

Uncertainty Grows in the Wake of Cunha's Resignation

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Brazilian Federal Deputy Eduardo Cunha formally announced his resignation as President of the Lower House on July 7. In his resignation speech, a tearful Cunha denied his guilt, “I am paying a high price for having initiated the impeachment [of Dilma Rousseff]” — an illegal process orchestrated by Cunha himself. “Indeed, the request for my impeachment was initiated by the Attorney-General of the Republic, on December 16, shortly after my decision to launch the impeachment process [of Dilma Rousseff]”, added the Deputy, a self-proclaimed “hero” of Brazilian politics.¹

Following a myriad of allegations accusing him of owning unregulated overseas bank accounts and being involved in the Petrobras scandal, the Ethics Committee suspended Cunha from his position as president of the Lower House on June 14.² After his suspension, the Deputy and his allies had attempted to appeal on July 6 in favor of delaying his court trial. This unsuccessful maneuver led to Cunha’s decision to step down as President of the Chamber, in the hope of trying to get out of the spotlight. Through this effort, he was attempting to defend his title, and to gain more time in the appeals proceedings that target him in the House.³ In fact, it is a common perception that his strategic resignation was aimed at securing his position as a Federal Congressman.⁴

In announcing his resignation from the House command, Cunha stated that this decision would likely help the restoration of the Lower House, which, in his words, “is currently brainless” without him.⁵ The House is now under the command of former Lower House Vice-President Waldir Maranhão, who is known for his political indecisiveness.⁶ The tone of his resignation speech, in which Cunha tried to invoke sympathetic feelings from the public, contrasted with his notoriously stubborn demeanor as a political leader. Cunha has held relevant positions in the House, as President of the Commission of Constitution and Justice (CCJ), and later as the leader of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB). In these positions, Cunha has projected himself as a leader with an unswaying mindset, willing to go to extremes to obtain and maintain political power— such is the case of his recent resignation.

When speaking on his resignation, Cunha’s conduct did not match the persona around which he had established his political career, and had attracted many allies in the Brazilian public and government. Throughout his tenure as a Brazilian deputy, Cunha showed his political strength with large numbers of both civilian and political supporters, especially prior to his involvement in the political scandals. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, according to *Folha de São Paulo*, a Brazilian newspaper, interim President Michel Temer, a longtime ally of Cunha, had recommended the former to step down as

President of the Lower House.⁷ Not only did Temer advise Cunha at the beginning of this process, but he has also been allegedly working with the Brazilian judicial system to ensure Cunha's tenure and relevance in Brazilian politics.

Implications

Cunha's resignation in the midst of Brazil's political scandals has resulted in complex outcomes and more follow-up questions. First and foremost, the next Deputy elected to a provisional Lower House Presidency mandate, valid until the end of January 2017, will be the second in line to assume the presidency. Cunha's allies, including Maranhão, constitute a multitude of congressmen who want to hold the election as soon as possible. This way, Cunha might still exercise some influence over his successor and on the CCJ, the latter of which will determine whether Cunha loses his title as a deputy on July 12. The Lower House's elections "may well be divisive, with the presidential palace fearing that the plethora of candidates jockeying for position may divide the 'centrão,'" the caucus of pro-impeachment centrist congressmen, who are fundamental to deliver interim President Michel Temer's legislative Agenda."⁸

Even though some members of the Brazilian government, including allies of Cunha, have stated that his resignation will not spare him from prosecution, the evidence of the political nature of Cunha's stepping down is undeniable. His resignation, although carefully orchestrated and strategically planned to save his position as deputy, will most likely work in favor of sparing his prosecution. With support from interim President Michel Temer, Cunha may indeed escape his corruption trial. According to *O Globo*, a Brazilian newspaper, the interim President has assured Cunha that with his resignation, he will maintain his mandate and the right to keep his deputy position as well as legislative immunity during his trial, despite all evidence of his illegal activities.⁹ In the case that Cunha's position is maintained by this political maneuver, this could deliver a huge blow to Temer's interim presidency.

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¹ Eduardo Cunha renuncia a presidência da Câmara dos Deputados. *G1* July 7, 2016. Accessed July 7, 2016. <http://g1.globo.com/politica/videos/v/eduardo-cunha-renuncia-a-presidencia-da-camara-dos-deputados/5148153/>

² Izquierdo, Pedro and Baril, Sophie-Anne. Brazil's scandals: Cunha's position at stake. June 16, 2016. Accessed July 7, 2016 <http://www.coha.org/press-release-brazils-scandals-cunhas-position-at-stake/>

³Gerson Camarotti, Cunha renuncia para sair do holofote e ganhar tempo na cassação. July 7, 2016. Accessed July 7, 2016 <http://g1.globo.com/politica/blog/blog-do-camarotti/post/cunha-renuncia-para-sair-do-holofote-e-ganhar-tempo-na-cassacao.html>

⁴ Mulher de Cunha assina intimação de Moro e tem 10 dias para se defender. July 7, 2016. Accessed July 7, 2016. <http://www.diariodopoder.com.br/noticia.php?i=59672379564>

⁵ Eduardo Cunha renuncia a presidência da Câmara dos Deputados. *G1* July 7, 2016. Accessed July 7, 2016. <http://g1.globo.com/politica/videos/v/eduardo-cunha-renuncia-a-presidencia-da-camara-dos-deputados/5148153/>

⁶ Raner, Verônica. Deputado compara Temer a Maranhão “mais indeciso que Waldir”. May 11, 2016. Blog do Moreno. <http://blogs.oglobo.globo.com/blog-do-moreno/post/deputado-compara-temer-maranhao-mais-indeciso-que-waldir.html>

⁷ Uribe, Gustavo. Cunha se encontra com Temer para discutir sucessão na Câmara. *Folha de São Paulo*. June 28, 2016. Accessed July 7, 2016 <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2016/06/1786286-cunha-se-encontra-com-temer-para-discutir-sucessao-na-camara.shtml>

⁸ Brazil: Date set for election of new speaker of federal chamber of deputies. Latin News. Accessed 2016. http://www.latinnews.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=69356&uid=17952&acc=1&Itemid=6&cat_id=802889

⁹ Proteção a Cunha põe Temer em um beco sem saída. Brazil 247. July 8, 2016. Accessed July 10, 2016 <http://www.brasil247.com/pt/247/poder/242806/Prote%C3%A7%C3%A3o-a-Cunha-p%C3%B5e-Temer-num-beco-sem-sa%C3%ADda.htm>