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Brazilian Municipal Elections Complete Yearlong Rejection of Political Left

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Following a year in which conservative legislators successfully impeached an incumbent leftist president, Brazilian voters went to the polls in October’s municipal elections and further fueled a tide of anti-left-wing sentiment. As a result, the country’s two largest cities switched hands, with voters unseating an effective sitting mayor in one and rejecting a hand-picked successor in another. São Paulo’s Fernando Haddad (NotiSur, Sept. 21, 2012, and Nov. 16, 2012) was evicted from city hall in the first round of voting in favor of centrist former businessman João Doria. In Rio de Janeiro, voters elected an evangelical bishop, Senator Marcelo Crivella, over a progressive state deputy.

Voter discontent comes amidst a rising economic depression, the worst in decades, and scandals that have rocked Brazil’s political establishment. Bribery and corruption cases have ensnared high-profile figures, including former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011), a wildly popular figure now facing criminal charges (NotiSur, Jan. 10, 2003, Nov. 3, 2006, Sept. 30, 2016). Da Silva’s Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) ruled the national government for 13 years, but his successor, Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), was impeached earlier this year (NotiSur, Nov. 7, 2014, April 29, 2016, June 24, 2016, Sept. 30, 2016).

The PT party affiliation sunk Haddad, an academic and former education minister credited with reforming São Paulo’s planning and zoning rules to reduce the heavy reliance on private automobiles and the prevalence of gated condominium complexes among the city’s affluent.

In Rio, outgoing mayor Eduardo Paes (NotiSur, Nov. 8, 2013, Sept. 11, 2015, Aug. 5, 2016), who steered the city through this year’s Olympic Games, could not persuade voters to select his candidate for the job, Pedro Paulo, and voters opted in the first round to advance Crivella, of the conservative Partido Republicano Brasileiro, and fiery activist Marcelo Freixo of the Partido Socialismo e Liberdade. Crivella then won the runoff with 59% of the vote to Freixo’s 41%.

The PT also lost two mayoral races in São Paulo state, where the party was founded in the country’s industrial heartland, and in Recife, the largest city in the impoverished northeast, where the party has its political base.

Trump-esque candidate in São Paulo

In a strange parallel with the US presidential election, Doria, the new mayor of São Paulo, shares several biographical similarities with Donald Trump. The largest city in South America will soon be governed by a former businessman who appeared on the television reality show “The Apprentice” and publishes luxury lifestyle publications branded under his own last name.

Doria, who belongs to the center-right Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira, is not known for the same inflammatory opinions as the US politician. But he did campaign as an outsider with the slogan, “I'm not a politician, I'm a businessman.”
Doria won handily in the first round on Oct. 2 with over 50% of the vote, besting a former one-term PT mayor, Marta Suplicy (2001-2004), and ousting Haddad, a PT loyalist who had parlayed his federal government experience to the leadership of São Paulo, Brazil’s financial capital, in 2012.

In the first month of his tenure, Haddad shelved a controversial redevelopment proposal in the city center that would have handed over hundreds of city blocks to private real estate interests. The next year, he went on to oversee a new master plan for São Paulo, a sprawling city of over 11 million people. The plan reduced minimum parking requirements along public transit corridors and required street-level retail, public space, and fewer setbacks.

These new approaches to the zoning code were designed to correct São Paulo’s default housing type, the cloistered condominium complex, which prompted sociologist Teresa Caldeira to coin the nickname “city of walls” in the 1990s in her seminal study of the city’s transformation.

In a public written statement, councilman Nabil Bonduki, a trained urban planner who pushed for legislative approval of Haddad’s plan, called it a measure “to curb the dictatorship of the automobile.”

Doria does not take office until Jan. 1, but his public comments have already raised fears among the city’s cyclist community, which under Haddad celebrated a major expansion of bike lanes, including along the city’s iconic Avenida Paulista. In an interview with Estado de São Paulo days after his election, Doria affirmed that he would not further increase the city’s bike-lane network “just to reach targets.” He said he would also revoke a reduction in the speed limit along the city’s two expressways. In response, bike activists have camped out in front of Doria’s residence in protest.

Evangelism in Rio

In a city with a reputation for beachfront bodies and carnival hedonism, the election of evangelical bishop Crivella may come as a surprise. But Crivella, who beat leftist favorite Freixio in the Oct. 30 runoff by a wide margin, rode the rising tide of evangelicals in Brazilian politics. Still considered the largest Catholic country in the world, religious identification now stands at 22% Protestant, the vast majority of those evangelical Christians.

The so-called Bancada Evangélica in the national Congress was instrumental in orchestrating Rousseff’s ouster earlier this year, and the number of evangelicals on São Paulo’s city council doubled with this election.

In Rio, Crivella capitalized on a wave of discontent with the corruption scandals that have plagued Brazilian politics in the last few years and appealed to the moral impulses of his religious faith.

“I pray to God that my public life, as rocky as it has been, can teach all Cariocas that our time always comes when we do not give up,” Crivella said during a campaign stop on the day of the election.

The 59-year-old bishop is the nephew of Edir Macedo, who founded the most popular Pentecostal sect in Brazil, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. His socially conservative stances have been interpreted as denigrating Catholics, the LGBT community, and practitioners of Afro-descended religions like Candomblé and Umbanda. In a book he wrote in 1999 after missionary service, he writes that gays are afflicted by a “terrible evil,” accuses the Catholic Church of
“preach[ing] demonic doctrines,” and dismisses African-based faiths, popular among many Brazilians, as the home of “unclean spirits.”

Crivella worked during the campaign to dispel such criticism, saying that such comments were the product of “immature zeal” as a young missionary. He publicly acknowledged his supporters from other faiths and committed to maintain some of Rio’s progressive LGBT policies, such as the right for trans people to be referred to by their preferred, rather than legal name, and the impending inauguration of a city-sponsored center for sexual diversity.

Many gay activists were not mollified by his overtures, however, as they worry about retrenchment on core issues like HIV/AIDS funding and the already limited access to abortion.

“I don’t see the sheep’s clothing on him, I think he’s a wolf,” Jindera Queiroz, a lesbian activist in Rio de Janeiro, told Public Radio International. “I think he represents a very risky climate that is going on and growing really fast in Brazilian society. It’s not only in Rio at all. If you look at other states, the same is going on as well.”

While the election results suggest a conservative surge in Brazilian society, more than anything they reflect a disgust with the status quo. Operação Lava Jato, a wide-ranging corruption inquiry that has reached the highest levels of power, revealed deep fissures in the political establishment (NotiSur, May 6, 2016, and Sept. 30, 2016). The 13 years of PT rule may have led millions of people out of extreme poverty and established Brazil on the world stage, but bribery scandals involving Petrobras, the state-owned oil company (NotiSur, Aug. 14, 2015, and Nov. 6, 2015), have led the economy to tank to its worst levels since the hyperinflation of the 1980s and early 1990s.

“There is a very big fragmentation,” Ricardo Ismael, a political scientist at the Pontifical University of Rio de Janeiro, told The Washington Post. “There are no winners. The political forces are more divided in the country.”

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