



What Does the Future Hold for Brazil's Embattled Workers' Party?

João Augusto de Castro Neves Thursday, Oct. 6, 2016

For too long, there has been little accountability in Brazilian politics. Corrupt politicians often benefit from both an intricate and lax judicial system and public opinion that seems to be, in many cases, overly lenient toward cases of corruption. The proverb that "Caesar's wife must be above suspicion" could apply to every Brazilian politician—and not just their spouses. Many suspicious or even formally suspected figures lurk in the sizable shadow of doubt that looms over the country's political landscape. Almost 40 percent of Brazil's lawmakers are currently under some kind of investigation.

Beneath this blanket of impunity, though, some promising and underlying trends suggest a glimmer of hope. Judicial and investigative institutions, while still in perfect, have grown stronger in recent years. Independent judges and prosecutors have more legal tools at their disposal to uncover elaborate corruption schemes involving large swathes of the country's political class and business elites. The ongoing investigation into kickbacks at the state-run energy giant, Petrobras, known as "operation car wash," is the clearest example. For the first time in Brazil's history, powerful politicians have been taken to court and, in several cases, convicted.

There have also been encouraging evolutions in public opinion. Many polls and other research show that Brazilians have become more concerned with corruption (<http://epocaglobocom/ileias/noticia/2016/10/por-que-m-abria-dos-brasileiros-prefere-nao-votar.html>).



A flag pole covered with the Portuguese words, "Darling Dilma," under a picture of former President Dilma Rousseff, at the presidential residence, Brasília, Brazil, Sept. 6, 2016 (AP photo by Eradio Peres).

This may be partially explained by the impressive process of poverty alleviation and increase in standards of living, driven by several years of above-average economic growth rates and successful social policies that brought millions of Brazilians out of poverty and ultimately led to the rise of a new and more emboldened middle class. With more and better jobs available and higher levels of income, voter preferences tend to shift from core economic issues of jobs and income and toward other issues such as the quality of education, health care, transportation and the rule of law, which in Brazil's case more or less means corruption. Brazil's current leaders are not used to addressing these new demands and living up to higher expectations.

The left-wing Workers' Party, or PT by its Portuguese acronym, was confronted with this new political reality earlier this week, when it was soundly defeated in local elections, further dampening its hopes for the next presidential election in 2018. Until former President Dilma Rousseff was impeached this summer, the PT had been in power in Brazil for the past 13 years.

But first, a caveat. Correlations between municipal elections and national politics in Brazil should always be taken with a grain of salt. After all, particular circumstances and motivations often shape the local political landscape and do not always make their way into the national debate. This is particularly the case in small and medium-sized towns, or those with less than 200,000 people, which account for roughly 98 percent of Brazil's 5,568 municipalities; only 92 cities are large enough to hold elections in two rounds, according to electoral rules. In many of these cities, for instance, voters tend to prioritize parochial interests and public works rather than follow the ideological proclivities that set the tone at the national level.

While the PT is likely to adopt more radical rhetoric as an opposition party, the legacy of Rousseff's government and her impeachment will still weigh against the party's ambitions.

One should be careful, therefore, not to read too much into the result of the local vote and how it may shape politics in

Brasília in the coming months. The strong showing by the main parties in President Michel Temer's ruling coalition, the conservative Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB) and the centrist Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), was not a sign of his government gaining strength or an indication of the beginning of a right-wing tide in Brazil. In fact, it is not uncommon for local political alliances to cross the government-opposition divide at the national level.

That said, while local politics are not necessarily a bellwether for national politics, Sunday's municipal vote did still highlight two new trends from the shift in voter behavior.

The first is the demise, however temporary, of the PT. While the PT is not the only one to blame for Brazil's current problems, the party appears to have paid a significant price for the traumatic interruption of its long tenure at the helm of the country, after Rousseff's impeachment in August. Although the pretext of Rousseff's ouster was the violation of budget laws, the context was the uncovering of the world's biggest corruption scandal at Petrobras, which occurred under her watch. All of this unfolded during the worst economic recession in the country's history— to a great extent self-inflicted, given Rousseff's poor policy choices.

In addition to many defections by mayors to other parties, the PT was the only major party that had few mayoral candidates this year than in the last local election in 2012. That led to a stunning 60 percent decline in the number of cities controlled by the PT, dropping the party from third to 10th place among the largest parties at the local level. The results were also bleak in state capitals. The PT went from having four of 26 state capital mayors elected in 2012 to just one in 2016; another candidate is facing a runoff election but is unlikely to win. The PT's performance in Brazil's two largest cities, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, was even worse. In São Paulo, the party's incumbent mayor lost in the first round— a first for the city. In Rio, the PT-backed candidate finished the race in a disappointing fifth place, with less than 4 percent of the votes.

What does this say about the PT's future ahead of the presidential election in 2018? With or without former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Rousseff's predecessor, who is still popular despite facing his own corruption charges, the odds of the PT making a comeback in two years are quite low. The damage to the party's image brought about by the economic crisis and the Petrobras scandal will simply be too much to overcome. While the PT is likely to adopt more radical rhetoric as an opposition party, the legacy of Rousseff's government and her impeachment will still weigh against the party's ambitions.

The second trend is a demand among Brazilians for political renewal. The decisive victory of Joao Doria— a millionaire businessman with no political background, and the former host of Brazil's version of "The Apprentice," no less— in the mayor's race in Brazil's largest city, Sao Paulo, is a sign of an anti-establishment mood gaining ground. Growing discontent with the political class more broadly, and with the PT in particular, may transform the current middle-class discontent into a wider force for protest votes. That has set up 2018's presidential election to be much more fragmented and competitive than the ones in recent decades— and thus harder to predict.

For the PT to stand a chance, one thing could do the trick, though it is unlikely: the utter failure of Temer's government to put the economy back on track or to survive the ongoing Petrobras investigations. After all, the PT does not have a monopoly on corruption. But even if its rivals are held accountable, the changing mood in public opinion suggests that the PT's resurrection might still have to wait a little longer than 2018.

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