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Brazil's Municipal Elections Will Be Test for President Dilma Rousseff and Could Point to New Political Directions

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On Oct. 7, more than 140 million Brazilians will vote in municipal elections to choose mayors and city councilors in 5,564 municipalities. These are the first elections since President Dilma Rousseff took office (NotiSur, Nov. 12, 2010) and will be an important test of her administration's popularity. The municipal elections could also be an indicator of new directions for party politics in Brazil.

Evaluations of the Rousseff administration have been generally positive. More than 70% of respondents in recent polls say that it is doing a good job, despite signs that Brazil's economy is in a period of cooling off, a cause of concern for the government, the productive sector, and workers.

"We are living in an ambiguous period in which people are still relatively satisfied with their jobs and income, but they also fear the effects of the global economic crisis already evident in Brazil, and the municipal elections are taking place within this context," said political analyst Valeriano Mendes Ferreira Costa of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP).

In any case, analysts believe that the municipal elections will be a real test for the Rousseff administration and also for the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), the party of the president and her predecessor, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010). During Lula's two terms, average annual growth was 3.8%. During the administration of social democrat President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), average annual growth was 2.3%. GDP growth in 2012 is expected to stand at about 1.5%.

Widespread strikes in August point to growing frustration

One sign of society's uneasiness with the direction of the economy has been the proliferation of strikes in various sectors. In mid-August, more than 350,000 workers in 30 sectors, including federal universities, were on strike. "We are facing a world crisis, and Brazil knows it; because it has its feet on the ground, it can and it will face the crisis and come out of it, guaranteeing employment for all Brazilians," said the president at the most critical moment in the strikes.

This scenario makes the Oct. 7 elections a test for the administration and the PT. In early September, specialized studies in the 26 state capitals showed the PT ahead in two cities, Goiânia, capital of Goiás, and Rio Branco, capital of Acre. The Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), the party of Cardoso and the PT's principal rival, was ahead in six state capitals. Currently, the PT controls the city government in seven capitals, while the PSDB has only one.

However, the early September polling showed significant growth for PT candidates in capitals of some of the most important states, like São Paulo, the country's largest. This change is attributed in large part to ex-President Lula's active participation in the campaign. Shortly after leaving office in January 2011, Lula was diagnosed with cancer and his health was very fragile. Some sectors in Brazil began to doubt the political future of the PT and even the federal government, where Lula had been the grand icon for decades.
But Lula regained his health and is participating in some municipal campaigns, especially in Brazil's largest city, São Paulo, where Fernando Haddad, the PT candidate for mayor, is Lula's handpicked nominee. Haddad was Lula's minister of education, and the former president pushed his candidacy for mayor against PT Sen. Marta Suplicy, who was also mayor of São Paulo from 2001 to 2004.

The performance of Haddad, who has never run for electoral office, has improved enormously in the polls. A Sept. 12 poll by Instituto Datafolha, one of the most respected polling firms in the country, indicated that Haddad now has the support of 17% of voters, a technical tie with rival José Serra of the PSDB, who has 20% support. Datafolha said that Serra maintained about 30% of voter preference between early March and July 21, while Haddad had only 5% voter preference during that time.

In the Datafolha polls after Aug. 21, Serra's support has declined, in contrast with Haddad, whose support has only increased since July 6, the date free election ads began on TV. Lula has participated in the TV campaign, with frequent messages of support for Haddad. After the TV and radio campaigns began, the candidacy of Celso Russomanno of the tiny Partido Republicano Brasileiro (PRB) also took off, and he was soon in first place with 32% of voter preference in the Sept. 12 Datafolha poll. The meteoric rise of Russomanno, whose professional career has been as a TV journalist and four-time member of Congress, has been considered an electoral phenomenon.

Runoff in São Paulo race likely

Under Brazilian law, for elections in large cities, if a candidate does not receive 50% plus 1 votes, a runoff must take place in November. The study's present trends indicate that, if Russomanno maintains his lead, the fight will be between Serra and Haddad to see who will face him in the runoff. So, the race will be a real popularity test for Lula and President Rousseff, who, since early September, has also begun to campaign for PT candidates, like Haddad in São Paulo.

UNICAMP's Costa says that this year's municipal elections will be important for the design of the 2014 electoral campaign, when voters will chose a president, governors, deputies, and senators. "Brazil is very large, the local realities are very different, and the municipal-election results are going to be very important in the context of the 2014 national elections," he said.

But the Oct. 7 elections will also be a benchmark for other aspects of Brazil's social and political life, such as the struggle against electoral corruption, which has mobilized a large segment of civil society (NotiSur, Sept. 23, 2011). For example, on Sept. 6, the Campanha Voto Consciente - Eleições 2012 was launched, led by the Catholic Church's Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB).

"The campaign launched at this exact moment wants to contribute to again turning politics into a vehicle for building the common good, putting it in the place it never should have left," said CNBB secretary general Bishop Leonardo Ulrich Steiner.

The CNBB campaign's messages for society in general, appealing to the electorate to not vote for candidates implicated in incidents of corruption, are being transmitted through radio and TV messages, in videos produced by the Núcleo de Estudos Sociopolíticos (NESP) of the Archdiocese of Belo Horizonte.

Women's participation in the municipal elections will also be closely evaluated, since this is the country's first election with a woman in the presidency. The Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (TSE) said that 12.5% of candidates in municipalities throughout Brazil in 2012 were women, compared with
10.6% in 2008 and 9.5% in 2004. In legislative council races, the participation of women in 2012 is also higher, with 31.4% of candidates being women, compared with 22.1% in 2008 and 2004. Despite the increase in women candidates, the figures are far from what feminist organizations would like.

Brazil still has a low number of women in elected office. In May 2012, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which has links to the UN, showed that Brazil ranks 117th of 141 countries in the number of elected women. That will be another test in the Oct. 7 municipal elections in a country that has a woman president for the first time in its history.

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