

## SCANDAL SHADOWS BRAZIL'S ELECTION

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Sept. 30 — With yet another ethics and corruption scandal lapping at President [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#)'s door, Brazilians will be asked to decide Sunday whether he is worthy of a second term.

A 60-year-old former factory worker and labor union leader, Mr. da Silva has been leading in polls and seems assured of finishing first by a comfortable margin in the initial round of balloting.

The drama surrounding Sunday's vote stems from uncertainty as to whether the president, made vulnerable by an unpleasant "September Surprise" involving some of his closest aides, will obtain the majority he needs to avoid a runoff.

A distant second in the polls is Geraldo Alckmin of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party, a 53-year-old doctor and former governor of [Brazil](#)'s largest state, São Paulo.

Two other candidates — former allies of Mr. da Silva — are now positioned to his left: Heloísa Helena de Moraes of the Party of Socialism and Liberty and Cristovam Buarque of the Democratic Labor Party. A range of polls have consistently shown them with a total of about 10 percent of the vote.

At a news conference for foreign correspondents here on Tuesday, Mr. Alckmin acknowledged his underdog status but argued that a runoff would be inevitable because of growing voter disgust with the new scandal and what he called "the corrosion of the president's credibility."

"The second round is another election altogether," he said, in which Mr. da Silva's high "rejection index" will be a factor. "In the first round I vote for who I want, while in the second round I vote against who I don't want."

Elected four years ago on a clean government platform, Mr. da Silva has instead presided over corruption scandals from buying votes in Congress to kickbacks on ambulances and postal contracts. The scandals have prompted resignations of his chief of staff and finance minister and the Workers' Party president, treasurer and secretary general.

Still, until mid-September, Mr. da Silva seemed likely to cruise to a first-round victory.

But then operatives of the Workers' Party, which Mr. da Silva founded in 1980 and still leads, were caught trying to pay \$792,000 in cash for a dossier they apparently thought would incriminate Mr. Alckmin's party in a corruption scandal. Up to now, that scandal, at the Health Ministry, has mainly involved Mr. da Silva's party. As a result, Mr. da Silva's campaign manager stepped down.

Mr. da Silva has been a presidential candidate in every popular election since a right-wing military dictatorship ended in 1985. Running initially on the hard left, he lost in 1989, 1994 and 1998, but then shifted toward the Social Democratic views of his opponents and won a landslide victory in a runoff in 2002, with more than 60 percent of the vote.

Nearly 126 million people are registered to vote here, the world's fourth-largest democracy. Voting is obligatory for all citizens between the ages of 18 and 70, but disillusionment and anger, especially among idealistic young voters, over corruption have led to concerns that some voters will cast blank or spoiled ballots — or even stay home, at the cost of a small fine.

Political analysts are unanimous in agreeing that Mr. da Silva wants at all costs to avoid a runoff, which would be held Oct. 29.

Each day the Brazilian press is full of new reports that incriminate his closest associates and let his rivals raise the question of the president's knowledge of or involvement in skullduggery that Marco Aurélio de Mello, the chief justice of the Electoral Tribunal, calls "worse than Watergate."

Mr. da Silva has responded by simultaneously accusing the opposition of seeking to achieve through undemocratic means what it cannot achieve at the ballot box and vaguely acknowledging that some of those around him are responsible for what he calls an "insane" act of "barbarism."

At a campaign rally this week, Mr. da Silva even compared himself to Jesus Christ, saying that he too has been betrayed by disciples.

The campaign highlight was to be a debate by the four candidates here on Thursday night. Hours beforehand, however, Mr. da Silva announced he would not participate, complaining to organizers in a letter that "some adversaries" intended to transform the discussion "into an arena of insults and aggressions, in a game with cards that are marked" against him, the incumbent.

But Mr. da Silva's absence did not prevent his rivals from addressing a chair with his name next to it. "If the accusations are proven, will you resign?" asked Mr. Buarque, the president's first minister of education. "Are your supporters voting for you or for your vice president?"