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Brazil's 2010 election: personality-based institutionalisation

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By Guy Burton

On the surface the result in Brazil's presidential election was relatively predictable. Both the principal parties' candidates, Dilma Rousseff of the Workers Party (PT) and the Brazilian Social Democratic Party's (PSDB) José Serra made it through to the second round. This is the fifth time in a row (out of six direct presidential elections since the return of democracy in the 1980s) that these two parties have taken the top two positions. Moreover, that the PT took first place in the poll highlights the shadow of the outgoing president, Lula da Silva, whose continuing high popularity after eight years in office was transferred to his own chosen successor, Rousseff.

There was also arguably little to choose between the two candidates. Both have broadly similar programmes. Although the two parties may have emerged from the south and São Paulo in particular from different constituencies (the PT in the industrial and working class areas and the PSDB among the middle class and business people), the past decade has seen both broadly committed to the same set of policies designed to increase economic growth and more redistributive social policies. If there is any significant difference it is more to do with style rather the content, the PSDB being slightly more committed to the market than the PT.

Such factors all appear to point to a sense of growing political stability in Brazil. Whoever wins the second round that will take place at the end of October will be confident that they will enjoy a constitutional transfer of power from President Lula to him or herself on 1 January. By contrast, the same cannot be said for other parts of the continent where social tension has manifested itself in political unrest and action in the recent past. This includes an aborted coup attempt in Bolivia in 2008, the overthrow of President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras in June 2009 and last week's political troubles in Ecuador against President Rafael Correa.

If the Brazilian election result exudes a sense of business as usual, there are political undercurrents which deserve closer scrutiny. First, Rousseff won around 59% of the vote in the Northeast, her highest share of the vote in the poorest part of the country. Meanwhile in the South she and her Serra were almost neck and neck, with around 42% to 44% respectively. This difference in support demonstrates the continuation of a shift in regional voting that occurred in 2006. Until then the bulk of the PT's vote had been based in the south of the country. Lula's re-election in 2006 was significant in that much of his support came from the north. What accounted for the change was the introduction of the bolsa familia (family grant), through which the government provided cash conditional transfers to households to support nutrition, children in school and basic utilities. The measure was targeted at the poorest families in Brazil, the majority of them located in the north. The electoral advantage that it gave to the PT was not lost on the PSDB, which committed itself to continuing the programme were it to be elected.

Second, Marina Silva's 19% for the Green Party was the highest for any third placed candidate since the return of direct presidential elections in 1989. Her result – as well as her presence in the election – was significant for several reasons. At one level, her journey from being an illiterate 16 year old daughter of rubber tappers in Acre state to becoming minister of the environment in Lula's government echoes the same rise as her former boss and his humble origins from a shoeshine boy and former factory worker, before becoming a trade union leader. For the PT to win her support is important, since it would enable it to claim the mantle of continuity (through her own participation in government) and historical commitment to the poor (through her own life story and association with the party). However, her close association with the environmental movement and politics was increasingly marginalised during Lula's second term as the Accelerated Growth Programme (PAC) with its various state-funded infrastructure and construction projects began to bite, ultimately resulting in her criticism of the government's unsustainable development and resignation in 2008. For this reason it is just as important for the PSDB to win Silva over, especially as her strong support in the south (including a quarter of the vote in the Southeast) could help counter the high degree of support for Rousseff (through Lula) in the north.

These features suggest that the coming campaign for the second round will be similar to that from the first round. Already the PT has announced that it will use the next few weeks to emphasise the differences between Lula's government and that of his

predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso of the PSDB, who left office eight years ago. It will emphasise Lula as the father of the poor in the form of the bolsa familia. At the same time it will continue to link Rousseff with Lula while courting Silva publically, including emphasising her background and association with Lula, the social movements and party and the government.

By pursuing this course, the 2010 campaign appears to be leading to a paradoxical political outcome. On one hand the emphasis on candidates' personalities echoes the populist period, when particular focus was placed on an individual rather than political institutions and parties. This was also a period when historically Latin America was politically unstable, many of the populists succumbing to coups and military rule. On the other hand though, the persistence of the same two parties and their candidates along with the use of now historic figures – i.e. Lula and Cardoso, neither of whom are standing for election – points to an increasing institutionalisation of the Brazilian political system. Could it be then, that the 2010 election may be pointing to a new synthesis where past and present political forms may co-exist, indeed even flourish?

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