

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

AEM-20
Election Anxieties

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Dear Peter,

I'm in the middle of writing a newsletter about youth in Brazil's presidential elections, but before I managed to finish, election day arrived. In this brief letter I'll record my running impressions of Brazil's first direct presidential elections in 29 years.

There is a climate of anxiety right now in Brazil; three days have passed since election day and we still don't know the results. Twenty-one candidates appeared on the ballot on November 15, two of whom will confront each other in the second round of voting on December 17. As I am writing, the first place position is assured to Fernando Collor de Melo, the young reformist candidate of the PRN (Party of National Reconstruction). But as election returns from various regions of the country reach the central computers in Brasilia, the second place position is wavering between the labor leader Luis Ignacio (Lula) da Silva of the PT (Worker's Party), and the old-time populist, Leonel Brizola of the PDT (Democratic Labor Party). When I went to bed, Lula was ahead by 2.4%. According to the official reports at noon today, Brizola is leading by 1.9%, with 69% of the votes in. The numbers promise to go back and forth until the last ballot is counted.

The indefiniton is leaving everyone unsettled. No one can quite claim victory, no one can quite begin to form alliances. People spend the day glued to the radio or television, hoping or fearing for changes in the numbers. The confusion was increased when São Paulo's principle newspaper, the Folha de São Paulo, announced Lula as victorious on the day after the elections, based on exit polls, while Brazil's foremost television network, the Rede Globo, projected Brizola as the leader in its parallel calculations. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), responsible for the official vote count, has been criticized by both candidates for its slow calculation of results, raising suspicions of potential manipulation or fraud, while the TSE insists the problem lies in the faulty efficiency of their computer system. We have been promised a result by tomorrow morning, come what may.

I am still suffering from election day hangover. On November 15 I spent nearly 20 hours on my feet accompanying the voting in my neighborhood. At 7:30 a.m. I put on my T-shirt stamped "Lula Presidente" and walked two blocks to the local elementary school, where the voters were already lining up. The streets leading to the school were littered with paper from the boca-de-urna (literally, "mouth of the ballot-box"), the last minute attempt to win the

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votes of undecided voters on their way in. Although the boca-de-urna is officially forbidden, this didn't stop campaigners for at least half a dozen candidates from invading the voting areas with pamphlets and banners. The police gave dirty looks and then warnings to those who came too close to the entrances of the schools, and in at least one school police tore up the material of boqueiros (pamphleteers). But for the most part, election day proceeded with admirable tranquility.

Even the weather helped; the sun was hot and the sky was blue, and stayed blue, which is a rarity in this epoch of daily spring rains. Here the weather doesn't have the same direct effect on voter turn-out as in the United States, since voting is obligatory. Those who don't show up are subject to fines and penalties. The clear weather simply added to the party atmosphere. Most workplaces closed for the day, and many folks voted early to spend the rest of the day at the beach. Families walked together to the voting places as if on a Sunday outing, arm in arm, with children in tow. Whether most voters thought the elections would change anything is another question. There were those who approached the ballot-box with reluctance; "unfortunately, I have to go and vote," said one harried middle-aged woman with an expression bordering between disgust and deception. But most seemed to savor the experience of voting for president, no matter how dubious they might be as to the result.

In my neighborhood, as in most regions of the city, the most numerous boqueiros were those of the PT, trying enthusiastically to win votes for Lula. Lula is Brazil's version of Lech Walesa: grass roots union leader turned national labor phenomenon turned politician, with the important difference that he serves as opposition to a capitalist government, while Walesa opposes a communist one. Thus Walesa, on reaching the government, is being showered with resources from the West, something that certainly won't happen if Lula wins. The leading business voice in the country, Mario Amato, president of the powerful FIESP (Federation of Industry of São Paulo), predicted in a grim moment that 800 thousand businessmen will leave Brazil if Lula becomes president. There is a joke circulating in which Lula comes across a group of rich kids enthusiastically waving banners for "Lula Presidente." Curious, he asks why they decided to support him. "It's that Daddy says that if Lula wins, we're going to Miami."

