

# The Domestic Nightmare and the Unfulfilled Global Dreams of Brazil

Written by Francine Rossone de Paula

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FRANCINE ROSSONE DE PAULA, MAY 11 2018

A decade ago, Brazil was taking off. Acclaimed for its thriving economy and its resilience in the midst of a devastating global financial crisis, the country was climbing its way up to the position of global player and establishing itself as a diplomatic powerhouse. The first ten years of the twenty-first century were marked by an active and assertive participation of Brazil in multilateral fora along with the formation of political coalitions against perceived asymmetries in decision-making structures on the global stage. Brazilian Foreign Policy was not focused merely on the creation of opportunities for the Brazilian market. Instead, it has been designed with the clear purpose of elevating Brazil's political status abroad through the diversification of its partners, the expansion of diplomatic representations, and the willingness to take over greater responsibility towards the democratization of the world order. The insertion of Brazil on the global economy map as a leading actor combined with an ambitious international political agenda have resulted in the consolidation of institutions and alliances that have survived the subsequent loss of Brazil's prestige, such as the BRICS, the G4, the New Development Bank, and the G20+ at the WTO.

South Africa will host the 10<sup>th</sup> BRICS Summit next July, an annual forum in which the grouping formed by Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa discuss "representing spheres of political and socio-economic complementarities and areas of cooperation". Over the last ten years, the annual programme for these summits expanded to include over 100 sectorial meetings. The New Development Bank, established during the sixth BRICS Summit in Fortaleza (2014), is now in its third full year of operations. The Bank, created with the purpose to mobilize resources for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in emerging economies and developing countries, plans to approve up to 20 new projects estimated at USD 4 billion and to start its private sector lending operations, according to the NDB Budget Summary for 2018.

The G4, composed by Brazil, India, Germany, and Japan, are still seeking the expansion of the permanent and non-permanent seats at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). On February 1, 2018, during the Security Council Open Debate on "maintenance of international peace and security: Trafficking of persons in conflict situations", the German Ambassador Christoph Heusgen delivered a statement on behalf of the G4 countries. He argued that 85% of the UN member states have requested text-based negotiations about the UNSC reform. The G4 expressed their commitment to support each other's bid for permanent seats, and invited the member states to produce their own texts expressing their positions in order to facilitate the conversations in the next Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN).

The G20+, or G20 Developing Nations, features at the WTO website as an active coalition of member states interested in coordinating their views and strengthening their positions by eventually speaking with one voice, in particular regarding the regulation of the agricultural sector in developed countries. The group was formed during the 2003 Ministerial Meeting in Cancun, with the leadership of Brazil and India, with the goal of promoting trade liberalization in agriculture. The commercial G20 should not be confused with the financial G20. The latter was created in 1999 as a multilateral forum welcoming finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors of the strongest economies in the world to coordinate policies and agendas towards the stabilization of the global economy. The G20 was expanded in 2008, as a response to the global financial crisis, with the first Summit of State Leaders, in which Brazil featured as a protagonist.

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The country has a seat at the United Nations Human Rights Council, after receiving 137 votes at the election (term 2017/2019) that took place during the 71<sup>st</sup> United Nations General Assembly. The net contribution of Brazil to the United Nations was reported to be US\$ 96 427 139 in 2017, the seventh largest contribution, compared to the US\$ 21 342 130 in 2009, when the Brazilian contribution featured in the 18<sup>th</sup> position. At the IMF, after the Quota and Governance reforms agreed in 2010, Brazil now holds the 10<sup>th</sup> largest share in the number of votes. These numbers indicate not only that Brazil is still on the game, but also reflects an unrelenting willingness of those representing the country to continually invest in multilateralism.

Nevertheless, despite the ongoing significance of Brazil as a member-state in those institutions and multilateral fora, the political presence of the country has been greatly compromised in recent years. The celebration of the “emergence of Brazil to the global stage” and the “end of the third world”, as proclaimed by Zoellick in 2010, did not last long after the outburst of the domestic crisis in Brazil that has put in check the reputation of the country in the global arena. Even with recent numbers indicating that the Brazilian economy is picking up, Brazil’s political performance has been, to a great extent, quite inexpressive or embarrassing.

