Where is the opposition?

After their third consecutive defeat in presidential elections and with serious internal crises, the two main opposition parties are struggling to survive as well as find an appealing message to voters. There is, however, growing dissatisfaction with the two major political forces in the country. Whoever translates this dissatisfaction into a clear message will tap into a vast pool of political capital.

João Augusto de Castro Neves, Washington D.C.

After a third consecutive defeat in presidential elections, the relevant question now is this: is there any light at the end of the tunnel for the political opposition in Brazil? As if a backdrop of sustainable economic growth — the highest in recent years — and high levels of presidential popularity were not enough to make life difficult for them, the fact that the two administrations (Lula and Rousseff) led by the Workers' Party (PT) adopted and built on policies launched by the Cardoso government led by the Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB) seems to make criticizing the PT administration nearly impossible, let alone finding an alternative message to offer voters.

Opposition in disarray

The problem lies mostly within the PSDB itself. Dumbfounded by the political savvy of President Lula (PT), the PSDB, Brazil's biggest opposition force, has spent what is left of its political capital on dubious, if not counterproductive, goals. First, it insisted on a selective approach in its only experience in power (1995–2003). While claiming responsibility for stabilizing the economy (the Real Plan) and launching conditional cash transfer programs to the poor that were later bundled up by Lula as the Family Grant program (Bolsa Familia), PSDB leaders fumbled for words when more controversial issues arose, such as privatization of state-owned enterprises. This reluctance alone claimed two presidential losers, Serra in 2002 and Alckmin in 2006.

It also seems that in the last several years the PSDB has paid little or no attention to the fragmentation of political parties and the surge of presidential popularity. Instead of crafting a clear message and building a strong political coalition, PSDB leaders have preferred to concentrate their time and efforts on internal disputes. Since electoral laws restrict campaign activities to specific periods and there is a lack of grassroots activism in the party, it is hard to avoid recognizing this situation for what it really is: personal disputes among party leaders. And while the leaders struggle with dissent, the party dwindles in both houses of Congress.

Meanwhile, with the defection of the Mayor of São Paulo City Gilberto Kassab and the Deputy Governor of São Paulo state, the second main opposition party, the right-of-center Democrats (DEM), has almost disintegrated. Kassab and Afif Domingos intend to set up a new party, the Social Democratic Party (PSD).

Lacking the numbers and the strength to block the legislative steamroller that is the governing coalition, the opposition's main hope today lies in a possible deterioration of the economy, because it is widely believed that the Lula administration survived a string of corruption scandals and was able to guarantee a "third term" with Rousseff mainly because of a favorable economic situation.

But would an economic slump be enough to revive the opposition? To cheer for the worst may not be a patriotic strategy for someone who seeks the presidential chair, but desperation seems to thrive where there is a lack of ideas. In the 2002 election the PT moved to the center, pushing the PSDB into a more conservative (and uncomfortable) stance. Today, the tucanos, as PSDB members are known, confront a conundrum: how and where to reposition their message to Brazilian voters. While joining forces both in Congress and in presidential races with their more conservative counterpart, the DEM, the PSDB's main leaders, former governor and presidential candidate José Serra and senator Aécio Neves, flirt with a more leftist agenda to try to compete with the PT on its own turf. But together Serra's credentials as a somewhat state-oriented developmental economist and Aecio's tentative courtship of labor unions send mixed signals to voters.

None of the PT's three consecutive presidential victories was a landslide, and the ballots in 2010 prefigured a trend that may gain importance in elections to come, namely the emergence of a third political force that may break down the 15-year PSDB-PT bipolarity.

Voter dissatisfaction

Nevertheless, to recognize that the PSDB-DEM opposition bloc is mired in an excess of egos and a lack of ideas is not the same as saying that there is no viable alternative to the PT-led





Photos: Valter Campanato/Agencia Brasil.

Senator Aécio Neves (PSDB) (left) and former São Paulo governor José Serra (PSDB) flirt with a leftish agenda sending mixed signals to voters.

government. None of the PT's three consecutive presidential victories was a landslide, and the ballots in 2010 prefigured a trend that may gain importance in elections to come, namely the emergence of a third political force that may break down the 15-year PSDB-PT bipolarity. The nearly 20% of the voters who went to Marina Silva of the Green Party (PV) may not necessarily be environmentally conscious; rather, they suggest a growing dissatisfaction with the two major political forces. Whoever is able to translate this dissatisfaction into a clear message will tap into a deep pool of political capital.

Meanwhile, what are the prospects for the opposition up to the next presidential election in 2014? First, a frail opposition in Congress is not likely to function efficiently enough as a shadow cabinet to create major problems for the government (though the administration will have its hands full dealing with its own governing coalition). Second, the divisions between PSDB leaders will probably harm the party even more if they are not dealt with sooner than in previous electoral cycles. Third, there is room for some surprises in the political landscape, either with consolidation of another political force behind Marina Silva or even with a new party or political group that may occupy the vacuum in Brazil's conservative camp today. But on a more objective note: the main event in 2014 will certainly be not the election but the World Cup.

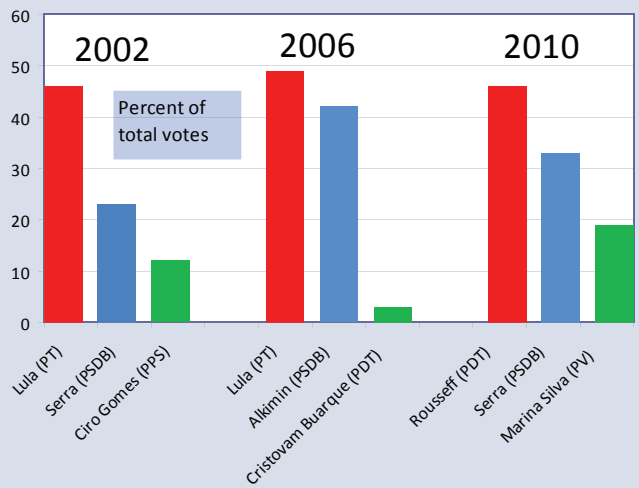




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Democrats (DEM) have almost disintegrated with the departure of Mayor Gilberto Kassab (left) and Deputy Governor Afif Domingos.

Despite all odds, the opposition totalled 52 percent of the votes in the first round of the last presidential elections ...



... and 44% of the votes in the runoff, 44 million votes.