Mario Amato has since been severely criticized for his statement not only by the left, but also by members of the business community and by commentators of the mainstream press. The more modern line of economic thinking views the consolidation of democracy as an essential first step in modernizing the Brazilian economy. This means ending state patronage and protection of business, including the military tutelage. The military leaders have stated that if Lula wins, they will do nothing to impede him from taking office, although they don't hide their distaste for the prospect. The financial market has shown nervousness since Lula began to rise in the polls, with stock prices falling and the dollar rising. A senator with close ties to President José Sarney reflected this anxiety: "the only one capable of turning things on their head in this country is Lula. No one else."

In the last few days of the campaign, "petistas" (members of the PT) became convinced that Lula would make it to the second round. Over 100,000 people gathered for the PT's final euphoric rally in the center of São Paulo, more people, by most estimates, than participated in the much-celebrated 1984 rally for "Diretas-Já" (Direct elections now). But although the PT, as the party with the most organized and energetic grass roots militancy, managed to put the greatest number of supporters on the street, other political parties also showed strength. Voters encountered campaigners for the social-democratic candidate, Mario Covas, of the PSDB (Brazilian Social-Democratic Party), who

experienced an unexpected last minute growth spurt in São Paulo; those of Afif Domingos, of the PL (Liberal Party), principal defendant of free market capitalism; of Roberto Freire of the PCB (Brazilian Communist Party), who succeeded in giving new credibility to the word "communist"; of Paulo Maluf, of the PDS (Party of Social Democracy), representative of the old authoritarian right; and of front-runner Fernando Collor de Melo, who has been in first place in the polls since he exploded on the scene last June.

A friendly survey I conducted during the boca de urna confirmed that only supporters of Lula, Mario Covas and Roberto Freire (the candidates more to the left) were there because the candidate corresponded to their ideals. The rest were earning some extra cash, and most often had voted for other candidates. Collor, Afif, and Maluf paid children and teenagers to pass out material, a task they completed with a rowdiness bordering on cynicism. They waved posters in the faces of voters, flirted with the passing girls, and when the sun got hot, collapsed on a shady curbside. They seemed disinterested in the political dispute. They were more interested in knowing if I was married, "because I'm looking for a crazy girl to marry." I said I wasn't interested, although a friend insisted on being the "padrinho" (godfather) at our wedding. At 5:00, when the voting was closed, they disappeared.

The more committed campaigners still had a night of work ahead of them. Sunburnt and tired, we loaded into cars to accompany the transportation of the ballot-boxes to another school where all the votes of the region would be opened. Observers from all the political parties spent the night on their feet, elbows perched on wooden planks, watching intently for errors or fraud as the votes were sorted, counted and recorded by hand. Where I was the vote count proceeded without incident. The rules had been clearly established ahead of time, eliminating the squabbles of the last few elections. Once again, the petistas outnumbered those of other parties by about five to one. At nearly 4:00 a.m., the last vote of the region had been counted. The gymnasium erupted in cheers and confetti, and everyone went home to sleep.

The most intriguing aspect of the boca-de-urna was the strong class division in the choice of candidates. Those voters with appearances that classified them as burgues - the term used to describe middle class and up - rarely accepted material of Lula. The more educated preferred Covas or Afif, while the rest were attracted to Collor and Paulo Maluf, the two candidates of the right who manage, by their populist discourse, to gain support among the less educated. But those voters with faces that can be called trabalhador (worker) - skin tones moreno or darker, faded clothing, with the guarded faces of those who have learned submission - were those who most eagerly accepted, even sought out the material of Lula. The slogan used by the PT, "trabalhador vota em trabalhador", received nods and affirmations. "É isso aí!" (that's it!) I heard repeatedly from the working class voters.

