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Candidates Emerge to Succeed Brazilian President Lula

by LADB Staff

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With the election to choose President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's successor still a year away, pre-election controversy is already heating up and causing behind-the-scenes maneuvering in political parties, the media, and Brazilian society. The key question to be answered when all the votes are counted a year from now is whether President Lula, at the peak of his popularity, is able to choose his successor.

The most recent presidential voter-preference poll, released Nov. 23, 2009, confirms a tendency detected earlier by political analysts. The Confederacao Nacional do Transporte (CNT)/Instituto Sensus poll shows increased support for Lula's Chief of Staff Dilma Rousseff of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), while support for early favorite Sao Paulo Gov. Jose Serra, of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), has fallen sharply.

Declining support for Jose Serra

Serra's voter-preference rating stood at 31.8%, compared with 39.5% in the previous poll in September and between 40% and 45% support a year ago. Rousseff received 21.7% in the recent poll, up from 19% in September. One factor contributing to Serra's declining numbers has been the emergence of another presidential candidate, Deputy Ciro Gomes of the Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB), which supports Lula.

In the CNT/Sensus poll, Gomes received 17.5%, "stealing" some of Serra's support. Another factor has been the strong public rejection of one of Serra's principal allies, former two-term President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003). Cardoso has a 49.3% disapproval level the percentage of respondents who expressly said they would not vote for a candidate backed by the former president. Only 16% of respondents said they would not vote for a candidate supported by Lula, in this case, Rousseff. Candidates compete to be "green"

Other potential candidates received significantly less support in the CNT/Sensus poll. Former environmental minister in the Lula administration and now Sen. Marina Silva, of the Partido Verde (PV), received 5.9% support. The "Marina Silva factor," which could take votes from Rousseff since Silva has a political history with the PT and much support within various segments of the left, has led strategists in the Rousseff campaign to adjust their tactics. Silva is a major figure in Brazilian environmentalism; she left the Ministerio do Meio Ambiente and the PT because she disagreed with governmental policies regarding the Amazon.

Sen. Silva, who later joined the PV, is also a fierce critic of genetically modified (GM) crops and has defended the most coherent government policies regarding greenhouse-gas-emission reduction to fight global warming. Because of Silva's "green" credentials and the fear that her strong positions on environmental policy could cost Rousseff votes, the chief of staff has assumed a more pro-environment posture.

Rousseff led government negotiations that resulted in Brazil's announcement in mid-November that it would "voluntarily" cut greenhouse gasses between 36.1% and 38.9% by 2020. This is the goal that Brazil will bring to the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December, which Minister Rousseff will attend. Behind-the-scenes speculation is that Lula set this voluntary goal partly in response to Gov. Serra, to date the strongest presidential candidate. Gov. Serra announced the goal of cutting greenhouse-gas emissions by 20% in the state of Sao Paulo by 2020 compared with the 2005 level. The state of Sao Paulo is the most industrialized in the country and thus the largest emitter of greenhouse gasses.

In another instance of giving Lula's candidate a "green tint," Minister Rousseff presided the Nov. 12 ceremony at which the federal government announced a substantial reduction in Amazon deforestation. Between August 2008 and August 2009, 7,000 sq km of forest were cleared, the lowest amount in 21 years and 45% less than the year before, when deforestation claimed 12,900 sq km. Deforestation rates are generally announced by the environmental minister, currently Carlos Minc, but on this occasion both Lula and Rousseff attended the ceremony.

In 2004, 27,000 sq km were deforested, so the five-year reduction is important and another achievement that the government will take to Copenhagen in December. Deforestation is one of the principal causes of greenhouse-gas emissions. Lula's popularity helps his candidate. The growth of Rousseff's candidacy is not just the result of drinking "green tonic"; she has certainly benefitted from the Lula administration's enormous popularity.

In the Nov. 23 CNT/Sensus poll, the administration's approval rating was 70%, up from 65.4% in September. At the same time, Lula's personal approval rating rose from 76.8% in September to 78.9%, also boosting Rousseff's candidacy. Lula's popularity is attributed to such factors as the government social program Bolsa Familia, which reaches 11 million households, one of the largest social programs in the world, and government actions during the global economic crisis, which hurt Brazil less than it did most other countries.

