

ICWA LETTERS

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Eating Henrique

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Assentamento Vitória, Pernambuco, Brazil

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Dear Peter,

I didn't think killing the goat would be so matter-of-fact. I was expecting more drama. Since my arrival at the Vitória Settlement in the São Francisco River valley, my friend Valdete had been talking about throwing a birthday party for her youngest son, Jefferson (nicknamed Nene at birth, when his grandmother could not pronounce his name). The party was set for March 4th. The closer the date, the more agitated and animated Valdete became.

The excitement was obvious throughout the family. They had not thrown a party since gaining possession of their plots of land in the Vitória Settlement in 1997.¹ Grande, Valdete's partner for the last five years, and she had never hosted a big party together.

Since Christmas, Valdete had been weaving complicated plans for the party. There would be appetizers, petit-fours, cake, punch, cocktails, fancy decorations, balloons, games, dancing and — if I and my husband Tyrone agreed to pay half of the 40 *reais* (U.S. \$21.99) cost! — a lamb would be slaughtered. I was dubious about the where the money would come from for such an elaborate plan in such a poor household. I kept quiet and watched.

The month progressed and money tightened. Shortly after I arrived a payment of about 400 *reais* (U.S.\$219.90) was released to each family in the settlement.² But there were debts outstanding. Barbed wire, fence posts, manure had all be been ordered on credit and would be released only on full payment. Then there were the daily groceries, surprisingly expensive for a rural area. Relatives looking for quick loans from Valdete quickly nibbled away at the rest of her money. Two weeks before the party Valdete and Grande were broke.

By this time, my husband Tyrone had left the area to photograph Carnaval

¹ Assentamento Vitoria is a settlement community established by the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Rural Workers Movement, MST) a land-reform movement. The community comprises 264 members holding a collective title. The Brazilian government allocated the land to the MST settlers after they invaded the Varig Airlines *fazenda* in 1995 and camped there for two years. Valdete, Grande and their families were part of the process.

² MST settlers, or colonists are they refer to themselves, upon gaining collective title to the land, become eligible for a series of no- or low-interest loans for agricultural projects. The loans are not issued as money to "live on," but many families find a way to stretch the pennies left over from collective purchases of seeds, fencing, etc.

in the city of Recife. I had money tucked away in various places: 25 *reais* in my suitcase, 25 *reais* in my camera bag, change in one pocket, a Visa card in my wallet. Tyrone and I had been alternating weeks with Valdete's family, buying the dried goods and vegetables for the house. She usually sent one of the boys to Santa Maria da Boa Vista for dry goods while Tyrone and I hopped into a canoe and headed to Curaçá, Bahia, just across the river, to get fresh food. We figured it fair to split the costs. And, as an added bonus, we were able to influence the daily diet of beans, rice, spaghetti and fried meat by adding a few salads and vegetables.

Valdete and Grande fretted constantly over the food in the house, their poverty and whether our fine American tastes were being offended. No matter how many assurances I gave, they were sure we were suffering. But I think they were equally sure I would come through with the funds to bridge the household gap. However, since Tyrone had left, and I am a relatively light eater, I did not feel obligated to share as much of the grocery costs. More importantly, I was spending time in the Vitória to get to know their lives and daily realities. Reality was *not* having a *gringa* in the house to pad the income. So I chipped in for the daily food and let the bulk of my hidden money stay out of sight.

Dilemma struck a few days before the party. Valdete finally realized that she had overextended her meager budget. Without asking me directly, she hinted that she needed my financial help. I had already stocked the cupboard for the month. Still reluctant to play the role of Sugar Mama, or Godmother-for-the-day, I gave Valdete an option. I had committed to 20 *reais* for the lamb. She could have that money and use it however she needed for the party, but that would be the extent of my monetary contribution. As it was, the small amounts of money I had been carrying with me seemed to slip from my pockets with ease: candles here, balloons there – small stuff, really, but it added up to me being the principal reliable cash source.

Valdete decided quickly: omit the lamb. She handed me the 15 *reais* she still had and a list of must-buys and sent Nene and me across the river to the market. While we were gone she pulled the manual sewing machine onto the front porch and whipped crepe paper and old sheets into table cloths and doilies.

