How much longer will Rousseff’s honeymoon last?

In its first six months, the Rousseff administration was beleaguered by coalition parties’ friendly fire, allegations of illicit conduct by its chief political coordinator and his resignation, and administrative paralysis. The president is running out of time. Rousseff will have fewer political resources at her disposal to hold her coalition together and govern as the likely slowdown of economic activity and looming inflation take their toll on her popularity.

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The concept of the first 100 days is often applied to a new administration as a measure of its productivity and early success. The concept does not work well for the Dilma Rousseff administration — even if we double the time span to almost a full six months of political activity.

Looking at it in the most favorable light, what many perceive as political inactivity may in fact be the careful political strategy of an administration in its early days. When a handpicked technocratic president who lacks political experience replaces a highly popular and charismatic leader, a change of pace might be expected in the political dynamics in Brasilia. The transition from former President Lula’s personal anointed candidate to leader in her own right may take a while for Rousseff to carry off. Caution may seem like the way to go.

But anyone who waits for political capital to accumulate must realize that in the meantime political capital is also being spent. The elements...
that will tip the balance, pro or con, are delicate. Economic growth, low inflation, and public opinion are obvious factors at play. But in Brazil's brand of “coalitional presidentialism,” the relation between the executive branch and Congress can say a lot about the nature of an administration . . . and its prospects.

There are three related reasons that might explain the congressional stalemate of the past several months. The first is the intricacy of the legislative agenda. For over a decade, for example, common ground has been lacking in congressional negotiations on tax reform and political reform, and any major overhaul would require a qualified majority to pass. But even on issues that need less support to be approved, such as inviting the private sector to take on airport concessions, the government seems unwilling or at best slow to push ahead.

Which brings us to a second reason for the near-paralysis of legislative activity so far in the Rousseff administration: a governing coalition that ideologically is unusually heterogeneous. On paper President Rousseff enjoys a larger congressional majority than President Lula ever did. But her own party, the left-of-center Workers’ Party (PT), is only the second largest party represented in the coalition, behind the centrist PMDB. Add to the mix smaller conservative forces, evangelical groups, more traditional socialist parties, and swarms of landowners, and the result is almost inevitably discord. The recent vote on the new forestry code was an obvious example of how the political dynamics of Rousseff’s coalition can work against her administration’s agenda.

The third reason for the stalemate is Rousseff’s slow and uncertain progress on executive branch appointments. In a nutshell, a stable coalitional presidentialism dictates that the parties in the congressional coalition should have corresponding shares in top and second-tier executive positions. As coalition parties do not have direct access to policymaking and the public treasury, pork-barrel spending usually becomes very difficult. The likely consequences: dissatisfaction, disloyalty, deadlock, and eventually defection. What holds a broad and diverse coalition together is not ideology but power and money.

President Rousseff seems to have a more serious underlying political vulnerability: she is noticeably unwilling to do politics.
These reasons alone demonstrate the challenges any Brazilian president can usually expect in dealing with Congress. But President Rousseff seems to have a more serious underlying political vulnerability: she is noticeably unwilling to do politics. So far she has preferred to govern mostly by decree, and unlike her predecessor she shies away from public exposure. Compared to Lula’s style, so far Rousseff’s silence has been interpreted as a sign of a more hands-on approach to governing. But that is likely to change with time. As the president’s popularity fades and the difficulties persist, her silence will be increasingly considered a sign of frail political leadership.

Congressional stalemate aside, so far the Rousseff administration has been able to muster the support it needs for its most immediate goals. As a matter of fact, the strategy for containing the recent political crisis that led to dismissal of the chief political coordinator of the administration, Antonio Palocci, suggests a savvy political instinct for survival. But survival is not the same as strength. Unless she has the political will to bind together the governing coalition, Rousseff’s support base will become the main source of risk to her administration. In a sense, the Palocci affair is an example of damage caused by friendly fire.

At this juncture, time is still a reasonable cover for President Rousseff’s shortcomings — a prudent start, testing the waters of governing, assessing loyalties, and actually deciding on the specifics of major policies. But the president is running out of time. As the likely slowdown of economic activity and looming inflationary pressures take their toll on her popularity, Rousseff will have fewer political resources at her disposal to hold her coalition together and govern. The clock is ticking.