

Brazil: 2006 Elections - a profound political break

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In the first round of Brazil's elections on 1st October, a disenchanted electorate was forced to make its choices in the context of an electoral polarisation between the country's two biggest political blocks: one around the PT and another based on the alliance between the PSDB and the PFL . This polarisation became sharpest, in the final weeks, around the presidential contest between Lula and Geraldo Alckmin.

In the first round, Lula won 46.66 million votes, that is 48.61% of the valid votes (excluding blank votes and spoilt ballots). Alckmin got 39.97 million votes, or 41.64%. In third place, the candidate of P-SOL and the Left Front, Heloisa Helena, received 6.575 million votes, or 6.85% of the valid votes. Senator Cristovam Buarque, of the PDT (usually regarded as a left populist party), won 2.54 million votes, or 2.64%. The other candidates got very small votes.

Unlike previous elections, this campaign was marked by a high level of apathy. The superficial explanation for this was that new electoral regulations greatly restricted the propaganda that previously saturated voters for several months. A stronger explanation, however, is to be found in the frustrated hopes of the most politicised sectors after four years of Lula government - frustration revealed in the almost complete absence of the kind of vibrant street activity that characterized the PT in the past (with activists now replaced by professional politicians) or in the loss of any "vote of conviction" for the PT.

It was predictable that this should happen in the first big electoral battle since the explicit conversion of the Lula group to neo-liberalism (or social-liberalism) and the revelation of deep-rooted corruption within the PT.

A profound break

The widespread disenchantment with politics - and especially with the idea that political power can be a vehicle for social change and emancipation - has deeper roots, however.

Since the return of democracy in the 1980s, many hopes have been frustrated. There was the hope invested in the main party of opposition to the military dictatorship (the PMDB, which was seen as a "democratic front"), the hope generated by the first presidential election after the dictatorship (in

1989), and the even the optimism over the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC) in its early years. The frustration with Lula, and above all with the PT, was therefore the last and most serious in a long line of disappointments.

We also need to take account of the changes in Brazilian society since 1990. The four years of Lula follow on from eight of FHC and five of Collor-Itamar in terms of Brazil's increasingly subordinate insertion into the world market, the neo-liberal reshaping of its productive capacity, economic stagnation, the breaking down of old class relations and identities, the advance of individualism and consumerism, ideological regression and the deterioration of citizens' political activity in general.

A large part of the socialist left - rooted in the working class, organized independently and which founded the PT and the CUT trade union confederation - simply ceased to exist. Autonomous class organisation weakened, workers became socially fragmented and the remaining socialist left has been left divided and on the defensive, suffering a crisis of perspectives. There no longer exists the one thing that distinguished the Brazilian left from that in the rest of Latin America throughout the 1980s and 1990s - mass, socialist, political action, rooted in the organized proletariat and autonomous from the capitalist class.

The same thing has happened to the social movements. If the 80s was a decade of big mobilisations, the 90s saw a decline - throughout the 1990s, the MST (Landless Workers' Movement) was the only social movement capable of mobilizing on a large scale (from the beginning of the Lula government it has been in an impasse).

The trade unions long ceased to have any great political impact. In this context, the new generations have no experience of big social mobilisations. The job of dismantling the left political identity built up in Brazil has, to a large extent, already been done. The political cycle of the eighties has come to an end.

What emerged in these elections was a neo-populist PT - an electoral machine based on Lula's own charismatic leadership and on the control of public funds; a machine committed to the stability of the ruling classes, but which presents itself as the champion of the poor against an insensitive elite - thereby ensuring that business continues as usual.

Nonetheless, the national crisis remains open. Neither side of the block in power can assure any progress in the future. Brazil continues to stagnate in a world economy experiencing rapid growth. Regional integration is paralysed. The social crisis is acute, with no hope of a qualitatively better future on offer for the population at large.

Multiple forms of organization spring up, without managing to link up any more ambitious actions - precisely what should be the role of political parties. Brazil is one of the most conflict-ridden societies in the world, in the midst of a Latin America that is coming to the boil, with more radical alternatives gaining ground. New spaces will certainly open up for the left!