The next day, Friday, Valdete's sister Diná was due to arrive with baking supplies and a herd of cousins. As Valdete swept the dirt yard free of leaves and garbage she worried about the lack of meat for the party. "Maybe we can kill a pig," she suggested. I pointed out that she did not own a pig and would have to buy one to kill. "Hmmm," she said, "But they're only 15 *reais*, not so expensive." I kept quiet. I knew I was being baited, and resented it.

By the afternoon when we walked over to her

mother-in-law's hut to drink anise tea, Valdete was talking about slaughtering one of her three goats: Amanda, Erica or Henrique. Since she was pretty sure Amanda and Erica were pregnant the logical option was to kill Henrique. But she was vacillating and bemoaning the loss of a "son." Valdete worked me over with the story of how she had embroidered sheets and walked up and down the settlement roads for six months selling linens to make enough money to buy Amanda, mother of the other two. Over the last two years she had gotten very fond of them and could not bear the idea of killing them. She was waiting for me to feel moved by her affection for the goats and hand her the money that would alleviate future pain. "A pig would be better," she sighed. Again I remained silent. We kept walking.

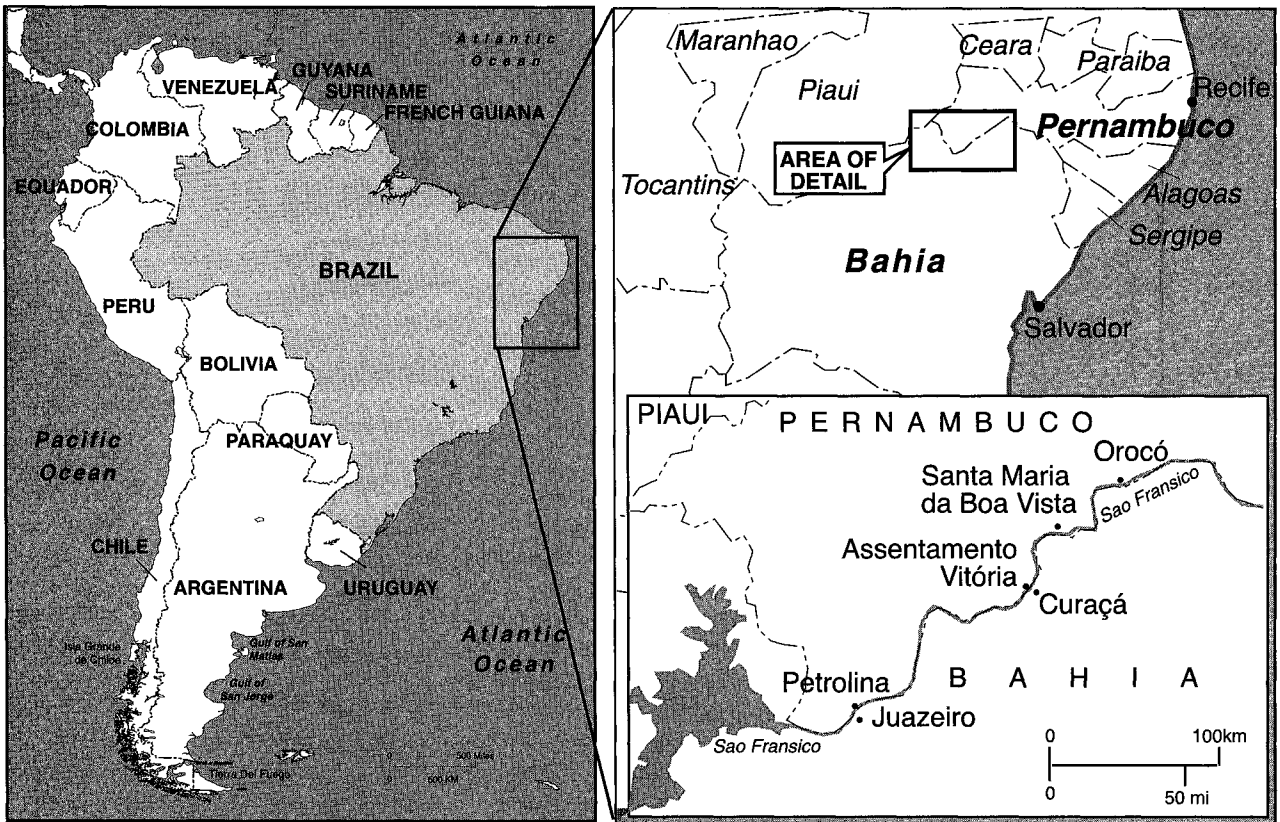
Diná and a few nieces had arrived and the baking had begun, as well as the arguing. There were no less than four chefs trying to direct the kitchen. I rolled cookie dough into balls, and kept my eye on the gas oven, stacked full with trays of baking appetizers. Outside Diná and Valdete bickered over how to deep-fry little cornucopias of dough in a pot of oil burbling over the wood fire, while their eight-year-old niece, Wesliane, diligently stirred soy meal and spices together to make the filling. No one mentioned pigs or goats.

