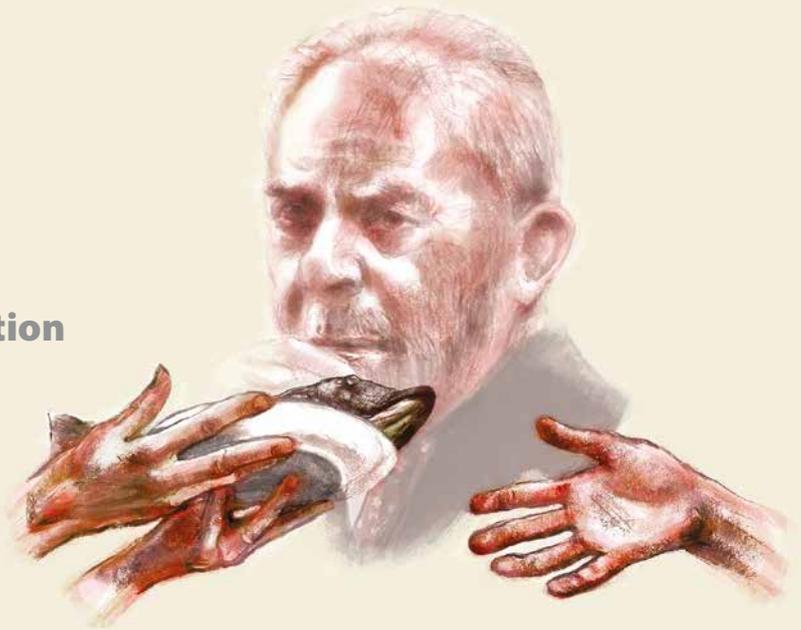


# Democracy in prison

Anxiety, perplexity and indignation over Brazil's political process as news of former president Lula's sentencing breaks. **DAN BARON COHEN** listens to how it goes down in Cabelo Seco.



**Dona Sonia hands me four cheese-breads.** In her Cabelo Seco bakery, this famous savoury snack is a fifth its shopping-mall price, and served hot from the oven. But it's thin on cheese, heavy on flour, because Senhor Manoel and Dona Sonia are economizing, like everyone in Brazil. Their price doubled again, in three months, and people from the community struggle to find the extra 50 cents on each bun. 'Make it five?' Sonia almost pleads, then repents. 'No, it's our gift.' I smile and accept. 'Do you think the October elections will happen now Lula has lost his appeal for habeas corpus?' she frets. 'They've taken the pleasure out of voting. There'll be no opposing views. In the past, candidates listened. Respected each other. Now it's all insult and slander.' Sonia risks another comment. 'Everyone knows the judges and newsbarons were bribed to take Lula out of the elections, because he would win. What can we do? We suffered such a cruel military dictatorship, and our grandchildren believe only the army can restore democracy!' Uncomfortable silence. 'Forgive me, have I invaded your privacy?' 'It's fine, Sonia,' I smile. I've met her humility across Brazil, but it never ceases to amaze me. It also explains Lula's popularity. He created an invisible fund to buy alliances, to lift millions like Sonia out of poverty. And they identified with him. Now the shoeshine boy turned trade union leader turned 'world's most popular president' begins 12 years and one month in prison for allegedly accepting a minor political gift. But will the

poor paralyze Brazil's cities to protest his innocence? When Lula's election caravan was shot at last week, most agreed with Globo TV Network: 'Lula is harvesting what he sowed.' I leave the bakery and step around the large pool of standing water in the main street of this Afro-indigenous community. The Tocantins River is flowing faster than usual, its rising waters mingling with open sewers, gushing from last night's heavy storm. In the drizzle, children walk to school wearing towels on their heads. A bike passes, a girl on the crossbar, another in the basket, and two clinging to the waist of their mother, behind her. All wear towels. Zequinha, community poet, circles the stagnant pool, to talk. He too has a towel on his head. 'Lula has just received his prison warrant. He has to hand himself in tomorrow.' He shakes his head. 'He made alliances with mining giants in exchange for mandates to build universities and legislate quotas, so that the poorest could study and change institutions. But he used the army to impose mega-dams, to woo the elite. Now the people will elect this mad demagogue!' Zequinha opens his mobile phone. We watch a clip of Jair Bolsonaro, ex-army officer, now the presidential candidate, sowing hatred against women, black, indigenous and LGBT people, condemning corruption, disorder and immorality, in supermarkets, schools, universities and especially, on TV. 'This intolerance,' Zequinha seethes, 'is apartheid. The day after Councillor Marielle Franco was

murdered in Rio, President Temer suspended democracy, in favour of military intervention. The elite can't accept that a poor, black, lesbian teacher can become Rio's most popular leader – community democracy in action! So they dig up her marriage to a dealer at 15 to prove her community killed her. And then publish on Facebook!' He spits with frustration. At sunset, Zequinha invites me to eat grilled Tucunaré fish. Kids are playing in the river, people fish. We sip beer, Zequinha sings, neighbours tell stories. It's the good life, self-sufficient, secure. Amazonia left to its own. 'Zequinha, instead of raging against the new dictatorship, defending his innocence, acting the victim, what if Lula apologized? From prison. To the people of Brazil? Recognized his errors. Shared what he learned in government. Presented a new popular project: clean energy, ecological community economics, environmental preservation, gender equality, community security? Education for democracy between equals? Could you forgive him? Would you believe him?' Zequinha stares. 'He could demonstrate restorative justice, become the bridge to an indigenous, post-capitalist Good Living project. He could be more powerful in prison, than as president.' Zequinha passes me fresh fish. 'Does he still have the humility, courage, self-criticism and imagination to make that leap?' ■ **Dan Baron Cohen** is an eco-cultural activist who lives in Marabá and has been working in the Amazon since 1999.

Illustration: Sarah John