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## **Brazilian President Cardoso Could Face Stronger Opposition in October Elections**

*by LADB Staff*

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When Brazil's legislature passed the constitutional amendment in June 1997 allowing President Fernando Henrique Cardoso to run for a second term, the president seemed headed for an easy victory in the Oct. 4 elections (see NotiSur, 06/06/97). Since then, however, the death of two key supporters adversely affected Cardoso's legislative agenda, and the political cost of high unemployment and drought-caused famine is increasing. In addition, the left has united to support the candidacy of Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva, diminishing Cardoso's chance for a first-round win.

Cardoso is encountering his greatest opposition since taking office in 1995. The economy has slowed since the government doubled interest rates, cut spending, and raised taxes late last year to defend the currency and ward off further effects of the Asian financial crisis (see NotiSur, 11/14/97). Unemployment in Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest industrial area, is now more than 18.9%, and the stock market is rocky, losing 20% in May.

Cardoso has also been under attack for his administration's response to the drought and accompanying hunger in Brazil's impoverished northeast, where up to 10 million are affected.

The food riots and protests have not only eroded support for Cardoso, they have diverted Cardoso's attention from campaigning. Cardoso's pledge to crack down on looting regardless of the causes has been hard to sell to the public given the position taken by prominent church, labor, judicial, and civic leaders.

In addition, opposition politicians have heaped criticism on the government for failing to heed warnings from its own experts that the effects of El Nino weather phenomenon would be severe (see NotiSur, 05/15/98). Lula will make third try for presidency As politicians geared up for this year's elections, Lula, of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), was an off-and-on candidate. He has made two unsuccessful bids for the presidency and said he would not run again without a united left supporting him, which seemed doubtful until recently. Meeting on May 12, leaders of the three leftist Brazilian parties overcame their differences and agreed to back Lula against Cardoso in October.

Under their agreement, Partido Democratico Trabalhista (PDT) president Leonel Brizola will be Lula's running mate. Others at the meeting besides Lula and Brizola were PT president Jose Dirceu, Joao Amazonas, president of the Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCB), and Almino Afonso, representing the Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB). "The national alliance has been consolidated," said Brizola after the meeting. "There are no more doubts in that regard."

The alliance received an addition boost at another meeting on May 14, when the Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB) agreed to back the Lula-Brizola ticket. To bring the various parties together, the PT's

national executive board, honoring an earlier deal struck with the PDT, withdrew Vladimir Palmeira as the party's candidate for Rio de Janeiro state governor. The Rio branch of the PT had approved hard-liner Palmeira as its gubernatorial candidate, undermining the PDT's agreement to back Lula in return for PT support for its candidate, Anthony Garotinho, for the Rio governorship.

During the PT convention, leaders convinced the delegates that Palmeira's candidacy would ultimately jeopardize the aspirations of Lula, and delegates voted 310 to 201, with 13 abstentions, to withdraw support from Palmeira. Lula came out of the convention strengthened as a presidential candidate, but the party was weakened. Differences, especially regarding alliances with other parties, are still strong. "The PT leaves this national convention united around the candidacy of Lula, united behind the Lula-Brizola ticket, and united in recognizing the need to have an opposition alliance in the elections," said PT president Dirceu.

Dirceu said that the convention gave much weight to the results of the latest polls showing that, with support from the other leftist parties, Lula has a good chance of forcing a runoff election against Cardoso. Polls encourage opposition Although recent polls show Cardoso is still favored to win the election, discontent with the government jumped in May. In a poll conducted May 7-13 by the Instituto Brasileiro de Opiniao Publica e Estatistica (IBOPE), the number of respondents disapproving of the government rose to 41%, from 34% in March and 33% in January. While Cardoso was still far ahead of Lula, the gap has narrowed.

In the IBOPE poll, 39% of respondents backed Cardoso, down from 45% in January. Lula's support rose to 24% in May from 20% in January. Cardoso entering uncharted waters Cardoso said he will be "uncomfortable" running for re- election, a possibility won after considerable political and legal wrangling.

Cardoso said clear campaign guidelines do not exist, especially regarding advantages that presidential statements or interviews can provide, but he is ready "to set precedents" in what a re-election means. "It is very difficult, a culture of re-election doesn't exist in Brazil, and I have to be very prudent in this," said Cardoso, adding he does not want "to give the impression that we're trying to use the state machinery" for the campaign.

Despite his "discomfort," Cardoso feels strongly that his re-election will benefit the country. "The change in Brazil's administration every little while cannot continue," said Cardoso. "If things are going well, why shouldn't they continue?" Cardoso recognizes that social problems are taking a toll on his support and that his economic policies have had their downside. "Brazil's social problems have existed for centuries, and they can't be corrected overnight," he said. "It is a something deeply rooted in the most backward areas. It is a very unequal country."

As unemployment and problems in the countryside increase, it becomes harder for Cardoso to sell legislative measures that many fear will have significant social costs. The deaths in April of two close allies, communications minister Sergio Motta and deputy Luis Eduardo Magalhaes, slowed even further the already long-delayed legislative reforms pushed by the administration (see NotiSur, 05/01/98). Speaking at a hastily called news conference on May 27 after a sudden drop in the stock market, Cardoso warned that more serious economic problems could lie around the corner if the

pension-reform bill remained stuck in Congress. "We must not let our chance of Brazil entering the next century on its feet slip through our hands," Cardoso said. [Sources: Inter Press Service, 05/12/98; Reuters, 05/09/98, 05/10/98, 05/12/98, 05/24/98, 05/27/98; Clarin (Argentina), 05/11/98, 05/27/98; Spanish news service EFE, 05/12/98, 05/14/98, 05/24/98, 05/27/98]

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