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President Lula Regains Lead in Polls

by LADB Staff

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Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva appears to have overcome a drop in poll numbers that had threatened his hopes for re-election later this year. Ethics scandals in his Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) had made Lula appear vulnerable in his effort to win a second term, but infighting among his top opponents and the popular perception that Lula was not directly involved in corrupt PT activity has restored his strong public support. Meanwhile, the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) has chosen Sao Paulo state Gov. Geraldo Alckmin as its presidential candidate over the more popular mayor of the city of Sao Paulo, Jose Serra.

Lula seems to have recovered the incumbent's advantage and the popularity he lost during official inquiries into ethics breaches by members of his party (see NotiSur, 2004-03-05, 2005-06-24, 2005-09-09, and 2005-12-09). After the allegations of wrongdoing against several top members of the PT piled up and investigations dragged on through the middle of 2005, polls had shown Serra potentially beating Lula in a presidential vote.

A poll published Aug. 12, 2005, by the daily Folha de Sao Paulo showed the president would lose a re-election bid to Serra his main opponent in 2002 by a margin of 39% to 48%. Since then, Serra has lost his edge in the polls. A March 15 poll by the Instituto Brasileiro de Opiniao Publica e Estatistica (IBOPE) showed Lula winning 43% if the vote were held that day. Alckmin, his candidacy not yet announced when the poll was taken, received only 19% support. The IBOPE poll was conducted March 8-11 with 2002 people in 143 of the country's 5,500 municipalities. It had a 2.2% margin of error. The poll showed Lula also beating Serra with the incumbent president receiving 40% of the vote versus 31% for Serra, and a runoff resulting in Lula's victory with 44%, and Serra with 40%.

The firm expected that some of Serra's votes might migrate to Alckmin, "but in all scenarios, Lula has, at this moment, a great advantage in relation to the names presented" as options, said Amauri Teixeira, consultant from the Confederacao Nacional da Industrias (CNI), which traditionally is in charge of IBOPE surveys. Nonetheless, Teixeira was careful to point out that the voters' tendencies could change between now and the Oct. 1 elections. Although Lula has yet to officially announce whether he will seek re-election, there is little evidence that he will not run.

Finance Minister Palocci under scrutiny

One potential factor that could hinder Lula's campaign is the corruption allegations that still persist. There are ongoing investigations of Congress members and other officials through legislative investigation commissions (Commissao Parlamentar de Inquerito, CPI) set up after revelations of wrongdoing, but the worst of the political storm seems to have passed over Lula.

Nevertheless, Finance Minister Antonio Palocci is currently facing corruption inquiries in the Congress, including claims that he accepted illegal payments from gambling and trash-collection

interests during his 1993-1994 mayoral administration in the city of Riberao Prieto and that he arranged illegal campaign funding to the PT. The allegations against Palocci may do more harm to markets than to Lula's political aspirations, with the fiscal conservatism of Palocci's policies making him the darling of foreign investors.

Indications that Palocci may be in trouble with the congressional investigations have tended to cause brief dips in Brazilian markets, though they have invariably recovered afterward. Seeking to stem speculation the government's top economic official will resign, Lula has said he is indebted to Palocci, 45, for improving the nation's economy.

"Rest assured that Palocci is my finance minister and he will continue to be my finance minister," Lula said in a speech on March 17. Alckmin announces candidacy, Serra left at state level Analysts concluded that Serra would risk "political death" if he lost a second presidential election to Lula. That may have been one of the concerns for party leaders when they chose Alckmin over Serra.

Alckmin is one of the founders of the PSDB, a party of social democrats. He is a fervent Catholic and comes from the Sao Paulo city of Pindamonhangaba. He promised to give a "scare" to the establishment by implementing neoliberal policies like cutting state spending, improving the quality of public investment, and pushing fiscal reforms. Argentine daily Clarin read this as a sign that he intended to accelerate privatization of public companies and give priority to the stalled Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The PSDB leadership, including Alckmin, now wants Serra to run for governor of the state of Sao Paulo.

A survey by the firm Instituto Datafolha said that Serra could win the post in the first round, with a majority ranging between 50% and 58%, depending on which candidate the PT ran against him. None of his potential competitors received more than 15% support. The poll asked 1,706 people from 45 cities around the state of Sao Paulo whom they would vote for in different electoral scenarios. A majority would eliminate the need for a runoff.

On March 13, shortly before the announcement, a Brazilian pollster said Gov. Alckmin would have an edge over Mayor Serra in running for president because he remains relatively unknown to voters. Alckmin has that advantage along with other presidential contenders including Rio Grande do Sul Gov. Germano Rigotto, who is seeking the nomination from the Partido do Movimento Democratico Brasileiro (PMDB), said Marcia Cavallari, president of IBOPE. "The candidates who are relatively unknown to the public have an advantage because they can create their image from scratch," said Cavallari, who runs the survey division of IBOPE, in an interview in Sao Paulo. "Serra, and even Lula, already carry some baggage, so voters have preconceived ideas about them."

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