

Municipal elections overshadowed by crisis

AMID A SEVERE CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE THE FIRST BALLOT IN BRAZIL'S NATIONWIDE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS FAVOURS POLITICAL OUTSIDERS

- **The ex-president Dilma Rousseff's Worker's Party (PT) is the clear loser in Brazil's municipal elections following her suspension from office.**
- **In a fragmented party-political scene, political outsiders emerge as the victors. This trend might persist in the 2018 national elections.**
- **The political and economic crisis has undermined the voters' political confidence for some time to come.**
- **In this election for the first time, corporate donations were banned as an anticorruption measure. This gives wealthy candidates an advantage.**
- **Candidates from the Pentecostal churches capitalise on the sentiment of antagonism towards politics.**

An explosive mixture of corruption scandals, a political crisis of confidence, inflation and unemployment set the context for this year's municipal elections in Brazil. One month after Brazil's first woman president, Dilma Rousseff, was controversially suspended from office, citizens were summoned to the polling booths on 2 October 2016 for the first ballot to elect mayors, vice mayors and city councillors for the four-year term 2017 to 2020.

Main election outcomes: a drubbing for the Workers' Party, gains for outsiders

The surprise victor of the municipal elections is the entrepreneur and TV presenter João Doria, whose comet-like ascent brought him 53.29% of the vote in the first ballot and election as mayor of the business metropolis of São Paulo. He represents the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira, PSDB), was standing as an electoral candidate for the first time, and had received only 5% of votes just five weeks earlier.

Likewise in Brazil's second-largest metropolitan centre, Rio de Janeiro, the leading mayoral candidate confounds the classic profile of the political establishment: Marcelo Crivella (PRB, Partido Republicano Brasileiro) is a bishop of the Pentecostal church Igreja Universal and achieved 27.78% of the vote. On 30 October 2016 he runs in the second ballot against the socialist Marcelo Freixo (PSOL, Partido Socialismo e Liberdade), who achieved 18.26%.

Throughout the country, this year's municipal elections are leading to a growing fragmentation of Brazilian party politics. The system imposes no election thresholds and with 35 parties currently registered, the scene is the most fragmented it has been in the last 20 years. Consequently, while there are few obvious winners among the parties, there is one clear loser: the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), which had consistently provided the country's president for 13 years prior to Rousseff's sus-

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pension in August 2016. Of the 644 mayoral posts it had held on the municipal level – including in São Paulo – during the last term, the PT managed to retain just 256 in the first ballot of the present municipal elections; another seven candidates still face a second ballot. That is around a 60% drop in support. The Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro, PMDB) of Rousseff's former deputy, Michel Temer, who has now assumed the presidency until the end of 2018, largely retained its share of the vote.

Another striking factor, considering that voting is mandatory in Brazil, is the high number of abstentions and spoiled votes in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

Analysis of election results: ballot overshadowed by crisis of confidence

First of all, the results of the municipal elections reflect the Brazilian population's deep disappointment and disgust with the entire political class. This comes as no surprise against the backdrop of the most severe economic crisis since the 1930s and a steady stream of corruption revelations.

Shortly before its municipal drubbing, the Workers' Party (PT) had already suffered a serious setback at national level in the form of Dilma Rousseff's suspension from office due to budgetary irregularities. The impeachment was sealed by Senate resolution on 31.08.2016 with a vote of 61 to 20, and critics are calling it a parliamentary coup d'état. On top of that, the ex-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, until then the PT's most popular figure, was prosecuted in September 2016 as a central string-puller in the gigantic "Lava Jato" ("car wash") corruption scandal surrounding the parastatal oil company Petrobras. However, a string of other parties including President Michel Temer's PMDB are also embroiled in the morass of corruption allegations that Brazilians see as their country's main problem.

As a consequence, the entire political establishment, and most especially the PT, has become a red rag for the Brazilian population in every sense of the word. This time

around, the vote for the "least worst candidate" – as Brazilians are fond of saying – very seldom went in favour of the PT. Instead there was fragmentation of the vote, which will undermine the effectiveness of future municipal governments since there is no mechanism of electoral thresholds. A smorgasbord of weak parties complicates the formation of stable majorities, which in turn hampers implementation of the many changes that the Brazilian people are longing for. In addition, the massive mistrust in parties and conventional office-holders leads to a negative perception of electoral processes overall, and exacerbates the disenchantment with politics in Brazil.

Who is the "least worst candidate" in this scenario dominated by antagonism to politics? Increasingly often a political outsider, as exemplified by the country's two largest metropolitan centres. In the economic centre of São Paulo, the image of a successful manager and non-politician propelled the "toucan" (as Brazilians call PSDB-members) João Doria on his purposeful rise to office. His direct landing on the mayoral throne of office was supported by the Governor of the State of São Paulo, Geraldo Alckmin (PSDB). In Rio de Janeiro, Senator Marcelo Crivella (PRB) in particular is riding the wave of antipolitical protest by campaigning with a focus on philanthropic activities instead of scoring points with his political profile.



