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Brazilian Election Prognosis Upended as Plane Crash Kills Presidential Candidate Eduardo Campos and Boosts Marina Silva

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An airplane carrying Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB) candidate Eduardo Campos crashed in Santos, São Paulo, on Aug. 13. The plane went down in bad weather although the exact cause remains undetermined. However, there is at present no suspicion of foul play. Campos was on his way to a campaign stop along with three political advisers, a photographer, and two pilots. All seven aboard were killed.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the PSB agreed to nominate Campos’ running mate, Marina Silva, as his replacement on the ballot. Silva previously ran for president in 2010 and came in third. She had intended to run again in 2014, but her political party was not successfully registered with the Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (TSE) in time for this year’s October general elections.

Prior to his death, Campos was trailing the incumbent, President Dilma Rousseff (Partido de Trabalhadores, PT), and conservative challenger Aécio Neves (Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira, PSDB). As a former minister in the PT government of Rousseff’s predecessor, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011), Campos had struggled to gain adherents following his rupture with the party and declaration of his candidacy. Silva, by contrast, draws significant support from the left as a former Partido Verde (PV) candidate and has skyrocketed in recent polls. On Aug. 29, she polled even with Rousseff at 34%, while Neves’ consistent 20% has since dropped to 15%, according to combined results from Datafolha, TV Globo, and the Folha de São Paulo.

Campos and Silva formed uneasy alliance that struggled to take off

The political expediency that resulted in a Campos/Silva ticket began with the disillusion of both politicians toward their former patron, the PT. Campos served as minister of science and technology under Lula from 2004-2005 when the PSB was allied with the PT. He maintained a close relationship with Lula after leaving the federal government and assuming the presidency of the PSB, which continued to hold several ministries in the second Lula and first Rousseff administrations. However, Campos, later a successful and popular governor of the northeastern state of Pernambuco from 2007-2014, did not maintain as close and cordial of a relationship with Rousseff. She ultimately demanded that all PSB ministers resign in September 2013 when Campos and his party refused to pledge allegiance to Rousseff’s re-election campaign. With the PSB-PT alliance officially broken, Campos then prepared for a presidential run under his party’s banner.

Silva likewise served in the Lula administration as minister of the environment from 2003-2008 following a nearly 20-year career as senator from the Amazonian state of Acre. An outspoken environmentalist, she broke with the PT over its support for hydroelectric dams in sensitive areas of the Amazon rain forest (NotiSur, May 30, 2008). In 2010, she received nearly 20% of first-round votes as a PV candidate (NotiSur, Nov. 12, 2010). Buoyed by the experience, Silva formed her own party, Rede Sustentabilidade (Rede), in 2013, but was unable to obtain the necessary signatures by
the deadline to appear on this year’s ballot. Consequently, she agreed to serve as Campos’ running mate and switched her party allegiance to the PSB.

As a marriage of convenience, and given Silva’s clear presidential aspirations, the Campos/Silva ticket struggled to gain ground. It polled well behind the incumbent, whose party has now been in power for 12 years, and the conservative movement allied behind Neves, the former governor of Minas Gerais and grandson of Brazilian president-elect Tancredo Neves, who died before taking office in 1985. Until Campos’ death, political analysts predicted that Rousseff and Neves would face off in a second round of voting with Campos coming in a distant third.

**Party establishment quickly coalesced behind Silva, aiding her candidacy**

The untimely death of Campos necessitated immediate action by the PSB leadership while respecting the wishes of his family. In quick succession, leading members of the PSB and Campos’ wife and siblings all closed ranks behind Silva. She, in turn, affirmed all the state alliances with other parties agreed to under Campos’ campaign including a promise not to campaign in states where the PSB agreed to support a PSDB candidate.

Silva has a broad base of support thanks to her politics and biography. Her sustainability credentials appeal to urban leftist intellectuals and progressive youth. Her fight against logging and agribusiness interests appeal to the rural poor, who also see in her a reflection of their own sociodemographics: She proudly casts herself as the potential first dark-skinned Brazilian president of poor origin. Finally, her religious convictions as an evangelical Christian, a fast-growing denomination in this predominantly Catholic country, have generated considerable support from this powerful voting bloc, though not without some controversy regarding her positions on abortion, marijuana legalization, and gay rights.

Having subsequently boosted the PSB’s electoral chances, Silva assumed a major role in the Sept. 1 presidential debates, which by custom feature all candidates on the ballot and not just those leading in the polls. She criticized the Rousseff government for not admitting its mistakes while in turn taking heat for having an improvised economic plan that would not take advantage of Brazil’s booming natural resources. Neves, previously the leading challenger, was marginalized to the point that his campaign coordinator publicly declared the PSDB’s willingness to swing its support behind Silva against Rousseff in a potential runoff. However, the candidate publicly repudiated this defeatism and insisted that he would make it to the runoff.

**Analysts attribute Silva’s rise to general political dissatisfaction**

As a nationally known candidate without a party identity—she has been a member of the PSB for less than a year—Silva has a unique mix of name recognition and outsider status. That combination has helped her benefit in a year of major voter dissatisfaction where youth in particular who took to the streets in 2013 were not registering to vote or were planning to cast a blank ballot ([NotiSur, Aug. 15, 2014](http://www.notisur.com.br)). The massive media exposure in the wake of Campos’ death also boosted her public image, even as the PSB’s previously lackluster showing means significantly less television time for the candidate vis-à-vis her main rivals under Brazil’s highly regulated political campaign laws.

Felipe Borba, a political scientist at the Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Políticos at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), says, "Marina shook up the electoral scene. She brought in her 2010 votes, the rhetoric of a third way, and now represents for the voter discontented with Brazil’s government a real chance to remove the PT from power, which Aécio [Neves] wasn’t able to show."
Despite Silva’s rapid rise, which in addition to strong polling numbers has included a social-network boom placing her ahead of her rivals on Facebook (used by 30% of Brazilians) and endorsements from public figures like musician and intellectual Caetano Veloso and the son of Chico Mendes, the slain environmental activist and longtime friend of Silva. However, Luís Carlos Fridman, professor of political science at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), cautions, "The heavier stuff is still to come, which includes working out the internal divergences between the PSB and Rede, not to mention the electoral position of the main economic sectors, like agribusiness and the banking and industrial elites, which already know Dilma’s government, but don’t know for sure what Marina would do in power."

With one month until the Oct. 5 first round of voting, the intense spotlight on Silva will raise those and many other questions. Already, she has been forced to pivot on popular social positions like a law criminalizing homophobia and support for gay marriage with the repudiation of major evangelical leaders who accuse her of betraying her faith. Negotiating the contradictions in her power base will be a major challenge as Silva seeks to lead an unwieldy but potentially game-changing coalition of voters to the polls. The once safe incumbent is now faced with a losing prospect: An IBOPE poll on Aug. 26 indicated that Silva would defeat Rousseff 45% to 36% in a runoff.