
Brazil's Lula faces new corruption charges

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Brasília (AFP) - New corruption charges linked to Brazil's massive embezzlement scheme at Petrobras oil company were filed Thursday against former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, prosecutors said.

A judge will now have to decide whether Lula, whose spokesman called the charges "invented," should face trial.

The Workers' Party founder is already set to be tried in other cases, with the mounting scandals likely to wreck the once hugely popular leftist leader's chances of a political comeback at elections in 2018.

In the latest case, federal prosecutors accused Lula of taking bribes from the construction giant Odebrecht in the forms of an apartment and land on which to build his Lula Institute think tank in Sao Paulo.

Odebrecht is the company at the heart of a massive embezzlement and bribery scheme at Petrobras, Brazil's most important state enterprise.

Dozens of politicians have been accused of taking bribes from Odebrecht and other construction companies to line their own pockets and boost party campaign funds in exchange for facilitating inflated contracts for the companies with Petrobras.

Eight others, including the former head of Odebrecht -- Marcelo Odebrecht -- are named alongside Lula in the latest complaint, in which prosecutors allege a total of 75 million reais (\$22.1 million) in bribes linked to eight Petrobras contracts.

Lula "is accused of practicing the crimes of passive corruption and money laundering," the federal prosecutors' service said in a statement. His wife, Marisa Leticia Lula da Silva, is accused of money laundering.

Lula's representative Jose Chrispiniano said that corruption prosecutors investigating the Petrobras affair "have

invented a new story for their obsessive quest to paint the ex-president as responsible for the embezzlement."

Lula had already been ordered to stand trial for alleged corruption and money laundering in the pay-to-play scandal. He will also stand trial for obstruction of justice.

An outsized figure of the Latin American left, Lula has said he is willing to run for office again in 2018 and polls show he would be a frontrunner, despite the increasing cloud of corruption.

However, he has lost the once heady ratings he enjoyed during his 2003-2010 presidency and is blamed on the right for the country's mounting economic woes.

His successor Dilma Rousseff was impeached and removed from office earlier this year for violating budget rules and his Workers' Party was trounced in recent municipal elections.

Marcelo Odebrecht has already been convicted on earlier charges and was sentenced to 19 years in prison. However, he and nearly 80 other executives from his company are currently cooperating with prosecutors in a plea bargain to get reduced sentences.

Their testimony, alleging participation of top politicians in the bribery scheme, is expected to set off more political bombshells in Brazil. The current president, Michel Temer, is among those being named in the testimony, according to Brazilian media reports.