New mayor of São Paulo: João Doria

Picture: Rovena Rosa/Agência Brasil

The electoral law reform perspective: election dominated by anticorruption

Unlikely as it may seem at first glance with national corruption scandals dominating the media, this year's municipal elections

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should actually give a clear anticorruption signal. For this is the first ballot since Brazil's Superior Court declared it unconstitutional to finance election campaigns with corporate donations in September 2015. Having been discussed repeatedly over decades, this reform of electoral law should now finally dislodge one of the key catalysts for the country's inherent systemic corruption – even if this is naturally a complex and long-term endeavour.

Yet the root of the problem remains that election campaigns in Brazil are very costly because of the personalised proportional voting system. For it is the candidates who amass the most votes who gain office, irrespective of their place on party lists. Each of them must therefore compete with colleagues from their own party as well, which makes elections highly personality-based and diminishes the significance of parties. It gives rise to high costs at election time, which have mainly been met until now by private donations from firms – a fertile breeding ground for corruption. After all, companies are not normally donating in order to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, but to invest in maximising their future profits.

The ban on corporate donations is aimed at making politicians accountable to the people once again, which is entirely in keeping with the democratic system. However, the new regulation's first test-drive has been a tough ordeal, in which many candidates struggled to convey their messages to the public. One reason was that until shortly before the election, the voters were distracted by other issues like the impeachment proceedings and the Olympic and Paralympic games in Rio de Janeiro. Added to that, the campaign period was halved and the television time allotted to electioneering spots was markedly reduced. Moreover, a massive economic crisis combined with a crisis of confidence is not exactly an easy time to drum up donations from private individuals – however actively the candidates seek dialogue with the voters. Whilst there is a publicly financed party fund, it was primarily the favourites who benefited from it in the first ballot.

The result was that, ultimately, well-heeled candidates who could afford to invest considerable sums of their own money gained an advantage from the electoral law reform. São Paulo's new mayor João Doria is the best example of this: he ran the most expensive campaign in these municipal elections, spending 13 million reais (around 3.6 million euros); 2.4 million reais (almost 670,000 euros) alone were spent from his private wealth. It goes without saying that such candidates do not represent the majority of the population in Brazil.

That aside, irregularities were found in relation to one-third of the registered election donations. In particular there are suspicious sums originating from recipients of Brazilian welfare programmes and from people who are unemployed or even deceased. Whatever kind of manipulation underlies this enormous number of payments from suspect sources, it does not exactly help to restore lost confidence in politics.

The religious perspective: (business-like) churches in politics

Another facet of the 2016 municipal elections is the relationship between religion and politics. This is particularly illustrated by Senator Marcelo Crivella (PRB), who stood in the second ballot for the office of mayor of Rio de Janeiro at the end of October. Having been a deeply unpopular candidate in previous elections because of his role as Bishop of the Igreja Universal, he is currently attempting to distance his image from that Pentecostal church and to position himself as an impartial servant of public welfare.

Against this backdrop, an outcry was provoked by an election pamphlet portraying him alongside the Catholic Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, Cardinal Dom Orani. The Archdiocese complained about the use of the photograph, which implied that Dom Orani was a Crivella supporter. Now the regional electoral court is also investigating him for illegal canvassing in the laicist Brazilian state. Crivella encountered similar criticism – albeit without such a media storm – for a pho-

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tograph with a priest from the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion.

Why does his link with the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God) cause such an uproar? There are various reasons. Crivella is the nephew of the church's founder, Edir Macedo, who is bombarded with scorn not just for drug-dealing and money laundering but most of all for personal enrichment at the expense of the poorest of the poor. As one of the most influential Pentecostal churches, the Igreja Universal follows the logic of a commercial company that continuously extends its market power, not least via numerous media channels. Since the 1990s it has also been extending its influence to municipal and national politics. In 2005 the Republican Party (PRB), of which Crivella is a member, emerged from the membership of this Pentecostal church. In the first ballot of these municipal elections it managed to boost its tally of mayors and city councillors by over 30% nationwide, and now has good prospects of winning the second ballot in Brazil's second-largest metropolis.

What is problematic is that candidate selection within the Igreja Universal is coordinated by Crivella and does not follow democratic principles. Besides, the goal of re-Christianisation pursued by numerous Pentecostal politicians is frequently voiced as intolerance towards other religions, particularly towards Catholic and Afro-Brazilian groupings. This explains why the candidate relied on the power of pictures to overcome the religious barriers raised by his neo-Pentecostal image. In doing so, however, he ultimately lost the support of his Catholic voters, and registered a loss of votes in the home stretch. Nevertheless, he is a further example of the voters' quest for alternatives who are not associated with established politics.

Conclusion: significance of the municipal elections for the 2018 presidential elections

The 2016 municipal elections, where debate focused more on the fate of the country than the fate of the cities, permit some

speculation about the prospects for the 2018 national elections. In particular, São Paulo's Governor Geraldo Alckmin (PSDB) might be encouraged in his presidential candidacy after striking gold with his support for João Doria. Ex-President Lula would like to run for election again but his prospects have gone badly downhill due to the rout of the Workers' Party – quite apart from the fact that he might be convicted in the "Lava Jato" scandal by then. Meanwhile, a conviction for illegal election donations means that the incumbent President Temer is not allowed to run at all. And the disenfranchised voters might be attracted to side with a political outsider once again on the national stage. So the suspense is set to continue.