



# IPRIS Viewpoints

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## Dilma Rousseff in Portugal: worst timing ever

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Common sense tends to dictate that the presence of a foreign dignitary in one's country is usually cause for a significant boost in bilateral relations, with diplomatic courtesies and multiple political-economic agreements frequently on the heels of such occasions. Moreover, if the two countries in question share a supposedly common bond, consistently nurtured by a long historical and cultural background, the stakes are understandably higher, as public opinion will rightfully expect an announcement of some sort, reflecting the depth and substance in bilateral ties on one hand, and the political will to continue moving forward, on the other.

However, if Dilma Rousseff's upcoming visit to Portugal on March 29<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> could have initially fallen under this category, the latest developments in Lisbon have completely neutralized any significant favorable advancement for the bilateral partnership that might have emerged from this opportunity. On March 24<sup>th</sup>, Portuguese Prime Minister José Sócrates tendered his resignation to President Aníbal Cavaco Silva, due to the Parliament's refusal to vote favorably on the latest austerity package brought forward by the government and designed to tackle the ongoing financial crisis. Consequently, Sócrates now leads a caretaker cabinet until the President formally accepts his resignation and

calls for early legislative elections, which are only likely to happen at the end of May or in early June.

In that sense, although Portugal's foreign policy has not suddenly lost its course, for all purposes it has clearly entered into an anxious deadlock, carefully awaiting further clarifications of the internal political scenario. This is not to say that the normal handling of daily affairs, crucial to Portuguese interests, will suffer any misdirection for the time being. On the contrary, one needs only to remember the current European endeavors towards a common approach on the proceeding crisis and more importantly, the non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council that the country holds and its wide associated international responsibilities, to rightfully acknowledge how foreign policy tends to carry on no matter what. But in truth, amid all this, it is no wonder that Dilma Rousseff's visit is seen in Portuguese diplomatic halls with a relative easiness and detachment.

Moreover, if nothing else, its actual initial purpose has also helped to significantly reduce the official magnitude of the event in itself. Indeed, from Brazil's point of view, Portugal's present situation is hardly a nuisance, mostly because Dilma is travelling to the country under a different pretext, other than the reinforcement of Brazilian-Portuguese relations *per se*. Former Brazilian



President and political mentor to Dilma, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva is to receive an *honoris causa* degree from Coimbra’s University and in that order Rousseff will tag along, seeking to show her respect, enhance the prestige of such a distinction and give her backing to the official ceremony.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, Brazilian media were quick to point out that this joint appearance is primarily aimed at dispelling rumors that the two have politically grown apart, as Dilma increasingly tries to tighten her grip on the Presidency which in turn leaves her occasionally at odds with Lula’s past legacy and the policies he previously adopted.<sup>2</sup>

Be that as it may, one important fact cannot be ignored: this will only constitute Dilma’s second visit abroad until now – after Argentina on January 31<sup>st</sup> – and her first one to Europe, no less. Therefore, international spotlights remain considerably wary and focused on her performance outside of Brazil, trying to gather clues as to the foreign path she intends to tread for her country in the days ahead. Unfortunately, those expecting to read between the lines of this particular event are bound to be left utterly disappointed. To be sure, although the exaltation of a preferential bilateral bond between the two countries is expected to figure highly in Dilma’s *pro forma* meetings with Portuguese officials – including President Cavaco Silva and Prime Minister Sócrates, exiting as he may be – there is presently little political space for any type of initiative other than the usual goodwill rhetoric that is customarily employed on these occasions.

Naturally, Brazilian-Portuguese relations will certainly survive this soon-to be innocuous visit and quickly

overcome any ripple effects that Portugal’s political uncertainty might cast on it. All in all, much ground has already been covered in the past few years, allowing for a rather optimistic bilateral framework in the coming future and reflecting the maturity of the present partnership. Not only do political contacts run at the highest level,<sup>3</sup> but international common interests abound, whether regarding the remaining Portuguese-speaking countries or the UN Security Council, where both countries are currently and actively engaged. On the other hand, economic ties have also slowly but steadily grown throughout the past decade, with Brazil becoming in 2010 Portugal’s 7<sup>th</sup> main exporting market and its 8<sup>th</sup> largest source of imports.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, capital flows have recently followed a similar path with last year witnessing almost €2 billion in Brazilian investments in Portugal, displaying the interest of Brazilian companies like aeronautics conglomerate Embraer or cement-maker Camargo Correa in the Portuguese economy.

Nevertheless, even with this context in mind, Dilma’s wish to ‘merely’ assess the state of relations with Portugal and focus on political contacts cannot really come as a surprise.<sup>5</sup> In all fairness, not much more is possible. Unforgiving circumstances and bad timing are usually worthy adversaries to any state visit and this time is no exception. But given the reinforced ties that both political leaderships so often tout, it is impossible not to be disappointed in what is, for the most part, generally considered a significantly missed opportunity on both parts.

1 Interestingly enough, former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso was also awarded the same honor back in 1995. However, a possible tiebreaker may lie with the Council of Europe’s North-South Prize that Lula will also receive on March 29<sup>th</sup> in Lisbon.

2 “Dilma visitará Portugal com Lula em 29 e 30 de Março” [BBC Brasil, 23 March 2011].

3 Prime Minister José Sócrates attended Dilma’s inauguration on January 1<sup>st</sup> and Foreign Minister Luís Amado travelled to Brasília on February 18<sup>th</sup>.

4 Figures provided by the Portuguese Agency for Investment and Foreign Trade – AICEP.

5 “Portugal/Brasil: Dilma Rousseff quer “tomar o pé” dos assuntos portugueses – embaixador” [Lusa, 25 March 2011].

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