During the G20 London Summit, the second annual meeting of State Leaders, in 2009, former president of the United States Barack Obama playfully referred to former Brazilian president Lula da Silva as his “man”, and “the most popular politician on Earth”. Brazil was not simply welcome at this meeting, but its presence was considered indispensable for the success of the conversations and negotiations related to the future of the world economy, given the scenario of financial crisis and the weight of Brazil and other emerging markets to the global economy. For Brazil, the future was just around the corner, as prophesized by Obama to a cheery audience in Rio de Janeiro later in 2011. In 2018, we still wonder where Brazil must have taken a wrong turn and missed its promised future. Last July, Brazilian president Michel Temer announced that he was not attending the G20 Hamburg Summit. The domestic political scenario was very instable, as General Prosecutor Rodrigo Janot had just accused the president of accepting bribes from the company JBS[1] in Brazil. Temer reversed his decision and flew to Germany, but the symbolic meaning of his initial decision of not showing up was irreversible. Temer was not included in the press program, he did not set up any meetings with other leaders, and he left before the end of the activities.

In his inaugural presidential speech, in 2016, Temer has timidly mentioned the need to rebuild Brazil’s international credibility, but suggested that political scandals (the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and operation Car Wash – a wide-ranging criminal investigation into corruption carried out by Brazil’s Federal Police and commanded by judge Sérgio Moro since 2014), high inflation, a public deficit of almost R\$ 100 billion, and a recession, were precluding the “natural rotation” of investment, production, and the generation of jobs and income, what would be necessary for the re-emergence of the country as a powerful global player. In that context, he highlighted the need to first “pacify” and “unify” the Brazilian nation, and to review its foreign policy so that it could once more[2] represent “permanent values and interests” of the country, such as democracy, national independence, peaceful resolution of conflicts, self-determination, non-intervention, the centrality of human rights, and the repudiation of terrorism and racial discrimination.

It has not been an easy task for Brazil to project these “national and permanent” values abroad while the same values are not consistent with a number of policies promoted domestically by the current government. While Brazil dreams about being a model for democratic governance, non-interventionism and self-determination, the government calls upon a military intervention in the city of Rio de Janeiro as a way of dealing with organized crime and drug trafficking. The Brazilian judiciary does not improve the representation of the country as a stable democracy, as it is criticized for being highly politicized and for not respecting the Brazilian Constitution and the prescribed independence of the Judiciary branch. Judge Sérgio Moro, who became a symbol of the recent crusade against corruption, might have gone too far as he has demonstrated his own partisanship in several occasions. In the midst of an anti-democratic nightmare, dictatorship is openly praised as a more efficient regime by Jair Bolsonaro, who is likely to be confirmed as one of the most popular candidates for the presidential elections later this year.

The assassination of Marielle Franco in Rio de Janeiro, on March 14, 2018, transformed her into a global symbol of racial oppression. Franco was a black woman, an activist and a politician who received the fifth-most votes in the Rio de Janeiro city council elections (more than 46,500). Having grown up in one of the most dangerous and poorest

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favelas in the city, she was tenaciously fighting against an oppressive State apparatus that historically targets the black poor population. Her story, widely publicized after her death, exposes how far short Brazil falls of its proclaimed “centrality of human rights” and the “repudiation of racial discrimination”.

Brazil, which was removed from the UN World Hunger Map in the 2014 edition of the report “State of Food Insecurity in the World”, has to face a reality in which former president Lula da Silva, who became the spokesperson of the campaign against hunger in the country, is now in jail, convicted for corruption, while unpopular economic measures, such as the labor reform decreed by the government in October of 2017, pushes the population to informality, increases the vulnerability of employees, and risks to undermine the fight against slavery and inhumane conditions of labor in the country. Closing this gap between proclaimed national values and political agendas in and for Brazil are one of the major obstacles the representatives of the country will have to face if the goal is to get back on track.