The next morning the rest of the family arrived. With 21 guests the little bungalow was bursting with energy and confusion. I gathered the cousins together and we strung balloons in every room. Valdete scrubbed. Diná baked and baked. Other relatives tasted and added unwanted advice.

Miraculously, when party time rolled around everyone was freshly bathed and ready to party. I found Valdete smoking furtively on the side of the house. The commotion was overtaking her usually serene country life. I asked why she was sneaking a smoke; did someone in her family give her a hard time about it? She laughed and confided that if the others had seen her light up they would have asked for her last few pinches of tobacco and rolling paper. She was sure we would need them to get through the night. I confessed that I had helped myself to a cup of the fruit punch laced with rum and felt much more relaxed in the midst of so much yelling and screaming.

True to form, the party was scheduled for 6pm and the guests arrived at 9:30pm. In the meantime, I inquired about the meat issue. Valdete had suddenly decided that a party for a 12-year-old neither merited buying a pig nor required the slaughter of a goat. "This is a simple affair," she sniffed at me as if I were the one who had wanted a barbeque.

The crowd arrived hungry for roasted pig or slices of salted goat meat with iced beers and glasses of whisky to wash it down. They received instead plates filled with slices of cake, wonderful sweets and an assortment of salty



appetizers. Cups of the punch concoction were passed around to the adults.

A group of about 20 men hovered just on the edge of the floodlights. They wore pressed jeans and cowboy boots. The looks on their sunburned faces were not happy ones. They picked at the plates of food and refused the fruity cocktail. There was a lot of awkward boot scraping.

Valdete grumbled that no matter what a person does, people criticize. "You spend every *centavo* in the house, borrow here and there to make it a nice memory, and all people can do is complain. I'll be the gossip tomorrow." As I floated around the party I quickly ascertained Valdete's real problem: her mouth. From slights and little jokes I learned that everyone had expected the party to be a blowout feast funded by me, the rich *gringa*. Valdete had been talking it up since my arrival. She had painted herself into a corner and was suffering for it.

Grande, however, was at his best. He'd scrubbed away all of the field dirt and dressed in his nicest shirt and shorts. He moved happily through the crowd of disgruntled men and poured more guava cocktails into their warming cups, "Enjoy, my friends! It's free! This is a party! Not every day is for beer and *pinga*!" He kept the music and dancing going.

Nene and his brother Ezekiel, for their part, were also having a great time dancing with their cousins and flirt-

ing with the shy girls from the village. When it came time for Nene to cut the cake he asked that we sing "Happy Birthday" to him twice, just so he could remember the moment.

At midnight a sudden rainstorm blew up and knocked branches onto the power lines cutting electricity and ending the party. The guests loaded up their donkey carts and headed home. The 26 of us, stretched out on every possible horizontal surface and lined up head-to-toe, drifted into night chatter, giggles and eventual sleep.

I fell asleep feeling frustrated about the situation. It was clear that Valdete, and by extension the community, looked at me as a giant greenback. It made things awkward for both of us. At night, after I had gone to bed, I would hear neighbors arrive on the front porch and ask Valdete for sugar, cigarettes, and even money. Valdete had a reputation for helping out others even when she had little to share. It was a reputation she actively cultivated. If Valdete refused a request she was met with the reproach, "How can you be lacking anything? You have the *gringa* in your house."

