

## Unpredictable 2010 elections

### Murillo de Aragão

It is well known that Cleopatra's nose was not as beautiful as one might have imagined. I mention this to point out that not everything occurs or has occurred the way one thinks. The 2010 elections present us with an excellent opportunity to reflect on how things may turn out. Perhaps it will be different from today's forecasts. How might the elections be transformed, or not, into historical truth within a few months? Will they merely be new Cleopatra's noses?

Today's predictions of the 2010 elections may be categorized in three main groups. Those in the first group argue that José Serra's victory is unavoidable because of

his current popularity. This argument finds support in the governor's performance in the opinion polls — he is ahead at the moment — and in the belief that his current leadership is a considerable omen of victory. After all, the candidates who won the last three elections had all occupied leadership positions the year before. Carlos Montenegro, from IBOPE, the Brazilian Polls Institute, is a major proponent of this powerful argument backed by historical facts.

Those in the second group believe in the magical power of President Lula to turn Dilma

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Rousseff, the candidate he endorses, into the future president. The argument is based on a certain degree of determinism: “It would be impossible” to conceive that the most popular president in the country’s history is not able to secure votes for his candidate. Its proponents argue, furthermore, that the weight of the state apparatus and the power of attraction exerted by the administration’s social programs are more than sufficient to leverage Rousseff’s performance. Few analysts are among these advocates, who in most cases are considered partisans of the administration.

### **The third group**

The last group envisions a third winner, someone between Serra and Rousseff — in other words, an unexpected result. For this group, a candidate incorporating the best in the other two candidates could win without representing either a rejection of the Lula Era or a nostalgic backing of Serra’s Tucano party. Both Ciro Gomes and Marina Silva could be in a position to capitalize on such votes; it might be an astonishing turn of events, but one of them could secure a runoff with either Serra or Rousseff.

Currently, those are the three most popular projections. What can we say about them? There is one undisputable fact: we do not yet know the results of the elections. A lot can happen, even though the polls are less than a year away. First and foremost, voters are starting to show more interest in the race. In view of the President’s achievements, they are beginning to think more carefully about what uncertainties the twilight of the Lula Era may bring about for their own future. As occurred in 2002, when some groups were fearful of the destiny of the economy under the PT (Labor Party), today the Tucanos may raise fears associated with the future of the social programs. The more informed know that the ideological matrix of both parties

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is very similar, but what counts here are not the values but the esthetics of the process. In other words, what counts is not what is but what appears to be.

Beyond the natural uncertainty and the current lack of interest surrounding the 2010 elections, the results may end up being defined by other parameters and paradigms. Some were already present in the plebiscite on the issue of disarmament and later confirmed in Lula’s re-election after the mensalão scandal<sup>1</sup>. Less educated voters no longer follow the pattern of the upper classes. As beneficiaries of social programs and income gains, the popular classes will probably not be reflecting in the same way about what is good or bad about the administration. Brazil as a country is more concerned about esthetics than about ethical values, and the most ethical examples are no longer emulated. The allegory of power is far more important: A bird in the hand is better than several in the bush.

### **Mutation**

A fact and a reflection: we see before us the natural unpredictability of the results and a manifest change in the electoral “geology.” The poor have changed: today they feel that their needs are being met and that they are represented. This reflection is further strengthened by the impressive results on social mobility: today, the lower middle class

is the largest in the country. A significant mass of new consumers thus gained access to the market, initially at the onset of the Real Plan and later through the Lula years. They are contented with their refrigerators, DVDs, washing machines, and cars. Are we then about to see an immense battalion of contented voters who do not bother with deep reflections on changes, particularly what must be changed and why? They will be more inclined to vote on esthetic values.

Moreover, the space for reflection on national politics is stifled, for four reasons: (1) the overwhelming popularity of the president and the approval ratings of his administration; (2) the absence of a clear alternative to the current national model; (3) the debate about the effects and features of the world crisis combined with a certain overoptimism about the current model; and (4) the enormous political conformity of the population to “that [good or bad] which is around.” Would these considerations interfere with any trend for renewal?

There are two other important factors to take into account, one structural, the other contemporary. The structural factor is the extremely limited education of the average Brazilian, particularly with regard to values

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and the exercise of citizenship. Reflections on the ethical nature of the political process are rare, except for the usual expressions of indignation. What counts, in the end, are the power of clientelism and the fulfillment of needs and expectations. The combination of low inflation and real salary gains with economic growth is therefore an extremely powerful electoral impetus.