Contradictions that emerge from the political and economic domestic scenario certainly constrained the space for decision-making in negotiation tables abroad. Brazil’s participation in the Paris Agreement is an example of a contentious issue, reflecting the distance between a promise and a behavior. While Brazil committed to zero illegal deforestation in the Amazon region by 2030, Michel Temer, pressed by his alliance with the agribusiness lobby, presented a bill (PL 8107/2017) to the National Congress that could drastically alter the limits of the National Forest of Jamaxim, a reduction of 349,085 hectares. Evidence that deforestation has increased since 2015 has led Norway to cut back its payments to help safeguard the Amazon rainforest to US\$35 million in 2017, less than half the amount that has been paid in the previous year. Another example of this gap between the representation of a particular identity abroad and a contradictory political decision would be the passing of the bill (PL 44/2016) that allows armed forces members that commit homicide under GLO (Guarantee of Law and Order) operations to be tried in Military Courts rather than Civil Courts. Considering the current involvement and the responsibility granted to the national military in the restoration of public security and order in Rio de Janeiro, the effects of this ‘war’ might seriously challenge the legitimacy of the country in agendas about human rights and democratic governance.

All that said, we take the risk of seeing the process of becoming a relevant global player as a one-way road that goes from the domestic to the global. It is easy to blame national malperformance for the shrinking of the space for Brazil in global politics. Analysts are quick to point out reasons for the success and failure of Brazil, and to locate them within the Brazilian territory. But we rarely ask questions about which future was “just around the corner”, or about the notion of ‘status’ that Brazil blindly pursues. When we discuss the emergence or re-emergence of Brazil to the global stage, we assume that it is not yet part of the global, as if Brazil was on some sort of inferior platform from where it should prepare to emerge to a ‘global stage’. The emergence implies a hierarchy between different levels, or distinct spaces for ‘politics’, and it often demands the subordination of those in inferior levels to the rules of the game that are set by those in the superior levels. If that is the case, how much of Brazil’s ‘domestic failure’ is actually hindering its capacity to participate in global politics, and to what extent could Brazil’s participation in global competition be responsible for the domestic disarray?

We should start considering the fact that the ‘global’ itself is full of contradictions. As a platform for political negotiations and performances as well as this abstract space in the political and economic imaginaries, the ‘global’ often fools us to believe that the future is there. In the name of this dream of global relevance and visibility in the future, one often ends up forgetting to rule in the name of people’s well-being in the present. If there is one thing we know for sure is that in any competition for status, there have always been winners and losers. A decade ago, at least the effects and the rules of this global race were being somewhat explicitly contested by Brazilian leaders.

## Notes

[1] JBS S.A. was founded in 1953, in Goiás, Brazil, and became the world’s largest meat processing company, and the second largest global food company. In 2017, the CEO and former chairman, Wesley and Joesley Batista, were arrested on charges of obstruction of justice and insider trading. They have also been involved in the political scandal that threatened Michel Temer to be thrown out of Presidency after Joesley exposed the recording of a conversation they had containing a controversial plea bargain. The recent crisis of this company, given its size, has affected trade negotiations between Brazil and its partners and it is also affecting significantly the economy of a number of Brazilian

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cities that were dependent on its revenue.

[2] Michel Temer and his Foreign Minister Aloysio Nunes argue that the Brazilian foreign policy agenda during the Worker's Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) mandates reflected the interests of this particular left-wing party instead of the interests of the 'nation'. It is interesting to note that the representatives of Brazil from 2003 to 2016 have not exactly promoted values that contradicted those listed by Michel Temer as 'national'.

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**Francine Rossone de Paula** is a Lecturer at Universidade Federal Fluminense in Niterói, RJ. She teaches International Relations Critical Theory at the Department of International Relations and Strategic Studies. She has a PhD in Political and Cultural Thought from Virginia Tech (2016). Her first book, *The Emergence of Brazil to the Global Stage*, critically examines discourses, and the effects of these discourses, about Brazil's status and 'positioning' in relation to the 'global stage' in the twenty-first century.