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Brazil's President-elect Dilma Rousseff Faces Challenge to Maintain Outgoing President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's Popularity

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Category/Department: Brazil

Published: Friday, November 12, 2010

Brazil's President-elect Dilma Rousseff, the country's first woman president, faces many challenges, and one will be to hang on to the enormous popularity of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The latest opinion polls indicate that Lula will leave office on Jan. 1, 2011, with an approval rating above 80%, a record for Brazilian presidents.

Lula's popularity is primarily a result of Brazil's good economic indicators, despite the serious global economic crisis during the past two years. Brazil's economy grew 4.5% a year between 2004 and 2007, the longest period of growth since the 1970s. Economic growth could top 7% in 2010. There was an explosion of durable goods and significant jobs growth. In the last eight years, the county has produced 15 million jobs.

The Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA) reports that, between 1995 and 2008, 13 million Brazilians were lifted out of absolute poverty. By the end of 2010, 240 technical schools will have been created, 3 million homes will have electricity for the first time, 126 Brazilian cities will have a university campus, more than 700,000 students from low-income families will be attending university, and 13 million families will be benefitting from Bolsa Família. Those are some of the achievements the Lula administration can take credit for.

With these and other data to celebrate, Lula was, naturally, the main reason for Rousseff's victory; he chose her to run to succeed him on the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) ticket. Opinion polls prior to Oct. 3 indicated that Rousseff might win in the first round. While she received 47.6 million votes, it was not enough to give her a first-round victory (NotiSur, Oct. 22, 2010). Coming in second was José Serra of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), with 33.1 million votes.

The Oct. 31 runoff was between the two top candidates, Rousseff and Serra. The big question was which candidate would capture the approximately 20 million votes obtained in the first round by third-place candidate Marina Silva of the Partido Verde (PV).

The runoff campaign was difficult, polemic, and aggressive. The Serra campaign came out fighting, with many criticisms of Dilma and Lula, contrary to the first round, when Lula was mentioned positively during Serra's TV campaign program. But it was not enough to bring him victory.

Lula's support key to victory

In the second round, Rousseff received 55.7 million (56.05%) valid votes, while Serra received 43.7 million (43.95%). Dilma obtained some 8 million more votes in the runoff than she had in the first round, while Serra picked up 10 million.

The results make Dilma the woman to receive the highest number of votes in Brazil's electoral history and one of the highest vote-getters on the planet. But it is precisely this historic result that
raises questions about her ability to govern. In her first foray into electoral politics, she was elected president. What will be her negotiating power and her tolerance, essentials for carrying out her office, bearing in mind that she lacks Lula's charisma?

In his first statements after the election, Lula was quick to affirm that he would not interfere in Dilma's administration. However, the president-elect made a point of saying that Lula would always be a welcome advisor. "I will always be able to knock on his door, and I know it will always be open," she said, adding, "Yes, we can," in a reference to the famous slogan of US President Barack Obama.

The truth is that, for most analysts, Lula continues to be the greatest name in Brazilian politics, and many consider that he must be the grand guarantor of Dilma’s government.

From militant to president

Rousseff's biography was unknown to most Brazilians when her electoral campaign began. Born Dec. 14, 1947, in Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais, Dilma Vana Rousseff is the daughter of Bulgarian immigrant Pétar Russév (naturalized as Pedro Rousseff) and Brazilian professor Jane Dilma Silva. Her businessman father provided a comfortable life for the family, and Dilma studied at the Colégio Sion, one of the most traditional in Belo Horizonte.

At 17, Dilma, then a student at the Colégio Estadual Central (now Escola Estadual Governador Milton Campos), joined the Organização Revolucionária Marxista/Política Operária (Polop), one of the groups that opposed the military regime that had taken over that year (1964). After marrying journalist Claudio Galeno Linhares in 1967, Dilma joined the Comando de Libertação Nacional (Colina).

Colina supported the armed struggle against the dictatorship, and in 1969 Dilma had to go into hiding, leaving her economics studies at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG).

Following her separation from Linhares, Dilma began a relationship with lawyer Carlos Araújo, who was living in Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul. The couple had a daughter, Paula Rousseff Araújo, who, during the presidential campaign, gave birth to Dilma's first granddaughter.

In July 1969, Colina and the Vanguarda Popular Revolucionária joined forces to form the Vanguarda Armada Revolucionária Palmares (VAR-Palmares). Rousseff used several aliases during her time in hiding and has always denied participating in armed actions against the military government.