The P-SOL, the Left Front and Heloisa Helena's campaign

In such a context of retreat, the candidacy of Heloisa Helena for the Left Front expressed the resistance to this deformation of the left and was the new element in these elections - even if it was not enough to put an end to the crisis of progressive politics in Brazil.

The most important party of the Left Front, by far, is the P-SOL - which only had its registration approved just over a year ago (in September 2005). The other two, the PSTU (United Socialist

Workers Party, inspired by the tradition of Nahuel Moreno) and the PCB (Brazilian Communist Party) have much less political (and especially, electoral) weight.

The P-SOL went into these elections with a few thousand militants, many of them trade unionists, with a significant influence among youth, and with some presence in parliament: one senator, seven federal deputies and four state deputies, as well as few dozen local councillors. In any case, it was a minority force, bringing together only a part of the old PT left and a smaller group of militants from other parties (mainly the PSTU).

In fact the P-SOL played a more significant part in these elections than its fragile organisation and minority social base would have suggested - thanks to the popularity and charisma of Senator Heloisa Helena. In the first months of this year, before the campaign began, the opinion polls gave her somewhere between 4 to 6 % of the vote - and put her in third place in the presidential race.

From July, the media began to give more space to the elections (especially the presidential race). The candidates for president began to have a few minutes a day on the TV networks (especially the biggest network in the country, Rede Globo). The imbalance in media coverage diminished. This gave a big boost to Heloisa Helena's candidacy, which reached 12% in the opinion polls by the middle of August. (That corresponds to 14 or 15 % of the valid votes, if you leave out the 'don't knows' and those who said they would spoil their ballots.)

This can be explained by several different factors, in addition to the greater media exposure: the appeal of a woman recognized by all as a fighter, who'd had the courage to confront the Lula government when it was at the height of its popularity, and who for several weeks came in for little concerted criticism; the worsening image of the Lula government among many opinion-forming sectors; and even the interest of the 'Tucano', or PSDB, opposition (and therefore of a part of the press) in seeing Heloisa rise, in order to force a second round. At that point, the difference between Heloisa and Alckmin narrowed, and it even seemed it might be possible to avoid the election being polarised between Lula and Alckmin.

However, from the moment the official election TV propaganda began (on 15th August) and the big electoral machines moved into action, that relatively favourable situation ceased to exist.

The enormous disproportion in material and organisational resources coming in behind the two main political blocks - that around the Lula and the other around the PSDB-PFL - took on a decisive weight. The Left Front could not compete. This disproportion was amplified by the way the law allocates airtime for party political broadcasts on radio and television. (The time allocated is based on results from the previous elections, in 2002, when the P-SOL did not yet exist.)

On the other hand, the organisational weakness of the P-SOL and the Left Front made it impossible to draw into the campaign all those came closer and wanted to help. Part of the electorate that identified with Heloisa realised that her support was too weak to offer a real alternative. The pressure to vote tactically increased, especially in the final weeks, when the distance between Lula and Alckmin shrank and it began to look as if a second round was possible.

Another difficulty for the Left Front campaign was that its organisational weakness was also a political weakness. It proved impossible to build a unified political leadership for the campaign in most states. Perhaps the most serious consequence of this weakness was the fact that the drawing up of a government programme for the Front was never finished (only a manifesto was distributed), because of internal differences both within the P-SOL and between this and the other parties of the Front.

This does not mean that Heloisa Helena and the other candidates of the P-SOL and the Front did not present programmatic alternatives for the country.

However, the fact that there was no officially approved programmatic document limited the impact that the presentation of these alternatives had, and opened up the candidates of the Left Front to the criticism of their opponents and the press.

Another political limitation of Heloisa's campaign was that she spoke much more in the first person than as the representative of a political project or of a process of social struggles. To some extent, this was inevitable. This was a candidate with a national impact, alongside a political project still in its infancy, which still had not developed a collective leadership, and at a time of little mobilisation. What is more, the logic of presidential contests is precisely this. It is the candidates who are standing, not their parties or fronts.

