. posture toward removal of the president. It will almost certainly fuel concerns on the Brazilian left about the U.S. role in the instability in their country. And it highlights many of the undiscussed dynamics driving impeachment, including a desire to move Brazil closer to the U.S. and to make it more accommodating to global business interests and austerity measures at the expense of the political agenda that Brazilian voters have embraced in four straight national elections.

UPDATE: Prior to publication, Sen. Nunes' office advised *The Intercept* that they had no additional information about his trip beyond what was written in their April 15 [press release](#). Subsequent to publication, Sen. Nunes' office pointed us to his April 17 [letter to the editor](#) of *Folha*, claiming that — contrary to their reporting — Vice President Michel Temer's

call was not the reason for his trip to Washington.

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