A Long Way from Overcoming the Populist Threat: Notes On The 2022 Brazilian Presidential Election – Vinícius Silva Alves

On October 30th, after a long and violent electoral
campaign—which unrolled in a hostile environment marked by Jair Bolsonaro's allegations
against the electoral process, fake news, and episodes of harassment and
assault—the Brazilians chose Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to be their next
president. Lula thus gained his third chance to serve as the chief executive
since he ruled the country from 2003 to 2009, when his second mandate ended

amid
high approval ratings, with over 80% of voters approving his previous
administrations.

He defeated Bolsonaro, the first incumbent in the country's
history to fail to be re-elected, following the latter's success in the 2018
presidential run as the anti-establishment candidate. What brought about this
outcome?
What should we expect in the near future? Can the 2022 Brazilian presidential
election
be seen as a successful example of resisting the populist threat?

A founder of the Workers Party (PT), Lula, now aged
77, has been a well-known political figure since the 1980s, simultaneously
esteemed
and rejected by the electorate to similar degrees. After two successful
mandates, he easily gathered the backing of the left-wing electorate but needed
additional support to beat Bolsonaro since the majority of Brazilian voters are
not progressive or inclined to the left. In an attempt to build a broader
coalition, Lula counted on the help of influential political leaders to weaken
the opposition of center-right voters to him.

To this end, he selected as his vice-president Geraldo
Alckmin, a former governor of São Paulo state and his major challenger in the
2006 Brazilian presidential elections. Alckmin is a respected leader across the
country, especially among entrepreneurs and conservatives. For decades he was
also one of the most influential figures of the PSDB (the Social Democratic
Brazilian Party), a center-right party that he left after internal disputes.

Lula also obtained broader support for his candidacy
by bringing in ideologically diverse figures such as Marina Silva, a globally
respected leader who had served as Minister of the Environment, and Simone
Tebet, an MDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party) senator who reached third

place
in this presidential election and decided to support the PT candidate in the
run-off. Sensing that this could be the most relevant election since the
transition to democracy, some economists who helped the country to reach
economic stability with the implementation of the Real (Brazil's currency) after
the end of the military dictatorship have also embraced this broad front.

To understand the level of dissent in the country, it
is relevant to note that Lula's victory came after he was imprisoned following
a highly controversial process conducted by Sergio Moro, a former judge, who
also served as Minister of Justice for Bolsonaro's administration. After reacquiring
his political rights, the former president was convinced that the country
needed a broad coalition to restore the democratic landscape. In order to
preserve the political institutions outlined by the 1988 Brazilian
Constitution, a special effort was required.

Therefore, while Bolsonaro insisted on rejecting the
diversity and pluralism now found in Brazil, appealing to a binary populist narrative
that recognizes only two groups (allies and enemies), Lula realized that working
with ideologically diverse sectors of Brazilian society was key to restoring
the democratic environment.

Bolsonaro's defeat can also be seen as a sign of public
dissatisfaction with his presidency. In the 2018 election, although he had been
a congressman for several mandates, he could present himself as an outsider
since no one would have expected him to be next in line to be the Brazilian
Chief Executive. However, at the end of his first term, vaguely blaming the
system for the poor results of his administration was not enough to win the
2022 election.

Here we see the difficulty facing a populist leader wishing
to maintain his political support. Presenting himself in 2018 as an anti-

establishment
leader, Bolsonaro had argued that he was the candidate who could make people's
lives better since he had not previously been involved with the political
figures and institutions that he claimed were preventing the country from
thriving. After winning that election, he was held accountable for his actions
and misjudgments during his time in office. Bolsonaro was found wanting by the
Brazilian electorate, essentially because of his poor management of the Covid-19
crisis and his failure on the economic front. It is worth noting, however, that
a large proportion of voters still trust his judgment and agree with him on a
wide range of subjects.

Despite his administration's poor results, he lost the
2022 election by only a narrow margin, winning only approximately 2 million
votes fewer than Lula, which represents around 1.8% of votes cast. Given these
circumstances,
it is reasonable to suppose that there is an implied ideological component
driving voters' preferences in Brazil, which may preserve his power in the
future or pave the way for another far-right leader. For this reason, Bolsonaro
insisted on following the same strategy that had favored him in the 2018
election, believing that re-election was possible if he could appeal to the
electorate's moral conscience by presenting his candidacy as some sort of
redemption
against political corruption in the country.

Brazil still has a long way to go to demobilize the
far-right in the coming years, and this is the major political challenge it
faces. Some of the senators, governors, and federal deputies elected in 2022
will not immediately turn their backs on Bolsonaro and will certainly offer
harsh opposition to Lula's government.

However, the potential influence of extreme-right
populist groups in Brazil can only be measured after Lula's future
administration has developed and levels of government approval can be judged,
and will essentially depend on specific events that may challenge the future of

these groups. In this respect, it is worth noting that the Electoral Supreme Court is pressing charges against certain political figures, including entrepreneurs that lead or finance far-right groups. The outcomes of these inquiries may hinder the continued activities of such groups, and suppress the political rights of their backers, potentially accelerating the decline of the far-right in the political landscape.

Lula's next term of office has started a process that may undermine, little by little, the relevance of these extremist groups, or at least weaken resistance to a left-wing leader. Indeed, the cabinet guiding the transition from Bolsonaro's administration to that of Lula, coordinated by his vice-president Alckmin, includes a diverse range of political figures, representing a broad coalition that may undermine extremism in the future.

By including center-right politicians in his cabinet, Lula sends a powerful message that the winner should not take it all. Although this may be unpalatable to a left-wing voter, it is undoubtedly a strong antidote to the populist approach to addressing public issues, especially in a multiparty system. With political support from center and right-wing parties in the cabinet, especially in the Legislative branch, the next president can expect better results than the previous populist administration, which may dampen populist enthusiasm.

Lula's past experience and his acknowledged political skills also bring some hope that internal political tensions will be processed through official channels from now on. We may also be able to expect that Brazil can strengthen its leading position in the global community regarding climate and natural resources management.

Rebuilding a democratic system in the aftermath of a populist experiment is not a simple task. It requires leaders to strengthen political institutions, reduce inequalities, pursue improvements in relevant public policy areas such as health and education, and reduce poverty indexes, all

of which are significant challenges for the next administration. However, sharing this burden with legitimate, ideologically diverse political groups could create optimism and may offer a hint as to how to overcome future populist threats.

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