Analysts say all these factors contribute to the popularity of Rousseff, who has never run for office. Her political experience began as an activist with the armed groups that opposed the 1964-1985 military dictatorship. The right has cited Rousseff's background with the guerrilla movement and will surely bring it up frequently during the 2010 electoral campaign.

Rousseff was treasury secretary in Porto Alegre and secretary of energy, mines, and communications in two administrations in Rio Grande do Sul, where she joined the Partido Democratico Trabalhista (PDT). In 2001, she joined the PT. Rousseff's appeal is also based on what her followers frequently call the chief of staff's "management ability." She has been a strong leader of the Programa de Aceleracao do Crescimento (PAC), a government initiative that includes thousands of infrastructure projects.

However, this "management ability" was certainly scratched during the Nov. 10 energy blackout, which covered 18 states and affected 60 million Brazilians (see NotiSur, 2009-11-20). The opposition surrounding Gov. Serra pointed out that Rousseff was minister of mines and energy in the Lula

administration, the ministry that should have prevented a blackout. Nevertheless, the polls are showing increased support for Rousseff and a simultaneous drop in support for Serra.

The new wrinkle is the candidacy of Gomes, who has always been a Lula ally. This raises the question of how Lula will react, if Gomes' support grows, regarding the candidacy of Rousseff, who has had various personal problems this year. In April 2009, Rousseff revealed that she was suffering from lymphoma. After the announcement, she underwent intensive treatment and in September said that she had been cured. Since then, she has worked to strengthen the contacts who will further her candidacy, with support from parties such as the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), which has the largest organization in the country and has supported the Lula administration (see NotiSur, 2009-01-09).

Rio de Janeiro federal Deputy Miro Teixeira of the PDT, which also supports Lula, is one of the most experienced and respected members of Congress. He believes that the Rousseff candidacy can only grow. "It keeps getting bigger not only because she is Lula's choice but also because she has shown that she is prepared to take on the presidency," said Teixeira. "Everything points to a breeding ground for the Dilma candidacy."

First elections without Lula in two decades

Teixeira believes that the candidates' debate will determine the outcome of the 2010 elections. For the first time in two decades, former factory worker Lula will not be a candidate. "Brazilians will pay more attention to the debate and less to the campaign ads," said Teixeira. But the opposition sees weaknesses in the Rousseff candidacy.

The goal of reducing greenhouse-gas emissions between 36.1% and 38.9% is described as "media-driven" by Deputy Antonio Carlos de Mendes Thame, PSDB president in the state of Sao Paulo. "[The government] cannot announce these figures, considering that Brazil still does not have an inventory of the volume of its greenhouse-gas emissions, and, additionally, to make the goal voluntary is not possible when you are talking about a UN convention," said Thame, one of the legislators most dedicated to environmental issues.

Thame believes that a strong point of the Serra candidacy is his "completely different perspective of the state, which he sees as bloated, with a swollen and unprecedented apparatus." For the PSDB deputy, Lula's oversized government "implies an incomprehensible tax, which has cost Brazil competitiveness."

For the Sao Paulo PSDB president, the 2010 presidential election is really a choice between two distinct visions of Brazil's development. "In these types of elections, there will always be two different proposals on how to see the country," he said. Rousseff's campaign strategists are counting on the 2010 elections being a plebiscite on the Lula government and the president's ability to transfer votes to his candidate.

Most analysts see Rousseff benefitting from the president's high popularity. But a year is a long time, during which all the politicians and parties can change, and it remains to be seen whether people such as Ciro Gomes and Marina Silva are confirmed as candidates.

One of the best known agencies following the actions of the government in Brasilia is the Departamento Intersindical de Assessoria Parlamentar (DIAP). DIAP congressional advisor Antonio Augusto de Queiroz believes that no "third-way" candidate will affect the tendency toward a polarized contest between Rousseff and Serra.

"In an election, regional alliances, extensive TV electoral propaganda, and financial resources count," he said, pointing out that the two principal candidates are more than able to provide these elements. Queiroz believes that economic issues and social programs will be crucial in the 2010 elections, which will be a referendum on the Lula government, a type of popular trial.

The DIAP analyst points out that the Lula government has opened "direct channels of dialogue with the unions and the popular movements" and notes that the labor federations were officially recognized by the government in 2008. The Rousseff candidacy will likely receive important support from unions and popular movements in 2010.

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