

More questions than usual

Riordan Roett

THIS ELECTION, UNLIKE THE two previous ones when Lula was “the man,” is far more uncertain. Polls indicate that Brazilians are just beginning to focus on the election; television time will be important but we won’t see what trends it triggers until late August-early September. Aécio Neves, the front-runner in opposition, needs to focus his campaign on the struggling economy, the rising discontent with poor public services, corruption, and—as always in democratic politics—the desire for change. The discontent over the money spent on the World Cup should play in favor of the opposition, but will that be as relevant in October as it was in July? And can Aécio sell himself with that approach?

It is also too early to see whether Lula will be a game changer. While he is tremendously popular personally, his Workers’ Party (PT) is not, and transferring support in any election is a challenge for every former president.

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Across the region democratic politics are being questioned by more and more citizens. The election will be a cliff hanger in October until we know how many first-round ballots will be nullified or turned in blank. Current candidates in Brazil and elsewhere do not seem to generate the kind of enthusiasm seen in past years, especially by Lula in 2002 and 2006. Those were the halcyon days of Brazilian political and economic life—high commodity prices, rising incomes, impressive social mobility; Brazil was a BRIC. Today the polls convey the impression that the country is stagnating. Only unemployment remains low. Do we really know what the expectations are of the tens of millions who have moved into the lower middle class? Are they content with their lives? Will they vote, or will they decide that the election is not particularly relevant to them? Will the mostly urban middle-class voters who protested in the streets last year decide to stay home? Do they see Eduardo Campos or Aécio Neves as able, and willing, to confront the tough choices the next president will need to make—with a divided Congress spread across multiple political parties? The Brazilian legislature is not

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noted for its ability to make tough decisions and follow the lead of the Planalto.

If there is a second round of voting, that would appear to be more challenging for Rousseff. The mere fact that a second round will be needed if she does not win outright in October will indicate that the opposition did indeed make inroads during the campaign. Can enough opposition votes, i.e., those for Campos, move into the Aécio column to make the difference? Or will Campos decide to sit it out and wait for 2018, when Rousseff cannot run and the impact of Lula will have had more time to dissipate?

As always, regional politics will play a decisive role. Minas Gerais will vote for Aécio; São Paulo is moving in that direction and a Paulista vice presidential candidate should help the PSDB; Rio de Janeiro and Bahia are less clear; Pernambuco will support its favorite son, Campos.

Elections obviously have consequences. The financial community is delighted that, if Neves wins it appears that Arminio Fraga will return

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in a leadership role. But will that be enough to persuade the average voter? The country has somehow survived four years with Mantega; does the average citizen understand that a new team must attempt to reestablish confidence in the new government in Brasilia—and that will require hard choices?

But the most important aspect of the 2014 election is that the results will be respected. The process itself, not necessarily the candidates, will confirm that Brazil's democratic system is alive and well. 