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"Nobody will want you. You will be deformed", the 22-year-old prisoner was told in January 1970 by a jailer - maybe "Dr. Medeiros", maybe "Joaquim" - working for Brazil's then military regime. The young woman's name was Dilma Rousseff.

Thirty-one years later, in 2001, she told a human-rights commission (in a statement released in full only in June 2012) that she had been held in prison for three years in three different cities, and during that time faced all kinds of torture, including numerous physical beatings, electric-shocks and even a fake firing-squad.

She could never have believed then that one day she would be Brazil's president.

Dilma Rousseff entered the Palácio do Planalto in Brasília in January 2011, following her election victory in October 2010. The president's success in her first two years in office, reflected in the fact that more than 75% of Brazilians think she is doing a good job, has many aspects.

For example, she has never used her suffering for political gain; she is a woman head of state in a country marked by a very "macho" culture; she created Brazil's first "truth commission", to review crimes committed by the state during the dictatorship of 1964-85.

But the most important ingredient is that Dilma Rousseff has confronted three major, serious challenges with hard work and honesty.

The Three Tests

The first is the global economic crisis since 2008. Brazil's response has been to boost domestic consumption, a remedy that seems to have reached a turning-point with a possible growth figure of under 3% in 2012.

Some in the Brazilian press argue that Dilma Rousseff's government is unable to deal with the problem, and the president acknowledges the need for action. But she also rightly insists that economic growth is not everything, but just one issue (if a vital one) on the political agenda.

She has reiterated that a country should also be judged by its ability to protect and educate its children, take care of the elderly and eliminate poverty.

By making these her priorities and pursuing them through various social programs, Dilma has in effect demanded that Brazil's official political culture end its practice of judging administrations by their economic performance alone.

This is a positive step, for it highlights the historic inability of the Brazilian state (reflecting the influence of Brazilian capitalism on the country's politics) to provide public goods - such as basic education, healthcare, justice and public security - to its citizens.

But even in the economic field, Rousseff's government has fulfilled her promise to reduce Brazil's interest-rates, with the central-bank's rate falling from more than 12% per year in 2011 to the current 8% (the lowest level since 1996).

More than that, the president has pressed the public financial institutions to use lower rates in the market, thus forcing private banks to do the same.

The result is a financial revolution. For the first time in decades Brazilians are able to use banks and other financial institutions with reasonable rates; now, TV news programs report on how to borrow responsibly.

The second challenge is one inherited from her predecessor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (and more distantly from former president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso): the need to avoid the trap of making spurious political alliances in order to govern.

Here too, Dilma's firm leadership - for example, in quickly dismissing seven ministers involved in political and corruption scandals in the first year of her presidency - has consolidated her authority and popularity.

But her steadiness will be tested in coming months, when Brazil's federal high court will judge the notorious mensalão - the prolonged corruption scandal that unfolded under Lula's government, when prominent figures in the ruling Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party), including Lula's chief-of-staff José Dirceu, were accused of distributing money to small parties in exchange for political support.

Until now, Dilma has behaved with dignity and restraint, leaving the issue entirely in the hands of Brazilian justice.

The third challenge is Brazilian foreign policy, where Rousseff's government has been attacked from both the right and the left. The right claims that the "Rio+20" agreement on climate change was empty, and that Brazil's policy over Paraguay's "presidential coup" was subordinated to Buenos Aires and Caracas.

The left claims that the president doesn't care about foreign policy, has no patience with the idiosyncrasies of Itamaraty (the political bureaucracy behind Brazil's foreign policy), and has lost the guiding path built by Lula and ex-foreign minister Celso Amorim, who (so the argument goes) articulated a more authentic and autonomous political strategy for the country in the international arena.

In fact, the agreement reached at the Rio+20 was a near-miracle, while Brazil's position on the overthrow of Fernando Lugo in Asuncion showed that Brazilian leadership in the region is being linked to a new democratic discourse.

In this terrain, Dilma Rousseff has continued to pose the longstanding Brazilian question about the current methods of global governance, as well as corrected some flawed stances on human rights.

Here too, her thinking is clear: it is better to fight poverty and abuse from the inside than to play power-politics outside.

Besides all that, the president has had to deal with the political moods of her predecessor and mentor. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who served two terms from 2002-09, has more than once impolitely suggested that he could run again in 2014, when Dilma herself would be in a good position to reach for a second term.

For handling this test and the others with honesty, sincerity, hard work, good social programs and an impressive political conscience, Dilma Rousseff has already achieved much as Brazil's first woman president. Oxalá she can keep going that way.

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