The contemporary factor has to do with the fact that the Brazilian population gets most of its information from television, which, according to the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, presupposes an “alienated or distracted regard.” Television is an electronic magazine that has little to do with reality. Only crimes, such as the case of Isabela Nardoni, receive intense and systematic television coverage. The rest is an avalanche of entertainment and news where Baghdad, the Taliban, the Heliopolis slum, and the floods in the state of Santa Catarina and the Rocinha slum are all blended in the same enormous pot.

### **Uneducated but informed?**

Citizenship at our stage of development as a nation materializes as consumption rather than reflection or the exercise of politics. We are still very unequal in understanding and reflecting on the true meaning of citizenship: knowing the facts is not the same as forming an opinion about them. The enormous flow of information neither mobilizes nor educates citizens. To some degree, however, it does create informed people — can we then be considered a sort of uneducated but informed populace?

If structural and contemporary factors conspire in favor of continuity of Lula Era, why would Serra be leading and Rousseff be falling behind Gomes? The answer may be that Serra is an experienced politician who has run in several elections. He was twice Congressman, on one occasion securing over

340,000 votes. Later, with an equally impressive vote count, he was elected senator. Then he was named Minister of Planning, majority leader in the Senate, and Minister of Health. His performance in those positions has had numerous repercussions. Although he lost the presidency to Lula in 2002, he secured the São Paulo Mayor's Office, which he resigned to enter and win the São Paulo gubernatorial race in 2006. Serra is a successful and highly regarded politician; he is well-known and he has a considerable record of wins in past campaigns. Had he been Lula's candidate, his rating today would exceed 50%.

Against the theory that votes can be transferred by Lula's magical power, there are a few charismatic and popular political notables who have not managed to elect their heirs. One heir is Valmir Campelo, minister of the Court of Auditors, who lost the elections in Brasilia to Cristovam Buarque in 1994 even though he enjoyed the support of Governor Roriz.

Indeed, Lula himself is an example: Although he was directly involved in the campaign, in 2008 Lula did not succeed in getting Marta Suplicy elected mayor of São Paulo city — where Cesar Maia was successful in securing the election of Luiz Paulo Conde, his unknown deputy mayor.

Former mayor of São Paulo city, Paulo Maluf, made Celso Pitta his successor and Serra transferred his current mandate to Gilberto Kassab. Curiously, Aécio Neves, governor of Minas Gerais state, chose as his successor Antonio Anastásia, a bureaucrat with a technical profile, who lives in the governor's shadow. The fact is that the transfer of votes can happen, but not always.

### Who knows?


Even if we accept that Serra is well-equipped to defy the prognosis of a few and confirm the opinion of others like Montenegro, 2010

is still undefined. This is where Cleopatra's nose comes into the picture: The details will decide the battle for power in 2010.

If Lula campaigns for Rousseff, she is guaranteed a place in the run-off election. If Lula retires to campaign, we may witness a tsunami of votes for Rousseff. Voters would not be casting their votes for her as much as endorsing her political patron. How Lula will participate in the campaign, then, will be the essential detail. Also television time for the government candidate is important — as is the magnitude of the Tucano campaign.

Gomes and Silva are candidates who may run into structural difficulties: state-level campaigns, television time, and a discourse that is convincing without compromising their participation in Lula's administration. As Gomes makes his third try, his discourse has become less virulent. Even the international crisis, which has brought him into the newspapers, is waning. Gomes will be a sort of first way alternative — a “B-group government supporter.”

Silva is an even greater unknown factor; her discourse does not carry popular scope and significance. She could be considered a “D-group government candidate” especially since people who have only just gained access to the market do not have great environmental concerns.

Cleopatra's nose, which many considered to be beautiful, turned out to be unattractive, very unattractive. The 2010 campaign is still surrounded by a thick fog of mystery, so much so that today's certainties — Serra's favoritism and the power of a possible transfer of votes by Lula — are very unpredictable. Just like the many different opinions about Cleopatra's nose. 

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1 Illegal monthly payments to Congressmen to buy support for approving bills that threatened to bring down Lula government in 2005.