

Dilma or Marina—Or Luciana?

September 30, 2014



A little more than year ago, Brazil was paralyzed by the enormous popular protests of the June Days of 2013 as, according to a highly regarded polling agency IBOPE, some 8.5 million people joined demonstrations in 400 cities and 22 state capitals, first against high transportation costs and then against just about everything else that had to do with government policies. IBOPE found that 72 percent of the population approved of the demonstrations and that 89 percent had no faith in the political parties.

The protests were followed by a wave of strikes—transit workers, teachers, street cleaners— involving 3.5 million workers according to the United Brazilian Workers (CUT) federation, a labor upheaval such as had not been seen in the country for decades. The protesters were first violently repressed by the government, but then when it became apparent that they had the public's sympathy, the government quickly made some minor concessions, offered promises of reform, and then studiously turned its back on the discontented and ignored the issues. Now Brazil is about to go to the polls in an election that pits two of the country's best known women leaders, once both leaders of the governing Workers Party (PT) against each other in an election that will take place in just a few days. What candidate and party today represents the Brazilian democratic left and radical social movements?

Emir Sader, one of the leading Marxist intellectuals of Brazil, best known to English readers for his articles over many years in *New Left Review*, has just published on the eve of the Brazilian elections scheduled to take place on October 5, an article entitled "Dilma or Marina?" in which he argues for a vote for incumbent president Dilma Rousseff of the Workers Party (PT) rather than for her challenger Marina Silva, the former Minister of the Environment who resigned her cabinet position in an earlier PT administration and is now candidate of the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB). There is also a third major candidate in the race, the more conservative Aécio Neves of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), and altogether there are eleven presidential candidates. Perhaps most important for the future of the social movements and the left, there is Luciana Genro, the presidential candidate of the Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL). If none of the candidates receives more than 50 percent of the vote on October 5, then there will be a run-off election between the two highest vote-getters on October 26.[1]

Sader states that Dilma would, as she has in her first four years in office, continue the policies of President Ignacio "Lula" da Silva, offering an "alternative to neoliberalism," while Marina would turn the clock back to the old neoliberal model. While there is no doubt that first Ignacio da Silva, better known as Lula, and then his successor Dilma had the good fortune to preside over expanding economy (until the 2008 crisis) and that beginning in 2003 they put forward social policies that reduced poverty dramatically, it is also true that the PT's alliance with the bankers and corporations led to greatly increased social inequality. If Marina, once a leader of the environmental movement beside Chico Mendes and now an idiosyncratic conservative, has become the savior of neoliberalism, then one should be clear that Dilma represents what has been called social liberalism, that is, a

commitment to neoliberal policies whose impact is softened by social programs for the poor. A victory for either Dilma or Marina will lead to a consolidation of power of Brazil's capitalist class through a government based on Brazil's notoriously corrupt political system, an arrangement in which the PT is deeply implicated as was made clear in the 2005 *mensalao* political-payoff scandal.

André Singer suggested in his book *The Meanings of Lulismo*, Lula's second election in 2006 represented something like U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's second election victory in 1936 election, that is, the establishment of a hegemonic bloc that laid the basis for a New Deal that established a new and durable social pact. Lula's poverty programs, most important *Bolsa Família*, not only reduced poverty between 2003 and 2009 from 22 to 7 percent, they also won him the votes of poor people from throughout the country and especially from the Northeast. At the same time, stronger affirmative action programs improved the situations and raised the expectations of the country's large Afro-Brazilian population. While Lula had originally been carried to power by the labor unions, the far left, and the Christian base communities informed by the Theology of Liberation, once in office, Lula renegotiated his party's relationship to society, forming on an economic development alliance with financiers, construction companies, and agribusiness, while his social programs won him the votes of largely politically passive poorer people of the country. That same voting bloc carried Dilma to the presidency in 2010.