There is no doubt, however, that this was an important political weakness of the campaign.

Another question that had some negative repercussions for the campaign, although probably little significant impact on the results, was the issue of decriminalising abortion. Although the position of the great majority of P-SOL and of the Left Front is in favour of decriminalisation, Heloisa Helena, for reasons of conscience, is against. The media spotted this discrepancy and persistently asked her about her position on abortion (while none of the other candidates were asked this question).

In any case, to win more than 6.5 million votes, or 6.85% of the valid votes, in the historical context of Brazil (and the world) today, is a very impressive result for a candidate who was always identified as "radical", and who ended her campaign (in the final televised debate between presidential candidates) by saying that the reason she was standing was the need to reassert the commitment to socialism that the PT had abandoned.

The votes obtained by Heloisa - 6,575,393 votes, with 1.56 million in São Paulo, 1.42 million in Rio de Janeiro, 579 thousand in Minas Gerais and 440 thousand in Rio Grande do Sul (the four most industrialised states in Brazil) - were mainly votes for an ethical, anti-neoliberal platform. In the difficult situation of the Brazilian left, they represent a victory, indicating a real relationship with sections of the Church, with public employees, trade unionists and sections of the liberal middle class and the universities.

The significance of the result is even clearer when we recall that she won more than 17% of the vote in the state of Rio de Janeiro - a state usually considered the most politicised in the country - and 25% in her home city of Maceió, even though this is in the Brazilian northeast, the region most benefited by the Lula government's assistentialist programmes, and where he got his biggest votes.

In the vote for president, the left-wing electorate in the broad sense, that was critical of both versions of the neo-liberal model, and which is an important part of Brazilian public opinion, corresponded to about 10% of the total - including a variety of sectors that broke with the PT and voted for Heloisa or Cristovam Buarque .

The contest between the PT and the PSDB

The PT and the PSDB had been preparing for this contest since the municipal elections in 2004. Although the results of those elections already revealed how fragile the PT was in the big centres of the Southeast and South, it was only after the cash-for-votes scandal, from June 2005, that the party's situation became seriously compromised. Later, in the first part of 2006, Lula gradually

recovered his position in the polls and began the campaign as the clear favourite. The cash-for-votes scandal was buried by others - the “vampires” and the “bloodsuckers” scandals (involving overcharging of blood supplies and ambulances to local health services). The PSDB candidate on the other hand, began the campaign with his party divided. The possibility of a second round looked remote.

All the commentators agree that two factors combined to make Lula’s vote in the first round lower than expected, thus meaning that there would be a second round. Firstly, there was the “dossier” scandal. Secondly, there was the fact that Lula didn’t turn up to the final TV debate between the main presidential candidates, held three days before the elections on the country’s main TV network (in fact Lula never turned up to any of the debates held during the campaign).

The most surprising aspect of the contest between Lula and Alckmin was that the electoral polarisation was expressed in terms of a social identification of the poor, with Lula, and the rich, with Alckmin, without this implying any polarisation between their respective programmes for the country.

Lula managed to hold onto his identification with the poorest sections of the population and with those living in the most “underdeveloped” regions of the country, through a combination of assistentialist policies and his own charisma. The impact of the Family Grant programme has been sufficient to carry considerable electoral weight, and the symbolism of having someone of humble origins as President of the Republic still plays an important role.

On the other hand, the more affluent and conservative sectors tended naturally to identify with Alckmin, who personifies the stereotype of the meanest kind of neo-liberalism. In addition to this, the “dossiergate”, which once again showed the daily recourse to mafioso methods by the PT machinery - even putting at risk Lula’s own re-election - reinforced the indignation of some sections of the middle class and the bourgeoisie with the PT, increasing the temptation to punish Lula by forcing him into a second round. Even some sectors that had remained neutral ended up in the final stages being won over by a sort of recycled anti-PT sentiment.

Under pressure, Lula and the PT emphasised the identification of Alckmin with the rich and with the policies of the FHC government, and in the second round began to increase their promises to the poor, pointing to a supposed left-wing character of their government, while at the same time giving assurances that they will not change the economic policies and that they will even cut public spending!

