In Brazil’s political system, a great amount of power is concentrated in the executive branch. Presidents dictate policies, control much of the budget, and even legislate. Due to their capacity to steer the political agenda and draw much of the public’s attention, presidents personify power.

Much like most of her predecessors, President Dilma Rousseff has resorted to this extra power to govern. And much like her political benefactor, former President Lula, she has enjoyed a sizable ruling coalition in congress and high popular support throughout most of her time in office, further enhancing the aura of invincibility around the presidential palace.

Yet unlike Lula, Rousseff has stubbornly ignored some of the basic rules of Brazil’s presidential politics. Despite a ruling majority in congress, the president has unnecessarily made coalition management more difficult because of her aversion to politics and her reluctance to distribute power—or cabinet posts—more evenly among allied parties. In addition, Rousseff’s stint as Lula’s chief of staff ingrained in her a propensity to micromanage, from centralizing policymaking to plotting her pilot’s flight plans.

What many saw as a breath of fresh pragmatism in a country of commonly dysfunctional politics has so far produced frustratingly second-rate results. After a somewhat promising start, the administration appears to have all but given up on structural reforms. Important policies have been mired either in poor planning or inefficient execution. Even the more obviously urgent projects, like those in transport infrastructure that are directly or indirectly related to the upcoming World Cup, have been inexplicably protracted; some projects have been abandoned altogether.

Even in Brazil’s foreign relations, an area that generated much controversy during Lula’s tenure, Rousseff’s governing style has...
translated into a tongue-tied and unsettling retrenchment. While the current silence might be considered a symptom of an ongoing restructuring of the foreign policy apparatus, it is increasingly evident that much of Brazil’s previous assertiveness in the international stage was a function of presidential charisma and statesmanship. It is true that every president shapes foreign policy his or her own way. But for a country that was in the middle of a long process of building up international muscle, a sudden retreat seems to be more the result of weakness or indecision than a calculated strategy to regroup.

As Brazil’s impressive economic gains of the last several years taper off, the notion of a lame duck president starts to pervade Brazil’s political landscape. The upcoming presidential election could force some much-needed change. But with Rousseff still favored to win reelection while the opposition must grapple with how to appeal to the discontent of the new middle classes, ironically the incentives push her to maintain the course despite mounting political and economic uncertainties—not only for the remainder of this term but possibly into her likely second term.

Even if Rousseff defeats the opposition by a wide margin, however, the situation will be far from stable. While the economy still protects Rousseff from attacks, this shield is likely to erode along with her political capital, especially if economic activity remains sluggish. Features that both friends and foes accepted as quirks could then be seen as weaknesses. And even if the president was willing to change her governing style, paradoxically she would probably have less room to do so, given the mounting political and economic challenges.

But there appears to be an antidote to this hollow pragmatism within the government’s camp itself, and his name is Lula. While the odds of the former president replacing Rousseff on the ballot this year are very slim, he is likely to play a more important role if she is reelected. Figures closely associated with Lula have already been making their way back into the administration. As a result, however reluctantly, the president is starting to delegate more authority to stronger ministers. In addition to helping manage the ruling coalition in congress, Lula also seems to be operating backchannel negotiations between the government and the private sector, trying to steer economic policymaking onto more credible ground.

While Lula’s greater influence is unlikely to usher in a new era of reforms, it may be the next best thing to pressure Rousseff to improve the overall quality of policymaking. Lula is now poised to be the “moderating power” of a second Rousseff administration.

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