I commented on the apparent class division to a city councilman of the PT, Adriano Diogo, who was doing boca-de-urna at the school. He agreed and became enthusiastic. "It's the first time we see this division. It shows how much we have progressed in terms of class consciousness." Whether this can indeed be called "class consciousness", or whether it reflects a deepening disillusionment with an economic situation that despite promise after promise, only seems to get worse, it indicates a change in the voting patterns of the poorer population. Historically, the less-educated are attracted to authoritarian, populist figures, the father-symbols who swear to "clean up this mess". This time a sizable segment of the poor and working classes was more attracted to Lula's radical criticism of the capitalist economic structure than to Collor's anti-corruption reformist rhetoric.

Lula did not do well among the middle class vote in São Paulo, due in part to the frustrated expectations with the administration of Mayor Luiza Erundina of the PT, who has confronted many difficulties during this first year of government. Even so, Lula received a strong votation in the Zona Leste, the poor and densely populated Eastern Zone of the city, where he passed Collor in at least half of the electoral zones. Lula was also well voted in Northeast Brazil, one of the poorest regions of the country, despite the fact that front-runner Collor de Melo was governor of the Northeastern state of Alagoas. Both Collor and Lula have demonstrated strong appeal among Brazil's poor majority. The two have certain characteristics in common. With ages 40 and 44, Collor and Lula are the two youngest candidates with chances of winning; the other front-runners are all past or nearing 60. They are also the two candidates that made the harshest attacks on President Sarney, and have the least ties to the current regime. As such both presented themselves as figures capable of realizing renovation and change, and if one thing is clear, the Brazilian people want change.

Despite these similarities, Collor and Lula have radically different images, histories, and ideological positions. Lula wears a dense beard, has flashing eyes, a gruff voice, and a preference for T-shirts. Collor is clean-shaven, charming, good-looking, and well-tailored. He seems more like a feisty law student than a president, just as Lula seems more at home in front of a factory than in an executive office. Lula is socialist in vision with a history of union leadership that revolutionized the Brazilian labor movement at the end of the dictatorship. Collor preaches "modern capitalism" and comes from a wealthy and politically powerful family in Northeast Brazil. Lula has only secondary schooling, but helped found the PT in 1980, ran for governor of São Paulo in 1982, and was elected constitutional delegate in 1986, with the highest number of votes in Brazil. Collor cultivated his early career within ARENA, the party of the military government, which named him mayor of the state capital of Alagoas. He voted against Tancredo Neves in the electoral college of 1985, and was elected governor of Alagoas in 1986 by Sarney's party, the PMDB (Party of Brazilian Democratic Movement). Only in the last two years has he entered the news for his fight against the marajás, public "functionaries" who receive huge salaries to do little or nothing, the popular symbol of state corruption and the division between rich and poor. In February Collor broke with Sarney and the PMDB, founding the PRN, which is essentially a vehicle to usher him to the presidency.

Collor's message is one of reform rather than structural transformation. He wants to clean up capitalism, not work toward socialism. Like all of the candidates, he speaks of "redistribution of wealth" and "combating misery", but this would come as a side effect of a modern, market economy freed from its ties to the state. Collor is, in short, just what the right needs: a pro-capitalist opposition candidate capable of mobilizing the passion and hope of the lower classes. Brazil's foremost television network and opinion-former, the Rede Globo, has invested heavily in promoting Collor's campaign, leading many critics to accuse Collor of being an empty creation of the media. While I don't agree that Collor is "empty", it is clear that the economic powers have seized upon him as the only hope for defeating the left in this moment of economic crisis.

The results are now definite; Lula will indeed confront Collor in the second round of voting on December 17. Lula hopes to polarize the debate between left and right, while Collor wants the opposition of modern and archaic. We are promised a fascinating tug-of-war in the coming month for the emotions and consciousness of Brazilian voters.

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Um abraço,

