A forsaken village and election polls, 2006–08

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Canudos — founded by messianic rebel Antonio Conselheiro in the northeastern part of Bahia state in 1893 and destroyed four years later by government troops — continues to be abandoned by the government. The city was rebuilt in the early twentieth century, after the people returned. It remained isolated until President Getulio Vargas visited in October 1940 and the government decided to build a reservoir, which was completed in 1969, forcing the people of Canudos to move to the village of Cocorobó. Today Canudos county covers a substantial 2,985 square kilometers and has 15,636 inhabitants.

Bahia ranks near the bottom on the Human Development Index (HDI), 22nd among Brazil's 27 states, and Canudos is the poorest area in Bahia. Isolated by bad roads, without working telephone connections (mobile phones get no signal) and devastated by the drought (rainfall there is among the lowest in Bahia), the inhabitants of Canudos survive on the bare edge of poverty. The federal government is missing: there is only one branch of the federal government-owned Banco do Brasil, for instance, and it is open only a few hours a day.

The gross domestic product (GDP) of the county was slightly over R$39 million (US$10 million) in 2007, which gives a per capita income of R$2,716 (US$1,300). The number of workers in the formal sector is less than 200 (nobody can afford to pay even minimum wages). In the city, the main means of transportation is the motorbike (421).

The city depends heavily on the Municipal Participation Fund.[1] It receives about R$6.5 million (US$3.6 million) a year and expends R$11.5 million (US$6.4 million) a year. Tax revenue is minimal: the property tax brings in only R$4,000 (US$2,200). The county spends R$4.5 million (US$2.5 million) on civil servant wages, but only R$250,000 (US$139,000) on infrastructure. There are two hospitals, each controlled by one of the powerful oligarchs ("colonels") in the city. In one year there were 13,563 hospitalizations, an average of one per resident, even though the hospitals together have only 62 beds. This gives an average of 218 admissions per bed. None of the 13 Canudos doctors lives in the city.

The economy of Canudos is based on very low-productivity agriculture, raising

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goats, and small businesses. Despite the Cocorobó dam, which has the capacity to store 245 million cubic meters of water, half the homes in the city do not receive the precious liquid. Much of the water is salty, and the small area that is irrigated, serving 150 families, is in bad condition with ruined pipes. Average family income is about US$250 a month, equivalent to the income from the minimum wage, according to the researcher Luiz Neiva of the University of Bahia.

Although schooling indicators have improved, most young people do not have steady employment. When they work, they do odd jobs. There is no industrial, agricultural, or commercial activity that creates jobs in sufficient numbers to absorb the workforce. Leisure options are nonexistent, teenage pregnancy is considerable, and the only entertainment available consists of bars. On the main street, Juscelino Kubitschek Avenue, alone there are a dozen bars. Alcoholism and drug use are endemic.

In this microcosm of the Northeast interior President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva won an easy re-election victory in 2006, taking 68.4% of the votes in the first round and 78.1% in the run-off. The opposition candidate running for president, Geraldo Alckmin, got 27.3% of the votes in the first round and 21.9% in the run-off. The Labor Party (PT) candidate Jaques Wagner running for state governor office won an absolute majority of votes, 54.7%, largely due to "Lula's surge."

The elections broke the dominance of two politicians who prey on the city, the current mayor from the Liberal Front Party (PFL) and former mayor from the Brazilian Social Democrat Party (PSDB). They had alternated in power since the county was created in 1985. In the presidential election in 2006 both supported the same candidate, Geraldo Alckmin, and were defeated.

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What stands out is the number of voters: 10,655 out of a population of 13,760 people, far above the national average. In the 2008 election 9,427 electors cast votes for mayor — a very low abstention rate, just over 10%.

It is difficult to find someone who has not benefited from the Bolsa Familia (federal government food stamp program), the government program that pays allowances to poor families. In May 2006, in five months 1,673 families enrolled. By the eve of the election, that number had jumped to 2,246. Four years later, in May 2010, the program was serving 2,432 families, without any significant increase in the population. That is, the growth in those enrolled took place by increasing the number of those eligible who already lived in the city: "We have no jobs. I have three children. My husband just got a job now. Bolsa Família is good but I would rather have a job," says Maria José Varjão, 29, studying in the second year of high school. She voted for Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1998, José Serra in 2002, and Lula in 2006. She was already enrolled in the social programs of the previous government. Of her six siblings, three migrated, two to São

Paulo and one to Salvador. She was able to build a house with the money one of them sends monthly. She lives next to her retired mother, and she has turned out to be the family breadwinner: "Bolsa Familia is the only guaranteed money the family has. My other two brothers do not have regular jobs," she says.

Teacher Maria Claudia Jesus da Silva, 26, was born in Canudos. She is single and has nine siblings. Five moved to the cities of Juazeiro, Petrolina, and Salvador "because there are no jobs here." Her father receives a pension: "without the retirement pension we could not survive." She has an aunt who has nine children and is already enrolled in Bolsa Familia. The teacher disagrees with the program. She says, "It's easy money," "no need to sweat." She adds that many who receive it do not work because they are lazy. She voted for Cardoso in 1998 and for Lula in 2002. This year she will vote for Lula's candidate again.

Father Livio, the Catholic priest, is an Italian who has lived in Canudos for several years. He believes that Lula has done little for the region. He complains about lack of investment. The presence of the government is seen only through Bolsa Familia assistance. He hopes the situation can be improved. The church has been very important in organizing the population to build water tanks, supporting preventive health programs, and encouraging family farming.

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The week before the second round in 2006 on a Saturday night there was even a motorcade in the city, with fireworks, obviously for Lula. Nobody said they would vote for Alckmin. The image the residents of Canudos had of the opposition candidate was of someone far removed from their everyday life. Many said they did not understand what he said, others only heard of Alckmin during the elections. They said that Lula was the only president "who looked upon us." They acknowledge the lack of jobs; talk about corruption ("everyone steals, but nobody has proved that Lula is a thief"); identify themselves with Lula's story ("he knows what drought is, what suffering is"); and related Alckmin to an old and powerful Bahian politician, Antonio Carlos Magalhães.

The semi-arid Northeast has become Lula's region. It is the only region that the official candidate, Rousseff, would win easily against the main opposition candidate, José Serra (PSDB). This is not accidental. Without establishing a political dialogue with the millions who survive in the region, the opposition will suffer another defeat next October. As a Canudos resident said: "I know that Lula will not be a candidate. I will vote for who Lula tells me to." ■

[1] The federal government provides funds for Brazilian municipalities through the Municipal Participation Fund, allocating shares mainly based on the number of inhabitants, which is estimated annually.