

Brazilian 2014 Elections: Plus ça change...

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Once again the Workers' Party (PT) found itself in the difficult position of having to defend its government's sorry record on issues such as the economy, corruption and energy policies, all while fending off right-wing opposition candidates. Fortunately for the PT and its incumbent president and presidential candidate Dilma Rousseff, their adversaries at the national level never managed to assemble a political program that differentiated itself from the PT's.

During the first electoral round, both Marina Silva of the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) and Aécio Neves of the Social Democratic Party of Brazil (PSDB) vacillated between two contradictory positions. While their right-wing policies aimed at reducing government and giving the central bank more autonomy in order to attract important economic interests, the parties also played up to the more populous working classes with offers of better public services. Economic shock therapy, however, is not something your average Brazilian would agree to or be interested in. So while the PSDB also promised to uphold the PT's successful social programs, it offered nothing new in terms of reducing poverty, criminality or inequality.

Initially Dilma was fortunate to run against the mediocre candidacy of Aécio, who demonstrated a lack of charisma despite favorable media coverage and a major political machine behind him. Then everything changed with the death of the PSB's Eduardo and his replacement by Marina Silva. This was not her first presidential run but followed her 2010 Green Party sprint, where she placed third with 19 percent of the popular vote.^[i] For many Brazilians, she seemed a decent alternative to the two principal parties, which were widely viewed as incrustated in the state, fraught with corruption, and incapable of representing average Brazilians.

Marina's main strategy lay not in pushing her political program (on which she flip-flopped several times) or her party (which remains divided about her candidacy and support to the PSDB), but in playing the anti-establishment card and attacking her main competitors' credibility. She often repeated on the campaign trail that she represents the interests of the millions of protesters who took to the streets every evening for almost a month in June 2013.

Due to her lackluster performance and her lack of an innovative political program, Marina was eliminated from the second round and ended up receiving about the same percentage of votes (20%) as in 2010. It was the PSDB political machine and very favourable press that managed to get Aécio into the runoff election. This was also the PT's lowest score in the first round since 2002, demonstrating the erosion of popularity in recent years that have included lower levels of economic growth, media-inspired corruption scandals and massive public protests. Although Marina and the executive of the PSB officially and publically endorsed Aécio, others in the PSB especially in North and Northeastern states (Amapá, Bahia, Paraíba) where they are allied with the PT decided to publicly support Dilma.

It is important to note that the PT did not do as well in Congress in these elections, losing 18 deputies and two senators. In general, there was a swing to the right in both the upper and low chambers of Congress. The PT won in only three important states, Minas Gerais, Bahia and Ceará and lost in states such as Rio Grande do Sul and Mato Grosso do Sul. While the right managed to keep it hold on important states such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Paraná, Pernambuco, and Pará, many have also commented on the conservative nature of the new Congress, given the election of a number of openly homophobic candidates and ex-police and military officers.

Polling before the runoff elections predicted an Aécio victory of 45 percent, with Dilma following with 43 percent, a gain of only 1.5 % from the first run. This shaped the media's prediction that Dilma would actually lose votes—itsself a reflection of media bias. Such bias is obvious in what makes the front pages: corruption scandals in the PT government are above the fold, while such equally newsworthy crimes as Aécio's government scandals in the state of Minas, his DUI arrest and his public assault on his girlfriend are barely reported. Although it is not surprising that the elite and upper middle classes voted for Aécio, what these polling surveys attempted to demonstrate was that important segments of the lower middle class were abandoning the PT for the PSDB. This did happen in richer states in the South and Southeast of Brazil, though the poorer states in the Northeast (and in Aécio's home state of Minas Gerais) voted for Dilma.

The good news for Brazilians is that, Dilma and the PT, warts and all, managed once again to win the presidential elections. In this, we can observe a pattern that dates to the 2002 elections where the PT finds itself lagging in the surveys in the weeks leading up to the elections when markets and mainstream media do everything legal and illegal to influence the popular vote. Then the PT manages to get into the runoffs at a disadvantage, yet pulls ahead in the polling race in the last few meters thanks to its network of activists working not only on the Internet but in the streets convincing a majority that despite corruption and continuity in old politics, the PT is the best bet for the poorer sectors of the population and for the country in general. This also reflects the right's incapacity to develop an alternative project that appeals to large sectors of the population and to come up with a charismatic and "clean" leader.

Other interesting observations: Dilma's victory was the tightest PT win since Lula confronted Collor in the 1989 elections. This narrow winning margin reflects the rising influence of the PSDB and the erosion of the PT's political influence with its allies and with the general public. The PT also becomes the party to hold power federally for the longest period of time in Brazilian democratic history.

Economically, this election was important because it saved Brazil from a return to purist neoliberal macro-economic policies that would have rapidly erased any progress made on the socio-economic front. Symbolically, it means an ideological polarization will continue for the next few years less over actual policies and more over representation.

What's also clear is that the Brazilian elite and its middle-class wannabes have declared an open class war not only against the PT but against the majority of working classes not-as-white or European Brazilians that voted for Dilma. What we can look for in the upcoming months and years is a radicalization of this position attacking not only the PT but those who elected them into power. This is not new. Brazil's rich, white and European-inspired elite have always attempted to position themselves as the "real" Brazil.

With the election of Lula and the PT to the federal government in the 2000s, this changed politically, economically, and symbolically. It is not that the working and middle classes are worse off under the PT, but that they are better off and in position to challenge upper class privilege and their national identity. Given that context, we should not underestimate the force of what the PT represents symbolically to the elite, upper middle, and middle classes.

The PT has four more years not only to consolidate its gains but to revamp its platform. Dilma has promised an important political reform claimed by its civil society allies. Unfortunately, because of its weak showing in Congress and the Senate and the reaction of the "market," it will have to depend on sleazy right wing parties as part of its governing coalition. Unless it develops a better political strategy, Dilma's administration will have to cut deals if it wants to get anything worth having through the legislature. To assure governability, it will also have to cozy up to the private sector so as to not deepen the economic instability that capital and the market know so well how to create.

when it serves their interests.

The left that actively supported the PT during these elections will also have to re-evaluate its strategy and relation to the governing party in order to figure out how to better influence this government and help them confront their elected right-wing enemies in government and in society. This will not be an easy task, and I hope that the relationship that the left in civil society has forged with the PT in government will not be simply be a back to the usual rapport that has developed in the past 12 years where social movements allow the PT to control the political agenda concerning important macro-economic issues. Some serious reflection will be necessary in order to think about how to keep the PT out of the clutches of its rightwing political allies and their political gains, and instead wage a real challenge to the the rightwing establishment.

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[i] Marina Silva can be best described as a political leech who latches onto small or weak political parties in hopes of running for the presidency. In 2009 she tried to negotiate a deal with the leftist party PSOL and when that fell through, she approached the Green Party.