In need of presidential leadership

Political and media circles have praised President Rousseff’s handling of the political crisis and replacement of problematic ministers and staff. However, the president’s corruption cleanup and independence have clear limits given the political realities. The governing coalition constrains widespread corruption cleanup and Lula’s influence continues to weigh on the president.

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In less than two months the Rousseff administration lost three cabinet ministers: chief of staff Antonio Palocci, transportation minister Alfredo Nascimento, and defense minister Nelson Jobim. Although each of the departures was for a different reason — in order: alleged influence peddling, corruption, and unnecessary friendly fire — there is a growing perception in political and media circles that how the president is handling them marks a new phase for her government.

Although the reactions have generally been positive, the main ideas pertaining to the current political landscape suggest trends that could become problematic for the Rousseff administration down the road. The first is the idea that the dismissals marked the beginning of a corruption cleanup at the top echelons of government. It is certainly true that there is enough pressure from the media and public opinion that Rousseff’s actions to fight corruption could transcend what has been happening in the transportation ministry.

The problem with this idea, if it becomes a true trend, is that it will test the president’s ability to deal with the political model that sustains her government. The coalition-president model dictates that parties in the congressional coalition have corresponding shares of power in the executive. To maintain the balance, then, the president would have to compensate a party for the dismissal of one of its ministers. This was not what has happened in the transportation and defense ministries, and the likelihood that scandals will reach other ministries may further undermine political stability.
Obviously, a corruption cleanup operation is risky to the administration because, if it is not done with astute political leadership, it will weaken the congressional coalition, paving the way for more political blackmail and legislative deadlock. So far, the strategy may resonate well with public opinion, but there is always the risk that Rousseff will at some point have to deal with problems in ministries led by her own party, the PT. Considering how reluctant she was to fire Palocci, it is as yet uncertain how she would proceed in such a case, and how that would affect her popularity.

Another idea being floated has to do with political emancipation. Her decision to structure the government’s political coordination around two newcomers — Gleisi Hoffmann, the new chief of staff, and Ideli Salvati, the political coordinator — was read by many not only as an ingenious move but also as an indication of Rousseff’s increasing independence from former president Lula. The departed Palocci, Nascimento, and Jobim were political remnants of the Lula administration.

The possibility of emancipation, however, is challenged by some facts. First, although it is probably true that the Hoffmann-Salvati solution was of Rousseff’s own making, it is too soon to tell whether this new political coordination model will work. Change may be a sign of independence, but for true independence changes must be sustainable. Second, the emancipation strategy could generate an undesirable byproduct: If it seems to be based solely on replacement of Lula’s ministers, independence is likely to be interpreted as an indirect attack on Lula’s legacy. (Although in fact Brazil’s recent history shows that the bond between political creator and creature tends to be short-lived.) Third, the appointment of former foreign minister Celso Amorim as the new defense minister certainly suggests that Lula still has the president’s ear. It was just seven months ago that Rousseff vetoed the extension of Amorim’s tenure as foreign minister (against his will, some say). Moreover, Amorim’s return may neutralize what has been considered Rousseff’s most positive innovation: a more responsible foreign policy with regard to human rights and a renewed approach to the United States.

Despite the difficulties, it is not impossible that both corruption cleanup and political change may be a sign of independence, but for true independence changes must be sustainable.
emancipation will become realities. But for that to happen, President Rousseff will have to deal with some of her own limitations, particularly her unwillingness to project political leadership. Otherwise she will never be able to truly alter the pattern of relations between the administration and Congress and launch her own governing agenda. If she does not exercise leadership, the president will just be managing the so-far partially positive legacy from the previous administration.

In Brazil’s political system, prone to scandals and crises, what might shield the president from these problems is somewhat elusive. Economic expansion, control of inflation, and social policies certainly matter. But ultimately it is the exercise of political leadership that insures a president against the unpredictable ebb and flow of public opinion. As the saying goes, power abhors a vacuum. If Rousseff does not step in, someone will.