She was arrested in January 1970 and tortured at the infamous Operação Bandeirantes (Oban) in São Paulo. Sentenced to more than six years in prison, she was released in late 1972, after her sentence was reduced by the Superior Tribunal Militar (STM).

She returned to Porto Alegre, where she took a government job in 1975 at the Fundação de Economia e Estatística (FEE). In 1977 she finished her degree in economics at the Universidade Federal de Rio Grande do Sul but was later fired by the FEE because of her past opposition to the military regime.

With the restoration of democracy, she returned to public life as a member of the Partido Democrático Trabalhista (PDT), founded by another giant in Brazilian politics, Leonel Brizola. She then became secretary of housing and of energy, mines, and communications in Rio Grande do Sul.
In 2001, she worked for Lula's campaign, and the following year he was elected president, the first laborer to be elected to the presidency in Brazil's history.

**Job performance catches Lula’s eye**

In 2003, Dilma was named minister of mines and energy. She began to catch Lula's attention with her program Luz para Todos, which provided electricity to millions of Brazilians who had never had the service, and with her efforts to avoid a new electric-power blackout as had happened at the end of the administration of former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003).

Rousseff became very powerful in the Lula administration and in 2005 was named chief of staff, the office previously held by José Dirceu, who had resigned (NotiSur, June 24, 2005) following a series of complaints related to the "mensalão" (monthly bribes payments) scandal.

As chief of staff, Dilma coordinated the Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento (PAC), a group of infrastructure and other projects initiated during Lula's second term that has contributed to the country's positive economic indicators.

In 2009, Lula picked Dilma to be the candidate to run to succeed him, contrary to what many PT members expected (NotiSur, Dec. 4, 2009). In early 2009, Dilma faced another major challenge when she was diagnosed with lymphoma. She underwent treatment, lost her hair, as is common for cancer patients, but kept her focus firmly on working to succeed the charismatic and popular Lula.

The former guerrilla was hit by heavy artillery, above all in the runoff campaign, but with Lula's crucial support she never lost the lead through the Oct. 31 voting.

Dilma's vice president is Michel Temer of the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), one of the most powerful parties in the country. The PMDB's participation in the administration, along with other parties such as the Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB), which has always backed Lula, helped win the recent elections.

The PSB elected six governors in the states of Amapá, Piauí, Ceará, Paraíba, Pernambuco, and Espírito Santo, more than the five governors elected by the PT (Acre, Bahía, Sergipe, Distrito Federal, and Rio Grande do Sul). The PMDB elected five governors—in Maranhão, Rondônia, Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, and Rio de Janeiro—and the Partido da Mobilização Nacional (PMN), also part of the support base of the Lula administration, elected the governor of Amazonas. The PSDB elected governors in São Paulo and Minas Gerais, states with the largest number of voters in Brazil, and also in Roraima, Pará, Goiás, Tocantins, Paraná, and Alagoas. The Democatas (DEM), another opposition party, elected governors in Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Norte.

Rousseff will have ample support in Congress, with 372 of the 513 deputies and 60 of the 81 senators. She has enormous political capital that could guarantee smooth sailing for administration initiatives, but that will depend in large measure on the president-elect's performance.

During the electoral campaign and her speeches at the time, Rousseff reiterated her intention of maintaining and improving Lula's social programs, with measures to provide pre-natal care to pregnant women, improve the quality of education, provide greater attention to early childhood education, raise the minimum wage above the rate of inflation, construct 2 million houses for low-wage workers, and reduce Amazon deforestation by 80%.
"The responsibility to fully fulfill the expectations and maintain the trust not only of the voters but the entire nation rests on the shoulders of every person elected," said the Conferência Nacional de Bispos do Brasil (CNBB) in a statement distributed shortly after Dilma's election. "It is now the indispensable task of us Brazilians to supervise those elected in the exercise of their duties."

Defeated, but with 43 million votes, Serra said that he would continue in public life, although many analysts consider that he has participated in his last presidential election. "For those who think that we are defeated, we are now beginning the real battle. We are going to support the country with the parties that we have with us, as individuals, legislators, and governors. My farewell message at this moment is not 'goodbye' but 'see you soon.' The struggle continues. Long live Brazil!" said Serra in an emotional concession speech on the night of Oct. 31.

Only time will tell whether Dilma will be successful as the president of Brazil. In her personal and political life, she has always overcome challenges and shown herself to be a pioneer. In any event, she has now made history.

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