

72 Brazilian Congressmen Might Be Expelled for Embezzlement

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A Brazilian congressional panel has recommended that 72 House representatives and Senators be expelled for taking bribes. The panel investigated during 52 days a huge corruption ring accused of profiting from inflated contracts to supply ambulances and sanitary equipment to local authorities.

The 69 Deputies and three Senators represent 12% of the sitting members of Brazil's Congress. The situation is unprecedented even for Brazil, a country used to corruption scandals.

The Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI), found that the accused had taken money and gifts in a complex fraud linked to the supply of ambulances and other equipment to local authorities across Brazil, identified as Operation Leech by the federal police.

Their names have now been referred to ethics committees in both houses of Congress, and will need final approval before coming into effect. The commission absolved a further 18 suspects on grounds of lack of evidence.

Antonio Carlos Biscaia, president of the CPI revealed the existence of "undisputed condemning evidence" against 50 of the 72 Congress members allegedly involved.

The head of the company at the center of the scheme told the committee how the politicians agreed to vote through public funds for the ambulances and other sanitary equipment well above their actual cost and the difference was shared out between those involved.

Only two of the 72 accused are from the governing Workers Party (PT) of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who is standing for re-election in October. However, some 63 are part of the president's support base in Congress.

"We're opening a process against 12% of Congress members. I wonder if in any other part of the world such a massive inquiry in democracy has taken place. This means we're beginning an in-depth cleaning operation to recover the prestige of the Brazilian Legislative, which has never had its image so tarnished", said representative Raul Jungmann from the opposition Popular Socialist Party.

According to recent public opinion polls, 30.8% of Brazilians link Congress with the corruption scandals that have made prime news during the last 18 months.

"The CPI has been criticized for making its findings public so close to the October general election, but that is the right thing to do so voters can really know whom they are supporting", said Senator Romeo Tuma from the conservative opposition Liberals, whose party has seven members in the list.

The Party of the Brazilian Social Democracy, whose candidate Geraldo Alckmin is President Lula da Silva's main rival next October, announced it had cut ties with Deputy Paulo Feijó, from Rio de Janeiro, the only member of the party in the list.

However the network of corruption under investigation by the Brazilian Federal Police and Judiciary does not only involve Congress but also extends to regional governments and dozens of city halls.

Corruption scandals have become one of the main issues of the October election campaign, in which apparently President Lula da Silva has managed to remain unscathed in spite of the surfacing last year of his party's involvement in a Congressional vote buying ring to ensure support for government initiatives and financed with funds skimmed from government and private companies.

A great number of Brazilian organizations from all venues including the Magistrates Association, the Catholic Church Bishops Conference and Brazil's chapter of Transparency International have launched campaigns to press on voters not to support politicians involved or accused of corruption.

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