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| SREERAM CHAULIA



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Mega corruption scandals are taking a toll on two leading democracies of the developing world — South Africa and Brazil.

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Mega corruption scandals are taking a toll on two leading democracies of the developing world — South Africa and Brazil. The rot goes all the way to the top, with Presidents Jacob Zuma, Dilma Rousseff and former President Lula da Silva embroiled in embezzlement schemes of whopping proportions. The fall from grace of these titanic political figures serves as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of state power and self-destruction.

What is most galling about the empires of graft being unearthed in South Africa and Brazil is that they involve iconic personalities who were at one time Leftist crusaders against corruption, abuses and injustices. The irony of Mr Zuma being found out and shamed for misappropriation of taxpayers' money and massive accumulation of wealth, or Mr Lula and Ms Rousseff being blamed for overseeing crony capitalist deals and amassing billions to finance election campaigns, is evident if one looks back at their histories as champions of freedom and democracy.

Mr Zuma was once a political prisoner, arrested in 1963 and incarcerated for 10 long years alongside Nelson Mandela on Robben Island as punishment for his revolutionary activities on behalf of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the African National Congress (ANC) against the apartheid state. Following his release from jail, he led a daring pan-regional underground resistance to the state terror of the white minority government in Pretoria, risking his life for the liberation of his people.

Today, the same Mr Zuma has been forced to apologise to South Africans for indulging in outrageously lavish refurbishments worth \$23 million to his private residence after they were deemed unconstitutional by the country's top court. His nephew, the mining magnate Khulubuse Zuma, has been exposed by the Panama Paper leaks documents as an operator of secret offshore companies stashing hidden wealth derived from oil exploration in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The President's children are associated with the controversial Indian-origin Gupta family of wheeler-dealers, who are believed to be de facto kingmakers in South African politics.

The transformation of Mr Jacob Zuma from a selfless foot soldier who sacrificed everything to challenge apartheid, to a hated President who is rapaciously enriching himself and his kin is a saga of ethical degeneration. Nelson Mandela would be turning in his grave to see his erstwhile comrades from the ANC running a mafia-like state enterprise in which their bank balances and net worths are skyrocketing while average South Africans are swindled and remain disempowered.

The cases of Ms Rousseff and her mentor-cum-predecessor, Mr Lula, are equally illuminative of the phenomenon of once-pure activists ending up as venal state elites with absolutely no compunctions about stealing colossally and lying brazenly. The so-called "Operation Car Wash" scheme of billions of dollars laundered among the state-owned oil major, Petrobras, construction companies and top ranking officials of Mr Lula and Ms Rousseff's Workers Party (PT), is the mother of all corruption scams. The Treasurer of PT and Mr Lula's Chief of Staff have already been arrested.

Mr Lula himself is alleged to have taken kickbacks. In a cynical ploy to shield Mr Lula, his protégé Ms Rousseff recently appointed him as her Chief of Staff to avail of immunity protections and avoid prosecution. In the 1970s and 1980s, these two were different creatures altogether. They rebelled against the military dictatorships of General Ernesto Geisel and General João Figueiredo. As a fiery trade union leader spewing Marxist maxims and sporting Che Guevara t-shirts, Mr Lula was truly a man of the masses who was locked up by the military, survived crackdowns, and eventually rose to Brazil's presidency on a wave of unprecedented mass popularity. The governance record during his years as President (2003 to 2011) was impressive and heralded Brazil's rise as a regional power. Yet, all these achievements are now clouded by the Car Wash scandal.

Rubbing salt into the wounds of Mr Lula's dismayed socialist fan base are intercepts of his phone conversations with Ms Rousseff and leading Cabinet ministers and PT lawmakers, wherein he is heard to be plotting attacks on the judiciary to stymie it from probing further into his corrupt record. In one revealing call, he insists like a cinematic villain to a PT acolyte that Brazilian judges "have to be afraid" and asks sinisterly, "Why can't we intimidate them"

Ms Rousseff has not personally profited from the Car Wash payola, but she headed Petrobras when the mammoth heist was in full swing. A gutsy guerrilla warrior against absolute military rule who suffered imprisonment and torture between 1970 and 1972, she has alienated average Brazilians by failing to stanch a severe economic crisis

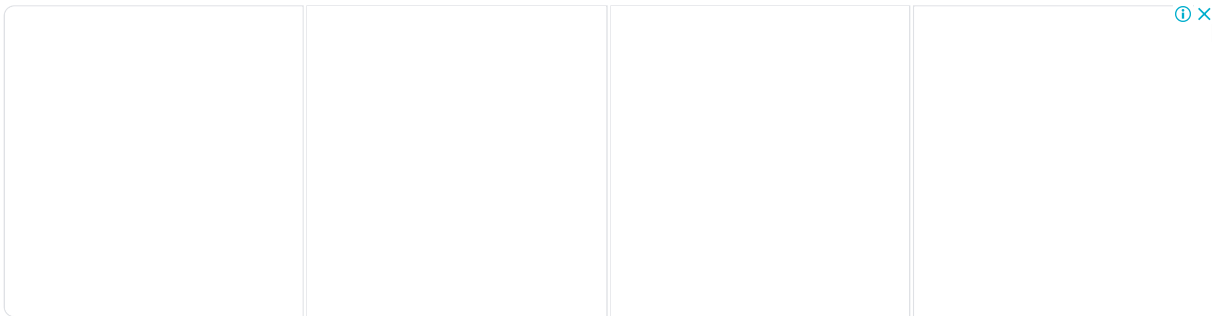
and carrying the stigma of violation of the country's finance laws to win a second term in office. Her defence that there is a political conspiracy to overthrow her rings hollow as she wages a losing battle against impeachment in a Brazilian legislature which is itself packed with tainted politicians.

Matching the ANC in South Africa, the PT in Brazil has exhausted its heroic revolutionary legacy. Having struggled and persevered against bloodthirsty authoritarian regimes, the liberation heroines and heroes have developed a sense of entitlement for life to state power and privileges. The longer they hold office, the more disconnected they become from grassroots social problems and the greater their resort to impunity.

The Left has enjoyed the trappings of power in Brazil for nearly one-and-half decades and has in the process lost its moral compass. The ANC has abandoned its original progressive ethos and is governing as an end in itself rather than a means to reducing staggering inequalities in South Africa. In both cases, socialists distanced themselves from the masses by assuming that the revolution ended the day they took charge of state power. They jettisoned the cause and settled down to reproduce top-down approaches to politics. With no opposition in sight for years, they took their countries for granted.

Like Presidents Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, and Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, the tarnished leaders of South Africa and Brazil have constructed a make-believe universe of deeming themselves and their parties indispensable and infallible. They and their aides commit grave misdeeds with contempt for rule of law while rhetorically posturing as saviours of their nations. Their souls are sold but they cling to spent legitimacy and illusions of self-righteousness to trample on democracy. Yesterday's victims are today's perpetrators. But sooner than later, these fallen comrades will be thrown out by publics that are tired of empty socialist shibboleths.

The writer is a professor and dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs



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