

Brazilian election dividing nation

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil - Brazilians are being divided along class lines by a runoff election pitting the nation's first working-class president against a patrician anesthesiologist who governed its wealthiest state.

Some political analysts fear the increasingly divided electorate in the tightening race between President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and challenger Geraldo Alckmin spells trouble in a country where two-thirds of the population lives on no more than \$500 a month.

Silva leads Alckmin by about 56 percent to 44 percent of the valid vote, according to recent polls, but leads 59-34 percent among the nation's poor, according to the Datafolha polling organization.

Alckmin, on the other hand, had 69 percent backing among the nation's wealthy minority compared to 34 percent for Silva.

"This differentiation is a novel phenomenon in Brazil," said Albert Fishlow, director of the Institute for Latin American Studies at Columbia University in New York. "I'm a little concerned about how Brazil survives this differentiation."

Silva took 48.6 percent of the first-round vote, while Alckmin got about 42 percent.

The first-round vote split along geographic lines, with Silva winning solidly across Brazil's poor north and northeast while Alckmin took the industrialized south, including Sao Paulo, the state he served as governor.

In 2002, Silva's support was more widespread, cutting across class lines, and he defeated his rival Jose Serra by 61 percent to 39 percent.

This year, "whoever is elected is going to have a very big problem governing and that problem won't be in Congress. It's going to be with the people," said Alexandre Barros, of Early Warning political consultants.

Alckmin, a cool, slightly stiff technocrat, has criticized corruption scandals that have reached Silva's inner circle, and he has vowed to rein in "an out-of-control government machine."

But Silva remains popular, largely because of his successful expansion of the "Bolsa Familia," or Family Allowance, a program that provides monthly subsidies to poor families who keep their children in school and meet other requirements.

Silva also scored points with the poor by raising the country's monthly minimum wage 17 percent to \$158 in April. Silva has told voters that Alckmin will do away with the Bolsa Familia and privatize state-run companies.

Ciro Gomes, Silva's former National Integration Minister, warned that an Alckmin victory could cause the kind of social schism that has split Venezuela under leftist President Hugo Chavez.

"The electoral-political process loses credibility because of these social tensions. And (if Alckmin wins) we will see a phenomenon similar to what we see in Venezuela and across Latin America," Gomes said in an interview with the Folha de Sao Paulo newspaper.

On Monday, Silva denied knowing that his party's officials allegedly tried to pay about \$780,000 for a dossier with incriminating information about the opposition. Silva said the federal police "have orders to leave no stone unturned" in getting to the bottom of it.