When television-news reports featured a Brazilian living in the United States and making \$40,000 as a domestic in San Francisco, Calif., the preferred topic of conversation became how easy it was to get rich and live the good life in "America." I talked myself blue trying to explain that though \$40,000 would provide a nice living in

the Brazilian sertão, it probably would just barely cover the bills in San Francisco. No one was listening. I was from the Land of Milk and Honey and could not convince them otherwise. (Although many did express sympathy for the violence of the United States as represented by the Hollywood action films shown every night on television.)

And it got worse. People started passing by and asking for loans. They didn't even know my name. I'd hear, "Hey, Valdete! Is that lady still here? Send her out." Valdete would sheepishly ask me to go to the front porch, and I would. There I would hear all kinds of reasons and dreams of what could be done with 15, 25, 50 *reais*. It was not a good feeling to say, "Sorry, but no."

I thought about Henrique. He just wanted to be a goat and live a goat's life. He walked around completely unaware that as he grew stronger and fatter he was not only growing into goathood, but beginning to look like a food source. He thought he was one thing. The community saw him as another. I was like the goat. I arrived to learn and photograph as much as I could about life in Assentamento Vitoria. I saw myself as a student and recorder of everyday life – ready to try anything. But, with cameras hanging off my shoulders, tennis shoes on my feet and good general health, I was seen as something else; an oddity maybe, certainly a curiosity, and sometimes, a "food source."

The next morning the general consensus of the hung-over adults was that Nene had completed another year with a roaring success of a party. It looked like Henrique would, too. Then the poor goat's luck changed.

Most of the relatives returned to town. Only Diná remained and she spent most of the time visiting a nearby boyfriend. Valdete was appalled by how much food had been consumed in a mere three days. There was almost nothing left in the house. In the afternoon we walked to the river to pick passion fruit from wild vines. We found *maxixi* (ma-SHE-she), a prickly vegetable similar to a cucumber, to make a thin ragout and help stretch the rice and a few kilos of dried beans.

On Carnival Tuesday Valdete woke me with a tug to my toe. I followed her out and across the field to the mud hut of her in-laws, Dona Zefa and Seu Paulo. There we drank strong coffee and talked about nothing in particular. As we were leaving Valdete called out to Seu Paulo, "Oh, Seu Paulo, sharpen your knives and tell Dona Zefa to get her pots boiling!"

When I asked her to explain, Valdete replied that it was time to kill Henrique. He was never any good anyway, she said, because he had never shown horns. "That's why I have him, for times when we need to eat. Besides, Grande wants to eat goat."

I was surprised by her flat tone and didn't know if I

should interpret it as resignation about killing Henrique, or reproach because I was not jumping in to save the family finances. After all the emotional resistance before the party, the tales of how the boys would cry, etc., Henrique had suddenly been demoted from adored son to dinner. I was curious about how the process would play out and hung around the house waiting for Seu Paulo to appear.

* * *

In the hours when the afternoon heat was beginning to break and the sun was moving begrudgingly lower in the sky, Seu Paulo and Dona Zefa appeared on the horizon. I was able to guess it was they by the glint of sunlight playing off Seu Paulo's butchering knife. Henrique happened to be passing through the backyard in search of water. "Looks like the jig is up, Henrique," I said to him, in English, lest anyone in the house think I was a sentimental softy.

Henrique stared at me in that blank irritating way goats do, and peed on the herb garden. He bucked his head and ran off. He must have caught wind of his fate. By the time Seu Paulo made it to the back of the house none of the goats, who usually hover close to home, were to be seen. Not even the familiar "clank-clank" of Amanda's neck bell could be heard. Grande pulled down a cord used to hang the hammock and set off to find his victim.

Seu Paulo dragged on a cigarette as he sharpened the knife against the porch step. Dona Zefa cracked wood over her knee and got a fire blazing outside on the mud stove, then left in search of more salt. A few minutes later Grande appeared with Henrique in tow.

I'm not much of a meat eater to begin with, but being of the supermarket generation, the link between an animal on four legs and the food on my plate is a fuzzy one, and I like it that way. What meat I have consumed in my lifetime has generally come frozen, in packages. When I was younger, it came in healthy slices from my grandmother's butcher block in the neighborhood grocery store she ran. I looked at Henrique and tried to remember if I had ever "known" an animal before it became my dinner — fresh trout excepted.

