

BRAZIL'S LULA POISED TO EARN FOUR MORE YEARS AT THE HELM

Despite a corruption scandal in his party, Brazilians are set to reelect President Luiz Ignácio Lula da Silva on Oct. 1.

The Christian Science Monitor
September 19, 2006

RIO DE JANEIRO – It is a sultry Friday night in Rio de Janeiro, and thousands of Brazil's evangelical Protestants have come to this suburban plaza for a political rally.

The main attraction is Marcelo Crivella, a fervent pastor and candidate for Rio governor. But President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is on stage with him sharing the adulation, and with Brazil's Oct. 1 presidential election fast approaching, Lula looks certain to remain in the spotlight for at least four more years.

Out in the plaza, Lula voters wave flags. Vera Lucia Andrade says she will vote for him because he has helped Brazil's poor. Gilson Amorim says he will vote for him because he has been a good president. And Fatima Gomes will vote for him because she can't remember the names of any other candidates.

Taken together, those reasons explain why Lula appears set to be reelected, in spite of a government that has been widely condemned for institutionalizing corruption and has failing to keep most of its promises to radically change Brazil.

"I think that what this election tells us is that people think the government is on the right track, even though there are still lots of problems," said Carlos Ranulfo de Melo, a political scientist at the Minas Gerais Federal University and an author of two books about Brazil's political parties. "People are not enthusiastic about their decision [to back Lula], but no one wants to risk changing the government while it is doing OK."

With less than two weeks to go until voting, Lula is about 24 percentage points ahead of his closest challenger, Geraldo Alckmin of the centrist Brazilian Social Democratic Party. Some polls even show him winning the absolute majority that would help him avoid a runoff election three weeks later.

Lula has won kudos for keeping the economy stable, but it has not grown as fast as people had hoped. Brazil's 2.6-percent growth rate under Lula is about half the average in South America. The main reason for his commanding lead in the polls, according to both political analysts and ordinary voters, is that Lula has given generous handouts to the country's poor.

Lula took the existing Bolsa Escola program that paid families a small stipend to keep their children in school and expanded it to help poor families pay for food, gas, and other necessities.

Today, more than 11 million families - about 45 million people - get money from the program, according to statistics from the Social Development Ministry. The aid guarantees survival for millions of people and is a key reason many are voting for Lula, analysts say.

"The PT wouldn't have been proud of the Bolsa Familia 10 years ago because it's paternalistic," says Timothy Power, a lecturer at Oxford University's Center for Brazilian

Studies. "But it is definitely going to win them the election. That and the fact that the minimum wage has gone up by about 23 percent in real terms since 2003, which is pretty incredible. The poor are much better off."

Overlooking corruption

Those handouts have encouraged the poor to overlook what many middle-class Brazilians believe to be the shocking corruption of Lula's administration. Lula's Workers' Party was implicated last year in a cash-for-votes scandal that, experts say, institutionalized longstanding graft.

Mr. Amorim, like many of those who plan to vote for Lula, said that he believes Lula did not know about the scandals that plagued his administration and led several senior members of his party to resign. Lula has always denied knowing that his government gave deputies cash for votes in Congress.

Others, however, say that they believed Lula was in on the scheme, but they were willing to overlook it.

"I think that Lula knew," says Ms. Gomes. "He might not have participated, but he knew. I'll still vote for him, though, because none of the other candidates have convinced me they'll be any better."

Which other candidates?

Gomes, in fact, does not even know the names of the other candidates. The middle-aged shopkeeper refers to Lula's main rival as "that guy from São Paulo" and was unable to recall his name.

Indeed, Alckmin's insipid campaign is another reason for Lula's big lead. Although few people doubt his competency, Alckmin has failed to connect with voters outside São Paulo, where he was governor.

Both men are running on similar platforms that propose political reform, economic continuity, and increased investment in infrastructure and education. So voters are deciding not on parties or policies but on personalities, say political analysts and experts.

"The differences between the candidates are in style and values," says former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

Alongside the charismatic Lula, Alckmin comes across as dull. Perhaps even more of a problem was that he was always playing catch-up.

While Lula has been waging a reelection campaign since the day he took office, Alckmin got going just a few months ago, says Carlos Manhanelli, the president of the Brazilian Association of Political Consultants (Abcop).

"This election will be won because of what has been said and done over four years, not during the campaign," says Mr. Manhanelli. "Lula's message has been coherent for a long time. He speaks to the masses and says, 'I am like you.' He says to them: 'The elite don't like me because I am like you.' He has also managed to protect himself from all the accusations of corruption. None of them have stuck."

Experts also say that Lula has benefited from changes in electoral laws brought about by recent campaign-finance scandals. Under the new rules, candidates are banned from appearing on stage with pop stars. Such shows-cum-rallies were a staple of most campaigns four years ago, and their disappearance has denied Alckmin a powerful tool to boost his low name recognition.

In efforts to close the gap, Alckmin also formed powerful alliances that gave him access to free radio and television time. Alckmin believed that having a weekly allotment of 81 minutes, compared with Lula's 58, would help him close the gap.

But while that difference may have been key in past elections, the scandals have diminished the importance of media campaigns this time around, experts say. An Abcop study showed that 48 percent of people watched the ads and only 6 percent admitted that they will change their vote because of them.

"Politicians have no credibility; it doesn't matter what they say because people don't believe them," says Manhanelli. "Anyone who ran against Lula right now would not beat him."

The fervent Protestants who turned up to see him in Bangu agree. They will vote for Lula, but with a heavy heart, they say. Unlike four years ago, when he was swept to power on a wave of optimism, the tide this time is one of cynicism and resignation.

"I'll vote for Lula, but if Alckmin wins then that's fine, too," says Rosangela Ribeiro, a human-resources clerk. "This is a difficult country. We think we are going to turn a corner and do something, and we never quite manage it."