

In Surprise, Brazil's da Silva Is Back on Top

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Oct. 21 — For those who hope to keep [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#) from a second term as [Brazil](#)'s president, time is running out. After forcing Mr. da Silva onto the defensive and into a second round of voting he was sure he could avoid, the opposition candidate, Geraldo Alckmin, is once again very much the underdog.

“The president has turned things around,” said Lúcia Hipólito, a prominent political scientist who is also an analyst for television and radio networks. “Alckmin went into the second round with a lot of momentum, but the opposition has made one mistake after another, and now he has lost the impetus he had.”

According to polls published this week, 60 percent of the electorate now supports Mr. da Silva in the runoff election to be held Oct. 29. That is slightly below his performance in the runoff that brought him to power four years ago, but in the past two weeks he has gained ground among all social classes and in all regions.

Until mid-September, Mr. da Silva seemed likely to coast to a first-round election victory. But then the police apprehended operatives of his left-wing Workers Party as they were about to pay \$729,000 in cash for a dossier they apparently thought would incriminate Mr. Alckmin's party in a corruption scandal.

Mr. da Silva, a 60-year-old former factory worker and labor leader, denied involvement in the skulduggery, but was nonetheless admonished at the polls on Oct. 1. He ended up with 48.6 percent of the vote, compared with 41.6 percent for Mr. Alckmin, a 53-year-old physician and former governor of São Paulo, the largest state in this nation of 185 million people. The winner needed a majority to avoid a runoff.

Since then, the “Dossiergate” scandal has deepened: this week, the chairman of a congressional committee looking into the scandal, a member of Mr. da Silva's party, said the money had “criminal origins,” which he did not specify. Courts have also ordered opening the banking records of Freud Godoy, an aide to and

former bodyguard of Mr. da Silva's who the police say was a leader of the dirty tricks operation.

But despite the recent developments, Mr. da Silva has seized the advantage by accusing his opponent of running a "one-note campaign" that focuses on the corruption allegations and fails to offer "positive proposals for Brazil." He also accuses Mr. Alckmin of planning to privatize state-owned companies and eliminate social programs, both of which Mr. Alckmin has repeatedly and heatedly denounced as "a big lie."

Mr. Alckmin's career path, though not as spectacular as the president's rise to power from rural poverty, is nonetheless unusual. Elected to the city council of his hometown at the age of 19, he became its mayor six years after that, won two terms in Congress and served as a governor for five years before becoming the nominee of the center-left Brazilian Social Democratic Party in March.

Mr. da Silva has consistently portrayed his opponent as a member of what he calls "the elite that has ruled this country for 400 years." Mr. Alckmin has sought to counter that image by stressing his own modest origins as the child of a government worker and his years of service to the poor as a doctor at a public hospital.

"I lived in a rural area until I was 16 years old," he said Thursday night in a debate with Mr. da Silva. "I never lived in the city."

But none of those protestations appear to have done him much good.

"Alckmin is a bit of the dandy, the guy who dresses right and talks right and uses a technical terminology that is not the language of the people," said Rubens Figueiredo, a political analyst and consultant in São Paulo.

"Lula talks about putting food on the table and is armor-plated because he comes from the masses," he said. "The average voter thinks corruption is a part of every government and that at least Lula has done something for the poor."

Entering the campaign, Mr. Alckmin had a reputation for being mild-mannered, even something of a milquetoast. Early on, he was nicknamed "the chuchu popsicle," a reference to a bland vegetable often served here, and was also the butt of jokes that revolve around his medical specialty: anesthesiology.

In recent debates between the candidates, though, Mr. Alckmin has showed an unexpected feistiness. He directly challenged the president's account of the scandal, pointing out contradictions and inconsistencies, stressing the president's close ties to those involved in the scandal and casting doubt on Mr. da Silva's assertions that all the illegal activity went on behind his back.

In response, Mr. da Silva has played the class card, adopting what Ms. Hipólito called "a very effective strategy of victimization." He has portrayed any effort to hold him accountable for the actions of his advisers and cabinet ministers as a manifestation of prejudice. Several of those advisers and ministers are now facing criminal charges resulting from previous scandals.

"The other day in the debate, when Alckmin answered back to Lula live, you could hear a scandalized 'ohhhh!' among voters, as if Alckmin had committed sacrilege," the commentator Arnaldo Jabor wrote this week in his nationally syndicated column, referring to the first televised debate Oct. 8. He said people reacted "as if Alckmin had denied the virginity of Our Lady by asking, 'where did the money come from?'"

After that debate, most political analysts and press commentators concluded that Mr. Alckmin had performed better than his rival, an impression confirmed in polls immediately afterward. But Mr. da Silva's lead has grown since then, with some voters complaining that Mr. Alckmin has been too aggressive.

Unless there is another scandal, "It's going to be very, very hard for Alckmin to win," Ms. Hipólito said. "Only the Workers Party itself can defeat Lula now."