Thus the social identification of the poor with Lula does not mean that we had a contest between real alternatives for the country. It is more a question of a state clientele, dependent on the use of public funds for compensatory income-support policies, which have an enormous impact given the extreme poverty of the majority of the population. An Alckmin government would not be the same as a second Lula government, in areas like foreign policy, but there is no reason to think that Lula will break with neo-liberal orthodoxy.

The P-SOL’s results

The overall vote for the P-SOL - as well as for the Left Front (the PSTU and the PCB added little in the way of votes) - did not keep pace with Heloisa’s, which showed the weakness of the party (and the Front). Where we had candidates for state governorships capable of sustaining a broad political debate, we managed to capitalize on a significant part of Heloisa’s vote. This was true in the Federal District (ie Brasilia) and in Para, with candidates like Toninho and Edmilson, who got more than 4%

of the valid votes, in Ceara, where Renato Roseno got 2.75% (but over 7% in the state capital, Fortaleza) and in Sao Paulo, with Plinio Sampaio, who won 2.5% (that is half a million votes). But in most states our candidates got barely 1% of the vote, or even less.

The P-SOL's proportional candidates won a total across the country, for federal Members of the National Assembly, of 1.149 million votes, or 1.4% of the valid votes, well short of the 5% threshold (that gives full rights to participate in Congressional committees, etc). We elected three federal Members of the National Assembly (Luciana Genro in Rio Grande do Sul, Ivan Valente in São Paulo and Chico Alencar in Rio de Janeiro) and three Members of State Assemblies (Gianazzi and Raul Marcelo in São Paulo and Marcelo Freixo in Rio de Janeiro). The PSTU and the PCB did not get any of their candidates elected.

If we remember that this was the first time the P-SOL has stood in any election, then these results do not seem so bad. But if we compare the situation the party was in before the elections, there was clearly a setback. The P-SOL comes out of these elections weaker, as a party, than it went into them. This is explained mainly by the small size and extreme fragility of the P-SOL as a party, and by the enormous difficulty of achieving unity in action. The P-SOL was not robust enough or extensive enough to stand candidates in sufficient numbers to have a real presence in key sections of society and regions.

We lost part of the political capital we brought from the PT - the elected positions as National Assembly Members of Orlando Fantazzini in São Paulo, Babá in Rio de Janeiro, Maninha in Brasília and João Alfredo in Ceará, and those of more than four Members of State Assemblies who were not re-elected (although these were partially compensated by the election of three new State Deputies). However it would never have been easy for us to get a better result than we did for our proportional candidates, given the internal political dispersion of the P-SOL. The most we could have hoped for, perhaps, would have been a second Federal Deputy in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, if we had managed a bigger vote for the party slate.

In fact, as has been pointed out above, we didn't have in the campaign even the beginnings of a collective political leadership. The solitary role of Heloisa Helena on so many occasions illustrated the weakness of our political, organisational and financial leadership. Part of the P-SOL leadership, with its roots in the trade unions, proved unfamiliar with organising an electoral campaign. In this sense Heloisa herself played a hugely important part in sustaining the relentless rhythm of the campaign in a country the size of a continent, without the material resources required.

The results also demonstrate the limitations of the PSTU and the PCB. The former added about 100,000 votes and the second just 40,000 to the Front's total.

The second round

The second round involved several state governor contests as well as the presidential election. The P-SOL decided not to support either of the two candidates for president, even though some in the party were in favour of voting for Lula in order to defeat Alckmin, because he was further to the right, while others put forward the slogan "no vote for Alckmin", leaving open whether people should vote for Lula or spoil their ballot.

There are several reasons why the majority of the party refused to adopt either of these positions. Firstly, Lula led a government that was clearly social-liberal; that is, he followed, on the fundamental economic questions and on social policies, the neo-liberal model. Secondly, he set up an arc of alliances that took in a large part of Brazil's most right-wing parties (like, for example, the PP of

Paulo Maluf). It was not therefore a question of a candidate who represented a left block (even though there was as we have already said a social polarization within the electorate).

