

INTERVIEW

## Frei Betto's Brazil

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**Lula's former special assistant opens up about four years of Workers Party governance, Lula's reelection chances and the current conjuncture in Latin America.**

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### Presentation

Four years ago, the landmark victory of Workers' party candidate Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva in Brazil's presidential election led many to dare to dream that an alternative to neoliberalism was not only possible but perhaps even probable in Latin America's largest country and economy. Today it is hard to distinguish Lula's economic policy from that of his predecessor and, despite a range of important accomplishments, his star is being outshone by the likes of Evo Morales and Hugo Chávez. Those hoping to make sense of what has happened and what may lie ahead for Brazil—and for Latin America—would do well to pay attention to Frei Betto. The 62-year-old socialist journalist/anthropologist/philosopher and Dominican friar is the author of 53 books and has been in the thick of movement politics for more than four decades. He is one of the most prominent figures of Brazil's religious left and is internationally celebrated for his human rights work.

After Lula's presidential victory in 2002, Betto spent 687 days as special assistant to his friend in the nation's capital of Brasília. There his responsibilities included social mobilization for the administration's flagship Zero Hunger program. His résumé chronicles some of the most significant developments of Brazilian social movements over the past half-century. He was imprisoned by the military dictatorship in 1964 and again from 1969 to 1973. Upon his release he eschewed exile, opting instead to live with and engage the inhabitants of Vitória's Santa Maria slum in popular education projects. During the waning years of the dictatorship he was involved in the founding of Brazil's Workers' party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT), a radical union federation (the Central Única dos

Trabalhadores) and an umbrella group for social movements (the Central de Movimentos Populares). He has played the role of supporter and advisor to many other groups, including the Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra—MST), and his long list of collaborators includes the likes of Paulo Freire and Leonardo Boff.

When I caught up with Frei Betto for this interview he was on the road to promote his latest book, *The Blue Fly (A mosca azul)*, a meditation on the corruptions of power inspired by his experiences in Lula's government. Over the course of several weeks we conducted a wide-ranging interview by e-mail. Our discussion touched on the Bush administration, the significance of the October 1 presidential elections for Brazil and the continent, the progressive trend in Latin American presidential elections, what to expect from a potential second Lula administration, Lula's domestic and foreign policy record, the mensalão campaign finance and influence-peddling scandal that has rocked the PT, the state of Brazil's religious left, and, of course, *The Blue Fly*.

The Brazil and Latin America that Frei Betto describes are steeped in paradox. Lula, he says, was elected both to implement radical reforms and to maintain the country's neoliberal economic status quo. The current conjuncture favors the election of progressive presidential candidates across the continent but not the bold advance of popular movements that could hold these elected leaders accountable. Undaunted, Betto balances incisive critique with a deep, unyielding hopefulness about the possibilities for Brazil, Latin America, and the world.

## Interview

**TLR: How has the expression of foreign—and especially U.S.—dominance over Brazil changed over the decades that you've been active in social justice struggles?**

FB: The United States really discredited itself by imposing military dictatorships in South America in the name of "democracy." We see the result today: popular governments elected at the polls! In other words, the person who contributes most to the rise in progressive politics today is George W. Bush. Look at Italy's election results. At the moment, U.S. interference in the Southern Cone is perceptible only in Paraguay and Colombia. We're in a phase of greater independence, though still dependent commercially (the United States is our principal trading partner) and ideologically (owing to the power of Hollywood and its derivatives in our culture). But Bush isn't viewed well on the continent, and we all repudiate the invasion of Iraq. However, I don't think the Brazilian people have a critical perspective on U.S. domination in Brazil. There is, of course, pride in our sovereignty and independence, especially among a small sector of Brazilian opinion makers. For us, the Lula administration rescued our sovereignty by fending off the Free Trade Area of the Americas, renewing Mercosul, and defending Chávez's mandate and the reintegration of Cuba into multilateral organizations.

**TLR: At one point there were as many as 100,000 Christian base communities across Brazil. What is their current status?**

FB: The CBCs are still alive. In July 2005 I participated in their eleventh national meeting, which convened nearly 3,000 leaders. They remain a kind of incubator for political and popular leaders. It's rare to find a Brazilian politician from a background of poverty who didn't begin his or her activism with the CBCs, as did Environmental Minister Marina Silva, former Land Reform Minister Miguel Rossetto, and the MST leader João Pedro Stédile. Lula is an exception.

The CBCs remain active but for a very simple reason no longer attract media attention: the White House, the CIA, and the rest no longer believe that they represent a communist threat in Latin America—in contrast to the 1980s, with the Sandinista Revolution and the guerrillas in El Salvador and Guatemala.

The principal offspring of the CBCs is liberation theology. It lost force as the Vaticanization of the Latin American Church implemented by John Paul II ushered out supportive bishops and Catholic publishing houses were constrained from publishing its work. The advance of conservative movements—Opus Dei, Folcolari, the charismatics, and others—and their media power have, however, enhanced interest in liberation theology among the faithful.

