

Election in Brazil: Has Lula Already Won or Will Bolsonaro Come Up With Surprises?

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The October 2 Brazilian presidential election campaign is now in its final stage. It is no doubt one of the most globally significant elections this year. Former moderate-left president Lula Inácio da Silva of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) is leading in the opinion polls with between 40 and 45 percent support in the first round of elections. The extreme right-wing incumbent Jair Bolsonaro of the Liberal Party (PL) trails Lula with 30 to 35 percent.

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Regarding a possible second round, should any candidate not win a majority, Lula leads Bolsonaro by a margin of 15 percent. While many observers consider the election already decided, others are expecting surprises. The question remains whether Bolsonaro will accept defeat at the ballot box. Expectations that Bolsonaro would attempt a coup during a rally on Brazil's Independence Day on September 7 turned out to be unfounded.

Election Rallies and Televised Debates

In fact, Independence Day celebrations occurred without any disturbances. Bolsonaro rallied tens of thousands in Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, and São Paulo, yet analysis of aerial photographs revealed participation was somewhat lower than Bolsonaro's rally the previous year, when he called for the abolition of the Supreme Court and Congress.

While in 2021 the number of Bolsonaro's supporters on the streets was seen as a disappointment, this year's lower numbers appear to be a success because there have not been any larger mobilizations by the Left for months, in contrast to the number of large rallies by the Left last year.

Bolsonaro successfully managed to blend the celebrations for the 200th anniversary of Brazil's independence with his election campaign. Several parties went to court to try to prevent the mixing of public celebrations and electoral campaigning, but it was improbable that courts would have impeded Bolsonaro from such campaigning. Any interference by the courts with campaigning at this point would support his long-standing claim that the elections are rigged against him.

On the other hand, the presidents of the Senate, the Parliament and the Supreme Court did not join the celebrations, and the official celebration in Parliament on September 8 was boycotted by Bolsonaro. This demonstrates his isolation, which even extends to the president of Parliament, Artur

Lira, usually a faithful supporter of the President.

Bolsonaro's popularity has increased by five percentage points since May 2021, but his ascendancy in the polls seems to have stalled in mid-August. As for Lula, after television debates in the last week of August, he lost two or three percentage points to competitor Ciro Gomes from the center-left Democratic Labour Party (PDT), who is now polling at nine percent.

The big question is whether Lula can win the race in the first round, which does seem within reach if polls are correct. Lula tried to build bridges to Ciro Gomes in the televised debates, but Gomes seems set to refuse any alliance with Lula.

Gomes is regarded as an egomaniac but was able to present rather concrete proposals in the debates, such as a guaranteed minimum income, which he aims to fund with a special tax on the wealth of the 60,000 Brazilians who are worth more than one billion Reals.

Another candidate is Simone Tebet of the center-right Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (MDB), and daughter of a wealthy farmer with large landholdings. She is now polling at 5 percent and could score a few extra points after the televised debates increased her public profile.

Proposed Policies

Lula and Bolsonaro have revealed little of their economic programs to the public. Both pledged to continue with policies similar to those they applied during their respective governments. The Brazilian federation of industrialists complained about the lack of details regarding the main candidates' economic plans. While it is safe to assume that Bolsonaro simply does not have an economic program, Lula's reticence on the subject may be because he wants to be careful not to antagonize centrist and middle-class voters. He needs to bridge their interests to form a broad alliance.

However, recently Lula did announce two measures he wants to implement. First, he proposes to renegotiate debts incurred for utility bills, bank loans, and retail purchases. Seventy-five percent of Brazilians are now in serious debt, a record number that has increased rapidly in the past 12 months. About 20 percent of these debts relate to unpaid utility bills.

Second, Lula announced that he will continue to pay R\$600 for the social transfer program that Bolsonaro restarted in July 2022 under the name Auxilio Brasil. Lula added that families will receive an extra R\$150 for every child under six years of age. The current version of the social transfer program is paid to all households regardless of particular composition, i.e., a single person receives the same R\$600 as a family of five.

In 2018 Bolsonaro's campaign was focused mainly on public security. This time public security remains an issue but it makes room for so-called family values and religion. And it is with evangelicals that Bolsonaro is seen as having potential to make significant headway.

While in early 2022 Bolsonaro and Lula polled equally among evangelicals, the picture has now changed. One reason for the rise in support for Bolsonaro among evangelicals, a third of Brazil's population, is probably the internal campaigns conducted by some churches. Lula is leading firmly among Catholics, among the poor, in the Northeast, and among female voters.

Sexism, Patriarchy, Racism and Hunger

Bolsonaro has consistent problems in attracting more female voters, and a televised debate in late August 2022 did not improve his chances. When journalist Vera Magalhães asked him about misinformation he spread about COVID-19 vaccines, Bolsonaro attacked the journalist with sexist insults, remarking, “You are thinking about me when you go to bed. I think you have a crush on me.” Worse still, the same journalist was verbally attacked in mid-September by a candidate aligned to Bolsonaro, which created a huge uproar.

Further exhibitions of toxic masculinity occurred during the Independence Day festivities when Bolsonaro defended the scandalous purchase of overpriced Viagra and penis prostheses by the army and then went so far as to initiate chants relating to his virility.