The sociologist Ricardo Antunes, one of the founders of the P-SOL. explained his reasons for opposing supporting Lula in the second round in an interview with Carta Maior Agency (13/10/2006).

"It is obvious that Lula and Geraldo Alckmin are not the same, but the shape of their economic policies, including the links to finance capital and large-scale industrial capital. While Alckmin is the more traditional candidate of the right, the Lula government comes out of the social struggles, but ended up embracing the basic tenets of the right. In this way, Lula effectively demobilises the social struggles.

For years Fernando Henrique Cardoso tried to reform pensions and tax pensioners. But he failed because of the opposition of the social movements. The Lula government proved extremely "competent" in undermining the Brazilian left which was broken up and fragmented. The challenge of the P-SOL and the social movement is to bring those fragments back together again. The confusion generated by Lula is so great that he is seen by the social movements at one moment as an enemy, at another as an ally or as part of a government that is in dispute. Therefore between him and Alckmin I do not know which is worst."

This view was shared by most members of the P-SOL. However the P-SOL did not campaign in favour of casting a blank vote. Its position was a way of respecting the views of those who had voted for Heloisa and now felt inclined to vote for Lula.

What direction for the country?

The P-SOL and the Left Front now need to think carefully about exactly what their political project is. The neoliberal Brazil of today is very different from the developmentalist Brazil of previous years, which still colours our political imagination. Lula displayed great clarity in engaging with this reality, which had already been consolidated under the FHC government - from his pension reform to the Family Grant scheme. This resulted, during his government, in a paradoxical (though minimal) reduction in the concentration of income.

There was a slight rise in income for a large number of poor, a squeeze on the middle classes and better paid workers, while the historical privileges of the 20 thousand families that rule Brazil were preserved - in fact they prospered more than ever before. This is not a viable model for the country, but it is an effective way of maintaining stability in one of the most unequal societies in the world.

Left wing public opinion, the organised and conscious sections of the industrial working class, those layers of the middle class and the intelligentsia that are actively engaged as citizens, all these have lost influence and seen their identity diluted by deepening proletarianisation and job insecurity. These segments - which were the product of a period of national developmentalism, and which according to the schemas of the left should have become the backbone of a new historic block by fusing with the mass of the poor - have been the greatest losers under the new, Lula-style, regime of accumulation.

Nonetheless it is clear that still exists a real space for the left in Brazil (even though at the moment this is a minority space). However, any project which aims to win hegemony, which seeks a just, sovereign and prosperous nation, and which wants to open the way for a transition to the building of socialism, will have to face two big challenges. Firstly, it will have to reorganise the political

intervention of this sector of the population.

This means recovering the aspirations of earlier periods of developmentalism. These can be summarised as growth, jobs and wages, but they also imply a series of things that are not possible in the foreseeable future (a prosperous economy, dynamic trade unions, high-quality public health and education, the possibility of social advancement). But it also means including new issues that increasingly affect these sectors - from ecology to free access to knowledge, from culture to sexuality, from identity politics to anti-globalisation. These are strategic issues, of particular importance to the youth, without which there can be no political recomposition of the left.

Secondly, it will have to recover a vocation for hegemony. This means re-establishing its links with the impoverished masses, with the majority of the population which today backs Lula at the ballot box and which will remain unreceptive to a non-state left that doesn't value income support policies. Lula is neo-populist because he has found a stable formula for addressing these impoverished masses, just as Getulio Vargas, in the 1930's and 40's, offered jobs and social advancement to the working class in the fordist-developmental framework of the times.

In the same way that the break with that old-style populism was only possible through the autonomous action of those who had been its target, so a break with Lulism will only be possible when those policies to guarantee income and/or jobs become universal. This is very unlikely in the neo-liberal world, but it is at least a lot closer to the aspirations of the majority of the Brazilian population than the creation of 50 million formal jobs with full rights and benefits.

Beyond these more immediate challenges, of course, and something that needs to be combined with them, is the bigger challenge of rebuilding the international credibility of the socialist project and developing a new transitional programme.

P.S.

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