Frankly, I was expecting more drama, along the lines of a farm girl and spider saving the life of a pig as in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. Given Valdete's earlier protests, I thought there would be a lot of tears. Just the week before, Valdete had tried to cajole me into buying a pig with images of the boys sobbing at the loss of a "family member."

I also had envisioned resistance on Henrique's part. He seemed like an animal filled with piss and vinegar. I thought there would be a struggle: man versus beast, and that of course the beast would lose to the great metals and rational powers of mankind. Grande wandered

around the back yard looking for sticks and holding them up for Seu Paulo to evaluate. Their conversation jumped from topic to topic, none of which were the goat at hand. The two men stood side-by-side, their bodies relaxed, as they chit-chatted with stubs of rolled cigarettes hanging from dry lips.

I didn't see it coming. Neither did Henrique. Seu Paulo spit a little tobacco from his lips. He coiled back, raising the stick above his head, and then released forward, landing a blow squarely on the back of the Henrique's head. It was one fluid motion.

The goat shuddered. He let out a stunted cry of protest and dropped limp on the ground. Henrique was dead. Quickly, Grande and Seu Paulo tied a cord around one of his hind legs and hoisted his inverted body up to the rafters of the porch. Seu Paulo made two quick punctures to the neck and let the blood drain onto the concrete. An audience of neighborhood cats and dogs materialized and hovered on stand-by for the rest of afternoon—dashing in to lap up puddles of blood or nip at scraps dropped.

As they dressed the goat, Seu Paulo worked quickly and with enthusiasm. He deftly slid his knife between the hide and flesh. "You can tell if the animal had a good or bad owner by how easily the skin cuts from the meat. This one had a good owner. The skin is jumping off!" he said, complimenting Valdete. Grande, his hands deep inside the goat, smiled and said, "She's just that way."

Seu Paulo and Grande debated over the possible weight of the meat and convinced Valdete to let them weigh it on her midwifery baby scale. They cut out the organs and digestive system and weighed the meat in two parts. Henrique totaled over 20 kilos of edible meat. The family was happy. Valdete, who had resurfaced after Henrique became less recognizable as a former pet, stuck out her bottom lip and with hand on hips declared that she knew her goat was a good one!

Seu Paulo tossed the pearly white belly and intestines into a laundry tub and set them aside for Dona Zefa to clean and prepare as a *buchada* (Northeastern delicacy of stomach stew). At twilight Dona Zefa pulled out bags of salt and laid out extra bowls and pots she had carried from home. She hacked at the bones and broke off pieces of meat to make the evening's spicy broth to be eaten with corn flour. The soup underway, she cut the meat into bands and rubbed them with salt. Piece by piece, she draped the meat over a wire hung across the back porch to let it cure in the sun—despite the fact that the sun had already set.

Just off the porch a cauldron of salted water boiled over the wood fire. Dona Zefa dropped various pieces—heart, liver, etc., in with precision timing and announced when each piece was cooked to perfection. She'd then

slice them up, add more salt and pass a plate around.

I think all of the flies in the surrounding region had descended on Valdete's porch, buzzing in the gooey blood, hopping over the meat and getting boiled with the organs. The sound was overwhelming, but I seemed to be the only one who noticed or cared about them. I feigned nonchalance, but was having a hard time standing still and not waving my arms around crazily.

Night soon enveloped the scene. The flies snoozed on the meat and mosquitoes began nibbling at ankles and arms. The hot coals kept the cauldron bubbling. The smell of the fire mixed with the rank odor of the blood and sharp wisps of cigarette smoke as everyone lit up one after another and chatted happily over the abundant food.

Blood and parts were everywhere. Grande walked off to take a bath. The kids lounged in Valdete's room to watch television, their bellies filled with goat broth. Valdete hauled all of the meat into the kitchen and left it in various laundry tubs and buckets on the floor. A few pieces made it into the little refrigerator. She locked the back door and readied for bed.

I looked at the kitchen floor. One of the dogs licked the edge of a goat leg hanging out of a bucket. The cat jumped onto the counter for a better view of the buffet. Already the stench of the warm, curing flesh was heavy. Valdete called for the boys to carry their dinner plates into kitchen. They shuffled in and tossed the dirty plates into the buckets of meat. The evening breeze had died. The perfume of the former Henrique was spreading through the rooms as the house, shuttered tight against mosquitoes, heated up.

