Brazil's Municipal Elections Strengthen Government but Also Show Disillusionment and Desire for Renewal

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Brazil's municipal elections, held in October, ended with significant numerical growth nationally for the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), the party of President Dilma Rousseff and former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010). The elections also showed a certain voter disillusionment with leaders of party politics and a desire for renewal, for change, for the future.

The first round of elections took place on Oct. 7. In the large cities where candidates did not garner enough votes for a first-round victory, a runoff was held on Oct. 28 (NotiSur, Sept. 21, 2012). Runoff elections were held in 50 large cities, including the largest, São Paulo, with more than 10 million inhabitants. And the São Paulo election is the best illustration of the PT's progress.

Throughout most of the campaign, PT candidate Fernando Haddad was placing third in the polls. However, Haddad, a former education minister, came in second in the first round and won the runoff, with 3.38 million votes (55.57% of the valid ballots) compared with 2.70 million (44.43%) for José Serra of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB).

The São Paulo election also confirmed the great polarization between the PT and the PSDB nationally, although the PSDB, the principal opposition party, has seen its municipal representation reduced considerably.

Another major Brazilian party, the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), is part of the administration, as Vice President Michel Temer is a PMDB member. In Brazil's 5,000 municipalities, the PMDB elected the most mayors. It won the mayoralty in 1,026 municipalities in 2012, down from 1,194 in 2008. (Most newly elected PMDB mayors were in small municipalities with fewer than 80,000 people.)

The PSDB, the major opposition party, continues having the second-largest number of elected mayors: 702 were elected in 2012, fewer than the 781 elected in 2008.

The PT won in 635 municipalities, 91 more than in 2008, and its electoral high point was winning in São Paulo, the largest city in South America.

Other parties allied with the federal government also fared well at the polls. The Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB) elected 440 mayors compared with 308 in 2008. The PSB won the mayoralty in the largest number—five—of the 26 state capitals. The Partido Social Democrático (PSD), which did not exist in 2008, elected 496 mayors. The 78 mayors elected by the Partido da Real Democracia (PRD) compared with 54 elected in 2008, and the Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCdoB) won in 56 municipalities, up from 41 in 2008.

Also part of the governing coalition, the Partido Democrático Trabalhista (PDT) elected 312 mayors compared with 347 in 2008, and the Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (PTB) won in 295 municipalities, compared with 410 in 2008.
Losses for most opposition parties

In addition to the PSDB’s losses, other opposition losses included the Democratas (DEM), which elected 278 mayors compared with 493 in 2008, and the Partido Popular Socialista (PPS), which elected 123 compared with 129 in 2008. The Partido Progressista (PP), which sometimes supports and sometimes opposes the government, elected 268, far fewer than the 549 it elected in 2008.

Results for other smaller parties were: the Partido da República (PR), 274 mayors elected; Partido Verde (PV), 97; Partido Social Cristão (PSC), 83; Partido da Mobilização Nacional (PMN), 42; Partido Trabalhista do Brasil (PT do B), 26; Partido Republicano Progressista (PRP), 24; Partido Social Liberal (PSL), 23; Partido Trabalhista Cristão (PTC), 19; Partido Humanista da Solidariedade (PHS), 17; Partido Renovador Trabalhista Brasileiro (PRTB), 16; Partido Patria Livre (PPL), 12; Partido Trabalhista Nacional (PTN), 12; Partido Social Democrata Cristão (PSDC), 9. The Partido Socialismo e Liberdade (PSOL) won two mayoralties, including that of Macapá, capital of Amapá. This will be the first state capital governed by the extreme-left PSOL. Overall, the governing-coalition parties obtained 60.02 million votes compared with 23.86 million for the clear opposition parties.

These figures indicate a "clear victory for the federal government and its public policies for social inclusion and wealth distribution," wrote Antônio Augusto Queiroz, a political analyst at the Departamento Intersindical de Assessoria Parlamentar (DIAP), an organization that monitors activities of the federal government and the Congress.

Victory brings talk of Dilma re-election effort

Queiroz says that the PT victory in São Paulo was what received the most attention and also points to another tendency observed in these municipal elections—people's desire for renewal. "Although the PT is a consolidated party, it chose a new candidate, who had never run in an election, to fulfill its desire for renewal. That is also what happened with President Dilma, who had also never run for office before her 2010 victory," said the DIAP analyst.

In fact, the winner in São Paulo, Fernando Haddad, a Marxist-trained professor, had never run for public office before. He performed well as minister of education before being chosen to run as the PT candidate in São Paulo, with strong support from former President Lula, who, after fighting cancer, actively participated in the 2012 municipal campaigns.

For Queiroz, the current economic and social policies strengthen the federal government, while the opposition has yet to come up with concrete alternatives. Given that, the 2012 municipal elections underscore "President Dilma’s re-election plans for 2014." Given the municipal election results, the opposition, and especially the PSDB, are not, objectively, ready to confront the leftist candidacy in 2014, says Queiroz.

Philosopher Roberto Romano, a professor at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp) and another astute observer of national politics, believes that the PT victory and consequent strengthening of the government should be taken with reservations. "The base of support for President Rousseff and ex-President Lula was always the north and northeast, and in these regions the PT did not do so well," said Romano.

In the northeast, the PSDB and DEM candidate won in seven of the 15 largest cities, including in four state capitals: Salvador, Bahia; Aracaju, Sergipe; Maceió, Alagoas; and Teresina, Piauí. In the
north, the PSDB won two state capitals: Manaus, Amazonas; and Belém, Pará. And the extreme-left PSOL won in Macapá, although the winner, Clécio Luis, has already spoken of a possible alliance with the PT.

In the northeast, the PT won only in João Pessoa, the capital of Paraíba, and in the north, it won only in Rio Branco, the capital of Arce.

Roberto Romano recalled that the PSB, which is part of the governing coalition and emerged strengthened in the municipal elections, has its own hopeful for the presidency, party president and Pernambuco Gov. Eduardo Campos. But Queiroz considers that "the PSB grew precisely because it is in the governing coalition, and Eduardo Campos is trying to grow, perhaps to run for the presidency in 2018, not in 2014."

Marketing over substance

Romano says that in the 2012 municipal elections the political parties, without exception, "showed immense mediocrity, with no grand ideas, no respect for their electoral platforms or the voter."

There was, finally, no debate on ideas and programs in the electoral campaigns but only "a physiological dispute dominated by the campaign-strategy consultant, who became the real owner of the elections," he said.

Perhaps this explains the large number of blank or null ballots in the municipal elections, as well as the high level of abstention. In all, 35 million ballots were blank or null (those on which no candidate was chosen) and 25% of eligible voters stayed home. In São Paulo, 28% of voters did not vote for any of the candidates in the runoff, or they abstained. In many cities, the number of blank and null votes plus the number of abstentions was higher than the number of valid votes cast in the runoff.

In sum, while the numbers showed the federal government strengthened in the municipal elections, the process also showed that much of the population was skeptical of political parties. This should serve as a warning for the country's leaders.

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