

Court targets Brazilian ex-politicians

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SAO PAULO, Brazil --

Brazil's Supreme Court has agreed to rule on corruption charges against former Cabinet members in a bribes-for-votes scandal that severely damaged the reputation of the president's party.

The most prominent defendant, former chief of staff Jose Dirceu, helped engineer President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's historic 2002 election.

The court late Monday agreed to hold a trial on the charges, which carry a possible 12 year prison sentence, and on Tuesday it added a conspiracy charge for Dirceu punishable by up to three years behind bars.

Once the second-most-powerful man in Latin America's largest nation, Dirceu now stands accused of orchestrating a scheme to bribe congressmen to support Silva's congressional agenda.

Dirceu was forced to resign after the scandal broke in 2005, as did other prominent members of Silva's Workers' Party who now face charges before the high court: former party president Jose Genoio, former party treasurer Delubio Soares; former Transportation Minister Anderson Adauto, and congressmen from allied parties.

All have denied the charges.

The court so far has approved charges against 36 of 40 people accused by federal prosecutors of funneling bribes or taking them. They include Congressman Roberto Jefferson, a former government ally who has testified before Congress that the Workers Party financed campaigns illegally and paid legislators monthly bribes for their support.

Dirceu, who resisted Brazil's military dictatorship in the 1960s, helped Silva found his Workers' Party in the 1970s and ran his repeated bids for the presidency.

After Silva became Brazil's first working class president, he named Dirceu chief of staff.

The Workers' Party, once considered a bastion of ethics in Brazilian politics, acknowledged irregularities in its campaign financing.

Silva was never implicated in the scandal and he won re-election in 2006, largely on the strength of Brazil's booming economy and an anti-poverty program.

Jefferson said congressmen received monthly bribes of about \$13,000 and his party alone received some \$2 million.