Bolsonaro and his ministers also campaigned against existing abortion rights. Cases in which 10 and 11-year-old girls became pregnant as a result of sexual abuse have come to light. Pregnancies after rape are one of the few instances when abortion is legal in Brazil. Yet in spite of this, judges and doctors have denied this right to young girls who had been raped. Several such cases made headlines in the past two years.

Lula’s campaign aims to counter these deeply patriarchal politics with a focus on the economy and basic social rights. The number of people with crushing debt indicates the extent of impoverishment of large segments of the population. More than 30 million out of 210 million Brazilians suffered from an acute lack of food in 2021, up from 19 million in 2020. Hunger had been practically eradicated in Brazil by 2014, with just 1.7 percent of the population being affected in that year.

Indeed, malnutrition started to return before Bolsonaro took power, and the pandemic and the liberal economic policies of Bolsonaro led to its rapid increase. While in earlier periods hunger was present in specific regions of Brazil, it is now equally widespread in the poor Northeast and in the wealthy Southeast of the country. One of the groups most heavily affected by hunger are family farmers, pointing to the lack of support for this segment of society by the current administration, which focuses instead on large agribusiness.

Lula has firm support among the poor, but because the better-off parts of the working and the middle classes saw some relief in their overall economic situation during the last two months, Bolsonaro could increase his support in these last few weeks among those earning between two and five times the minimum wage.

Environmental concerns became more of a focus during September in Lula’s campaign, a topic about which the middle classes are often more sensitive. He made peace with former ally and then adversary Marina da Silva. Silva came close to becoming president in 2014, and supported the right-wing Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PDSB) in the second round of the election against Dilma Rousseff. Silva comes from a poor background, is one of the few high-profile politicians who is black, and is tied to the evangelical agenda.

In a well-publicized meeting, Silva appeared with Lula and announced that she would support his candidacy and is keen to introduce carbon credits to Brazil, the flagship project of green capitalism, in a more systematic fashion.

Lula is also considering Ricardo Galvão, the former director of the Brazilian Space Agency, as a potential minister of science in his government. Galvão was sacked by Bolsonaro after the President did not like the numbers the agency produced regarding deforestation.

It is also interesting to note the topics that have not been touched upon by either Bolsonaro or Lula. The central fault line of Brazilian society apart from inequality and poverty is racism. It is seen as such a divisive issue that hardly any mention of it was made by any of the main candidates.

While Bolsonaro routinely utters racist slurs even against his own supporters - he alleged twice to black supporters that cockroaches could nest in their hair, a common racist stereotype in Brazil - Lula only touched on the topic when he referred to the rallies of Bolsonaro's supporters on September 7 as being "similar to meetings of the Ku-Klux Klan."

Regional Elections and PT Prospects

Additionally, it is important to note that the elections on October 2 will determine the composition of Parliament and the Senate, as well as the state governors. Fernando Haddad from the PT, who ran against Bolsonaro in 2018, is firmly leading the race for governor of the state of São Paulo, the most populous state, with 44 million inhabitants.

It seems that Haddad's ally, Marcio França, from the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) will win the senate seat for the state of São Paulo. There are few other states where the PT will win governorships due to alliances with other parties.

In the state of Rio de Janeiro, Marcelo Freixo from the PSB is head-to-head with Bolsonaro-ally Cláudio Castro, though Castro is leading by a small margin. In the third most populous state, Minas Gerais, neoliberal Romeu Zema Neto from the Partido Novo is leading by a large margin against Alexandre Kalil, the candidate supported by the PT. In the Northern state of Pará, the PT supports the center-right candidate Helder Barbalho, a scion of one of the richest families there, who is running with a large alliance that also includes people from Bolsonaro's camp.

The lack of PT candidates for state governors is a symptom of the regional power structures where charismatic politicians and established families dominate. Nonetheless, for the PT, governing the state of São Paulo will be a major win and an important power base. Overall, Bolsonaro's allies are set to win in 13 states if polls are correct, compared to the nine states where allies of Lula are favoured. A further five states will probably elect governors from centrist parties.

Much of the governability of Brazil will depend on the composition of Congress, and expectations are not very high for a progressive composition. It is probable that Lula will be able to pull some centrist parties into his government, but this will require the old system of alliances, based on the exchange of favours and a reproduction of clientelist networks.

Whether this cycle can be broken, or at least diminished, will depend on popular mobilization, which has not been particularly strong in the past months. The trade unions are firmly on the side of the alliance around Lula, but they are not seen as a relevant actor today. If social movements are mentioned in public, they are, first of all, the Landless Workers Movement (MST), and then, the indigenous movements, the Homeless Workers Movement (MTST), and the anti-racist and black movement. The former profile of the Brazilian trade unions as important actors has suffered greatly, and it will probably be difficult to rebuild under current economic conditions.

More important than Bolsonaro's speeches on September 7, was probably the news that Mercedes-Benz in Brazil will dismiss 3500 workers, 30 percent of its workforce, as it aims to outsource the tasks the workers performed. Mercedes-Benz will focus on the production of commercial vehicles in Brazil. Additionally, Ford shut down its remaining factory in Brazil last year, and in April 2022, Toyota closed a factory in the São Paulo region.

These are signs of the dramatic changes occurring in industrial work, with work forces distributed across ever smaller units of production. Such developments certainly focus attention on the need to conceive of new economic models beyond the traditional focus on manufacturing, agribusiness, and mining in Brazil. Such economic reconstruction will be one of the biggest challenges for a new government.

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P.S.

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