A vote for Dilma then is a vote for the hegemonic bloc and the social pact of the PT—though in today's world there is no guarantee that the conditions that made possible Brazil's economic expansion in the 2000s and paid for the expanded social programs will continue into the late 2010s and 2020s. In fact, it is highly unlikely that the economic expansion of the PT's best years in power can be repeated. Brazil grew under Lula and Dilma through its exports—meat, aluminum and agricultural products such as soya—and through the expansion of heavy civil construction and ship building, though it actually experienced a significant decline in manufacturing. Brazil's deep and complicated insertion into international capitalism, especially its economic ties to China and the United States, make it vulnerable to both their influence and to the vicissitudes of the larger international capitalist system. Brazil cannot compete with China in industrial production and its petroleum and agricultural commodities make it dependent on market fluctuations.

What's At Stake in Brazil?

In another article titled "What's At Stake in Brazil" Sader writes, "What's at stake in Brazil in these elections is whether the country will continue as a major partner of Latin America and the Global South or if it will return to being a U.S. satellite." Yet this both distorts and exaggerates Brazil's role. Though Sader sees Brazil as a kind big brother to other Latin American nations, for years Marxists in Brazil such as Ruy Mauro Marini have argued that in addition to the United States, there exist regional, sub-imperial power, such as Brazil, that while operating within the context of U.S. domination of the hemisphere also itself dominates other nations, a point of view most recently advanced by Raúl Zibechi in *The New Brazil: Regional Imperialism and the New Democracy*. Sader believes that BRICS—the economic alliance of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa—holds the hope of creating an alternative to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), establishing a bi-polar international economy that would seriously weaken U.S. power.

Yet all of the BRICS' economies which were thriving a few years ago, have, with the exception of China, gone into decline, with falling growth rates usually related to falling commodity prices. The fanfare surrounding the opening of the BRICS New Development Bank a few months ago does not change the reality that New York, London, Frankfurt and Tokyo remain the financial centers of world capitalism. As several Marxist critics have argued, rather than being an alternative to the existing imperialist system, the New Development Bank seems more likely simply to become a sub-imperialist center. Lula's himself recognizes this for while in 2009 he blamed "the blue-eyed

bankers” for the economic crisis was in New York, in February 2014 begging them to come invest in Brazil.

What’s Really at Stake?

With conservative candidate Aécio Neves having fallen behind in the polls and unlikely to make the runoff election, what’s really at stake in this election is whether or not Brazilian capitalism will be consolidated on a neoliberal or social liberal basis, either of which would work to smother the discontented and rebellious social forces of the June Days who represent the future for progressive social change in Brazil. What’s really at stake is the future of that amorphous, rebellious, movement and all the possibilities it suggested.

The candidate whose party puts itself forward as a vehicle for the hopes of those millions of Brazilians who want a more democratic society that works to meet the needs of its majorities for transportation, education, and health care as well a more livable society is Luciana Genro of Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL). Luciana Genro is a twenty-three year old political activist and former Congressional Representative (*deputada*) who in 2003, together with other Workers Party leaders was expelled from the party because she criticized and refused to support its neoliberal policies. Those expelled leaders representing the far left wing of the PT—but made up of people from a variety of political tendencies—regrouped and organized the Party of Socialism and Freedom in 2004 and running Helena Heloísa for president in 2006.

While the movement activists of the June Days were generally hostile to all political parties left, right, and center, PSOL succeeded in establishing a rapport with the mostly young, low-wage, working class activists. Now Luciana and PSOL are trying to see if they can provide a voice and an organizing center for Brazil’s discontents in order to build a mass movement. Luciana has little hope of winning in the first round, but her party’s goal goes beyond the election to the construction of a new left in Brazil. Dilma and Marina are not the only alternatives. And for the movement they are not alternatives at all. Luciana, PSOL, and the veterans of the June Days represent the future.

[1] I have broken with our usual style here and followed the Brazilian practice of referring to all of the candidates by their first names.