**TLR: Was Lula's election to the presidency in 2002 evidence of the strength of Brazil's left and its social movements? A rejection by the Brazilian people of the corruption, privatization, and other neoliberal policies of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso?**

FB: Paulo Freire was more important to Lula's election than the theories of Karl Marx. Above all, his election resulted from the rise of popular movements over the past 30 years, as is now the case in many Latin American countries where poor voters have become aware of the need to vote for change, hope, and an alternative to neoliberalism and the meddling of the United States. At the same time, the Brazilian people were tired after eight years of Cardoso's administration and embarrassed by its subservience to the United States. Let's just say that Cardoso's foreign minister took his shoes off at U.S. customs whereas Lula's minister, Celso Amorim, does not. However, Lula's government made the mistake of not mobilizing the popular movements in order to ensure its ability to govern. He put his trust only in the Congress, which is conservative and thoroughly contaminated by corruption. My hope is that Lula will be reelected for a second term and rely more on the social movements.

**TLR: Why did you leave the Lula administration?**

FB: To return to my writing and because of my disagreement with a regressive economic policy that, in my view, didn't contribute to a reduction in social inequalities. But I consider the government's performance to be good in the areas of social and foreign policy.

**TLR: Is there reason to think that Lula would draw closer to the social movements in a second term?**

FB: Yes, as soon as the movements press him to do so. Government is like beans—it only works in a pressure cooker. Without the poor, I don't believe there's a future for the Workers' party and Lula's government. It's for the poor that they were created and elected.

**TLR: For a period after Lula's election he appeared to have attained a status perhaps even more powerful than president of Brazil—that of folk hero. Many people seemed to think that if a metalworker could become president, fundamental change in Brazil might actually be possible. It was an atmosphere of great hope.**

FB: That's what I describe in the first chapter of *The Blue Fly*. But the government didn't know how

to manage that mystique. Nonetheless, Lula continues to have the support of the poorest Brazilians, thanks to his social policies. But he still owes us various reforms: land, labor, tax, and political.

**TLR: Are these reforms possible without changing the economic policies that produce poverty? Lula's economic policy is a continuation of the neoliberalism we saw under Cardoso.**

FB: Yes, and there begins my disagreement. That's the paradox of Lula's administration: it was elected both to make structural changes and to maintain a neoliberal economic policy.

**TLR: Might Lula abandon neoliberalism?**

FB: He will be pressured to do so by the popular movements and will have to choose between repressing them and bringing the government's policies in line with the historically progressive proposals of the PT.

**TLR: Haven't the social movements been pressuring the government during its current term? Why should things be different if Lula is reelected?**

FB: The popular movements—above all the MST—have applied pressure, but this electoral year creates better conditions, given the present South American conjuncture. In the face of what Evo Morales is doing, Lula can't promise without delivering. I can't be certain that movement pressure will make Lula's government any less compliant to speculative capital or more consistent with his promise to promote labor, political, and tax reform, but I continue to believe that Brazil is better off with Lula than without him.

**TLR: Hasn't what you have called the "schizophrenia" of Lula's government—progressive rhetoric combined with economic policies more severe than even the International Monetary Fund demands—demobilized, fragmented, and weakened social movements and the left? Were they better off confronting the openly neoliberal government of Cardoso?**

FB: The present conjuncture doesn't favor popular movements, but it does make it more likely that the voters of Brazil and of Latin America will elect candidates that are more progressive and—especially—more ethical. I wouldn't say that movements were in a more comfortable situation under Cardoso's government. On the contrary, they were repressed—which hasn't happened with Lula. This year's electoral process might heat up our political debate and our mobilization.

**TLR: What's the explanation for the current conjuncture's not favoring popular movements? And if such movements are weakened, where will the pressure—that "pressure cooker" you spoke of—come from to force the government to implement needed reforms?**

FB: Conjunctures are like clouds—they form and dissipate in ways we can't predict. Look at the fall of the Berlin Wall or the recent student mobilizations in France. I don't want to stop believing that pressure from popular movements, the Catholic Church, and leftist intellectuals could pull Lula's administration more to the left.

**TLR: In his last presidential campaign, Lula said that if he could achieve one thing as president it would be land reform. According to the MST, Lula's government is doing much less in this area than did the openly hostile administration of Cardoso and is also greatly exaggerating the number of families it has settled.**

FB: According to the [Catholic Church's] Pastoral Land Commission and the MST, the government's land reform initiatives fall far short of what was promised and hoped for. In fact, there haven't been

any substantial changes in the structure of land ownership.

**TLR: Could it be that the high-water mark of Brazil's social movements in the postdictatorship period came not with Lula's election but much earlier—perhaps in the late 1980s? Is this a time in Brazil, as in much of the rest of the world, for the left to rethink and rebuild its forces rather than a time for achieving fundamental changes in economic and social structures?**

FB: The facts don't show that the left is in a phase of thin cows [from the Bible story in which the Pharaoh dreams of seven thin cows, representing seven years of privation]. Look at the electoral results in Latin America, the advances of Venezuela and Bolivia, the increased stability of the Cuban Revolution. Perhaps in Brazil the left is less mobilized, but this can, I hope, be reversed in this electoral cycle.