I bathed and crawled under my mosquito netting and prayed that a breeze would move through the tile roof and carry the slaughterhouse stench from my sleep. About 3am my hopes were answered—and more. A cold wind blew in off the Rio São Francisco carrying belts of cold rain. The fetid odor dissipated as I listened to the clatter of the rain hitting the tiles before falling back to sleep.

At dawn when the rooster crowed, another voice was absent—the old-man moan and bleating of Henrique. Instead I heard his sister Erica circling the house and calling out to him. I slid from the netting and into flip-flops to make my way to the bathroom. At the juncture of the dining room and the little hallway leading to the bathroom my foot splashed in liquid. At the same time I was hit by an acrid smell. It was a bad combination. I poked my head into the kitchen and saw a small disaster.

The rainwater had flooded the kitchen floor and dripped through holes in the roof into the buckets. Bloody water overflowed onto the floor. Power had been lost during the storm and the refrigerator had defrosted—adding to the slimy mess. A hairy, bloody goo was ev-

erywhere. Flies had already convened on the meat. One of the dogs wandered through and lapped absently at the bloody water; then whined to be let out. Holding my breath I waded through the muck and opened the back door, letting more water trickle in. Outside a light sprinkle continued.

Valdete had awakened and we grabbed rags and a floor squeegee and began pushing the liquid into the backyard. All day long we battled the rain and the bloody water. There was no dry place to hang the meat. Valdete decided to returned it to the wire and let the rain wash away the salt. The wire was hung at Valdete's height. Valdete stands at less than five feet. All day long I kept hitting my head on the dripping meat. By midday, flies were pursuing me.

For the ten days after Henrique became food there was goat in every form — but mostly cut into tiny pieces, salted and fried until crunchy. We ate it with cracked rice, fresh beans sent to Valdete by her brother a few communities away, pasta and sometimes *macaxeira*, a sweet root that is a basic staple of the Brazilian Northeastern diet.

Once again I found myself in the position of assuring Valdete and Grande that the food in the home was just fine for me. While they chewed bones and licked the goat grease from their fingers, I was very happy with the seasoned broth poured over rice and beans and topped with a chunk of *macaxeira*. Grande insisted and insisted that I eat more. At one point he even jumped up and put a big bone on my plate. When I explained that my favorite part of the meal really was the rice and beans he smiled at me incredulously and let me slide the goat onto his plate.

Any nagging feeling that Henrique had been slaughtered for my benefit, or due to my financial negligence,

dissipated at seeing how much the family enjoyed the boost in fat and protein. The boys snacked on boiled and salted tripe. Valdete used goat fat for seasoning and the bones for soups. Grande sold the hide for enough money to keep him in tobacco for a month. And after every meal they would rub their bellies and complain about having eaten too much. I realized it was a rare sensation in that house.

* * *

The goat is nearly gone. Tonight we'll have bean soup seasoned with coentro, pepper, garlic, cabbage and the last bits of meat and fat. Tomorrow the diet will return to spaghetti, rice and beans. The refrigerator holds a bottle of homemade hot sauce, a bag of powered milk, stale baking powder and chocolate sprinkles left over from the party.

On Monday, Valdete will rise early to catch the 6am bus to Santa Maria to stand in line until 11am when the banks open. Only then will she learn then if the 50 *reais* stipend Nene earns by attending a special morning *bolsa escola* (school stipend) program will be available. The municipal program is designed to help lower income families cover living costs so that children do not have to work. Payments are currently two months behind schedule.³

Valdete has already spent the money a dozen ways. There are staples to buy and little niceties she's wanted for a while— a new head band, pencil cases for her boys to use in school, ropes to secure the remaining goats, corn for the chickens. Every day is a lesson in making hard choices.



³ *Bolsa escola* programs are in effect in various parts of Brazil. They can be funded at the municipal, state or federal level. In general the populations targeted are those with a high number of children working instead of attending school. The municipality of Santa Maria da Boa Vista initiated a *bolsa escola* program for surrounding rural communities (MST and others) this year. The program is poorly administered and widely thought to be a vote-securing measure by the mayor's office for upcoming October elections.