Elections 2014: Characters in search of a plot

João Augusto de Castro Neves, Washington D.C.

BRAZIL'S NEXT PRESIDENTIAL election is still a year and a half away, but it seems that campaign season is already in full swing. Much recent media attention has been given to potential candidates, shifting coalitions, and President Dilma Rousseff's reelection chances. In fact, even the president's decision to replace four ministers in March was perceived by many as a strategic move on the electoral chessboard. The newly anointed cabinet members openly acknowledged that the main reason for their appointment was Rousseff's need to strengthen the ruling coalition and pave the way for her reelection. As usual, policy gave way to politics.

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With approval ratings near 80%, Rousseff is the odds-on favorite in next year's election. Low unemployment and rising wages sustain her popularity despite two years of lackluster economic growth (2.7% in 2011 and 0.9% in 2012). While economic activity is recovering more slowly than anticipated, GDP growth this year will most likely be this administration's best so far (at least 3%). This momentum should help consolidate Rousseff's advantage, even if her approval ratings decline a bit in coming months. If the government can keep mounting inflationary pressures from getting out of control, the balance will tilt in her favor even further.

Despite the incumbent's clear advantage, however, the 2014 race may be the most interesting presidential election in a decade, at least when it comes to the number of likely well-known candidates. In addition to Rousseff, at least three other hopefuls are lined up to do battle: Senator Aécio Neves, former Senator Marina Silva, and Governor Eduardo Campos. While Neves is from the country's second most populous state (Minas Gerais) and enjoys

castroneves@eurasiagroup.net

the support of Brazil's main opposition party, the Social Democrats (PSDB), in the 2010 elections Silva performed impressively as the Green Party candidate, grabbing 20% of the votes in the first round. Moreover, it is quite possible that former presidential candidate José Serra (PSDB) will leave his party to run again.

Yet the true novelty in 2014 will be Governor Campos. As the main leader of the socialist party (PSB), his presidential bid would represent the first real challenge emerging from within the ruling coalition. Furthermore, as the governor of an important northeastern state (Pernambuco), his candidacy might also constitute a threat to the dominance of the Workers Party (PT) in an important regional stronghold. Equally interesting is that his yet untested name and image as a leader from a younger generation may also pose a threat to the opposition. Since his political profile overlaps somewhat with that of Neves, the two may end up competing for the same votes.

While many intriguing candidates are beginning to appear on the electoral stage, most of them still need to craft a clear campaign message. This is not a trivial task when confronting a popular government. PSDB's three consecutive defeats serve as proof that being in the opposition is not necessarily the same thing as offering itself as a credible alternative to voters. The party's frequent silence and the lack of consistent views with respect to many of the country's pressing issues underscore the challenge. As for candidates whose parties were (Silva) or still are (Campos) members of the ruling coalition, conveying a credible alternative message to voters without appearing incoherent may prove even more difficult.

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Certainly there is still time for the tide to turn. The campaign is only just beginning, and candidates may be testing the waters before voicing specific policy preferences. And even if economic winds appear to favor Rousseff to a large extent, it is easy to spot dark clouds on the horizon that deserve the close attention of any presidential hopeful. Excessive state intervention in key sectors of the economy, growing inflationary pressures, and a proclivity toward protectionism are just a few examples of topics that candidates will have to explore.

So far, however, the lack of any real debate on issues is not diminishing the media's early obsession with next year's election. Maybe after all it is just an indication that, in Brazilian politics, the cast of characters is always more important than the actual story.