**TLR: The PT broke with the old left, which sought to take control of the state through armed conflict, and instead has pursued state power by means of the ballot. As a self-described socialist, do you believe a just and egalitarian society is best pursued by taking control of the mechanism of the state or by some other means?**

FB: The conditions for armed struggle don't exist today in Latin America. Armed conflict only interests the ultra-right and the arms manufacturers. The way forward is through social mobilization and refinement of our democratic institutions for the progressive empowerment of social movements.

**TLR: Since his election, Lula has distanced himself from the left. He no longer talks about socialism and has remade himself as a populist. In the aftermath of the mensalão corruption scandal he has even distanced himself from the PT. What are the implications of these shifts for social movements and for the party?**

FB: The PT distanced itself from the popular movements, and Lula distanced himself from the PT and the sectors most to the left in Brazil. But the strategy of cozying up to parties of the center and the right didn't work out. For his reelection, Lula mustn't cast aside either the PT or the left. We're clear that he's our candidate. We know that his reelection is of the utmost importance to prevent an ebbing of the popular wave spreading through the countries of this continent that is electing progressive presidents. Brazil plays a strategic role in this Latin America that refuses to follow the dictates of Washington.

**TLR: Is Lula's reelection more important to Latin America as a whole than to Brazil in particular?**

FB: It will be important both for Brazil and for the continent—in short, for the poor of the world today. Even if not one radical reform were achieved in a second Lula term, it's better to have him in the presidency than for the Social Democrats, linked to the oligarchy of the Liberal Front, to retake command of Brazil. That would represent a regression for all of Latin America.

**TLR: With his term now coming to a close, what do you consider to be Lula's most significant achievements?**

FB: They're countless, among them economic stability, the end of inflation, the creation of 2.7 million new jobs, the Light for All program, which brought energy to almost the entire country, the Zero Hunger program, which today distributes income to 8 million families, and higher-education reform, which guarantees quotas for black and indigenous people and provides grants for poor

students at private universities.

The Lula administration is reducing social inequality in Brazil. In 2003 our country was third in the world in inequality; today we're tenth. In 2004 the income of the richest 10 percent declined by 7 percent and the income of the poorest 10 percent increased by 23 percent. The government has introduced social policies that improved the living conditions of the people, though we're still lacking land reform to ensure that the families benefiting from those policies don't slip back into dire poverty.

Lula also deserves top marks for his independent foreign policy, for opening the country to the Arab world and strengthening relations with Africa, India, and China.

**TLR: Brazil's state oil company, Petrobras, is impeding efforts by Evo Morales' government to take majority ownership of gas exploration projects on Bolivian soil. Brazilian troops are on the ground in Haiti. Do these policies deserve top marks?**

FB: I've always opposed the presence of Brazilian troops in Haiti and respected the sovereignty of Bolivia.

**TLR: In light of the government's failure to implement fundamental reforms, Zero Hunger has been criticized as a paternalistic food assistance program that doesn't address the root causes of poverty and hunger.**

FB: I've already mentioned the success of this program, but for it to be complete we must have land reform.

**TLR: Your most recent book, *The Blue Fly*, is about the lust for power that infects and corrupts even the most righteous. Please tell us about the metaphor of the blue fly—from a poem by Machado de Assis—and what it reveals about the current political conjuncture in Brazil.**

FB: The poem of Machado de Assis, published at the beginning of the twentieth century, describes a servant who feels like a sultan after seeing his reflection—as in a mirror—in a blue fly. Hence the expression used when people become attached to power: “They were stung by the blue fly.” I'm referring to power at any level, from the store manager to the police officer on the corner. In general, people are contaminated by the poison of the blue fly and become delirious. Power doesn't change people; it causes them to reveal themselves.

In my book I deal with the trajectory that brought the PT to power and analyze in depth why the party moved away from the popular movements and, above all, why a small leadership group within the party became involved in corruption. Every position of power tends to intoxicate the one who occupies it. As a result, nobody likes losing or letting go of power. That's the sting of the blue fly. The majority camp—the governing faction of the PT that got involved in the scandal—is an example. Those people traded in a nation-building project for an electoral one.

**TLR: In the PT's internal leadership elections last fall, the majority camp was weakened but retained the party's presidency. In Congress it appears that the PT and other parties made a deal to avoid expulsion of corrupt members rather than to clean house. A large number of PT members—including elected officials—have left the party for other political formations such as the Socialism and Freedom party. What is the likely future of the PT?**

FB: I think Lula will win and the PT will lose. It will be hard for it to regain the 91 deputies and 10 senators they had in 2002. It's an error for the PT to leave its internal investigation of members

involved in the corruption scandal until after the elections. Without ethics and a strong connection to the poor, the future of the PT will be that of the Brazilian Democratic Movement today.

**TLR: Is there an antidote to the poison of the blue fly?**

FB: Yes: a permanent connection to the world of the poor.

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