Brazil Poised to Elect Its First Woman President

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In its last presidential elections, Brazil chose a laborer and trade-union leader. This time around, if predictions from the most well-know electoral-research institutes in the country are correct, the country will likely elect a woman for the first time. The Oct. 3 elections are expected to confirm Dilma Rousseff as the successor to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the laborer who became president in 2002 and now, at the height of his immense popularity, is largely responsible for the success of his hand-picked candidate in the campaign.

Rousseff, a former mines and energy minister and former all-powerful chief of staff during Lula's administration, is the candidate for the governing Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). Until now, Rousseff has never run for public office. Her success in the campaign is, therefore, somewhat surprising, despite the huge popularity of Lula, who is leaving office with an unprecedented 80% approval rating.

Yet, Rousseff's first steps on the campaign trail were not encouraging for her supporters. At the start of the campaign to succeed Lula, the far-away favorite was José Serra, who was then governor of São Paulo state. A member of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), Serra had opposed the 1964-1985 military regime. He was president of the União Nacional dos Estudantes (UNE), and, during the dictatorship, lived in exile in Chile.

Serra—from shoo-in to long shot
Upon returning to Brazil, he held various top posts such as minister of health during the administration of former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003), where, among other things, he pushed to open the generic-medicine market (NotiSur, Sept. 5, 2003) and defended violating patents on drugs for AIDS victims (NotiSur, May 25, 2001). Later, he was elected senator, mayor of the city of São Paulo, and governor of the state, the richest and most populous in Brazil.

Always with an image of strength and a huge capacity for work, Serra began his presidential campaign as the front-runner. A poll published on April 19 by Datafolha, affiliated with the daily Folha de São Paulo, said the PSDB's Serra had 40% of voter preference compared with 29% for the PT's, and Lula's, Rousseff.

But, little by little, Dilma was gaining ground, and, from June to July, she overtook Serra in the polls. In the final leg of the campaign, the climate has heated up, but not, as some analysts expected, because of Dilma's past. During the military dictatorship, Dilma joined armed groups opposing the dictatorial government. She spent much time underground and was arrested.

Some observers thought that Dilma's actions during the dictatorship might affect the presidential campaign, but that didn't happen. The biggest surprises, in the final weeks of the campaign, had to do with other issues, such as charges, repeated endlessly in the press, that the confidential tax records of persons linked to the PSDB, including Serra's daughter Veronica, had been leaked. "This involves two crimes: that of violating confidentiality, which is against the Constitution, and the crime of gathering false documents," said candidate Serra regarding the episode.
The PSDB began to link the incident with Dilma's candidacy, but her and Lula's supporters always maintained that violating tax-information confidentiality was a crime and not a matter related to party politics. If there was a crime, they say, it should be treated as a common crime, unrelated to Dilma's candidacy. The Receita Federal [Brazil's federal internal revenue service] began to investigate the complaints of tax-confidentiality violations.

"A candidate moves up in the polls and then the unproven accusations begin. Dilma is going through what I went through in the past," said Lula in one of Dilma's campaign ads in early September. In the same ad, he added, "Brazil is very mature and won't be tricked." For Lula, the people know "that Dilma is honest and competent."

Also causing some turbulence in Dilma's candidacy were complaints involving her successor as chief of staff, Erenice Guerra. The Brazilian press reported various complaints regarding an alleged influence-peddling network in the federal government, which involved some immediate family members of Guerra, who resigned under pressure on Sept. 16.

It was widely expected that these incidents—the violation of tax secrecy and the complaints involving Guerra—would negatively affect Dilma's campaign. But, judging by the opinion polls published Sept. 17, they did not

In the Datafolha poll, Dilma remained in first place with 51% of voter preference, compared with 27% for José Serra. If those numbers hold for the Oct. 3 election, Rousseff will be elected in the first round, which requires obtaining at least 50% plus one of the valid votes.

**The Lula bounce**

Now the favorite, Dilma is pictured by the vast majority of analysts as benefiting from Lula's enormous popularity as well as from Brazil's favorable economic situation and the various popular social programs established by the former laborer's administration in recent years. One such program is Bolsa Família, in which 12.7 million families participate(*Notisur, July 14, 2006*.). Bolsa Família uses federal funds to pay a stipend for the poorest families in the country on the condition that they keep their children in school.

Inflation control and the policy of fiscal responsibility carried out with an iron fist by the federal government and Banco Central president Henrique Meirelles (who had been part of the Cardoso [PSDB] administration and was kept on by Lula) are among the positive components of Lula's economic policy.

Between 2004 and 2007, the Brazilian economy grew by an average of 4.5% a year. This is the most cohesive period of economic growth since the 1970s, a period called the "economic miracle" by the military regime.

These factors have contributed to raising the standard of living of millions of Brazilians in recent years. Data from the Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA), a respected federal agency, show that, between 1995 and 2008, more than 13 million Brazilians rose out of abject poverty.

The favorable economic situation and the results of the social projects have contributed to increasing the number of supporters of Lula and are largely responsible for Dilma's rise in the polls. The question is whether her advantage over Serra and the other candidates will hold so that she is...
elected in the first round, which is Lula's great hope, as a definitive sign of popular affirmation of his administration.

**Former Lula Cabinet member sees numbers rising**

Another unknown in the final moments of the campaign is the performance of Sen. Marina Silva, presidential candidate for the Partido Verde (PV). During the electoral campaign, Silva's numbers have ranged from 8% to 10%, but they have risen in recent weeks. Her campaign slogan has become, "Two women in the runoff," as a way to encourage voter turnout.

Marina Silva is one of the best known environmentalists in Brazil, especially in the Amazon. She is a senator for the state of Acre and the direct heir of the struggle of Chico Mendes, the rubber-tapper leader and environmentalist who was slain in 1988 (NotiSur, Feb. 23, 1993) and (Aug. 2, 1996). Silva even worked on the rubber plantations in her youth. Connected to the base, she joined Lula's PT, where she remained during the better part of her political career.

She resigned her post as environmental minister in the Lula administration because she differed with some of Lula's decisions such as to allow planting of genetically modified (GM) crops and to build a huge hydroelectric dam in the Amazon, the Belo Monte plant (NotiSur, May 28, 2010). In Lula's administration, Marina ran into opposition from, among others, Dilma Rousseff.

Shortly after leaving the Ministério de Meio Ambiente, Marina Silva also left the PT and soon joined the Partido Verde, which had never had a national standing. Silva's good showing in the presidential race in 2010 could do a lot to strengthen the PV and the ideas of sustainable development in the country.

In any event, Brazil for the first time in its history has two women among the three major presidential candidates. Both Dilma and Serra were active in the opposition to the military regime, although in different ways.

Undoubtedly, a sign of the country's political maturity was the election of a laborer, Lula, to the presidency in 2002 in the face of the mistrust of a large part of the business sector and the international financial system.

Lula proved them wrong; he was given the Global Statesman award by the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in 2010 and still has enormous public support, despite criticism from social movements for not making greater strides in areas such as agrarian reform and protection of indigenous rights.

Part of Rousseff's success in the campaign can be credited to Lula's coattails. The question is whether she will really be elected in the first round or whether there will be a runoff, when the other candidate's chances could improve.

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