

Lula's Probable Victory

On October 27, 115 million Brazilian voters will decide who will govern Latin America's most populous country for the next four years. As election time neared, neighboring countries were expressing concern about the all but inevitable triumph of Luis Inácio "Lula" da Silva as president.

Some political analysts predict that a win by Lula could create a political divide in South America, between a bloc of pro-US, pro-free trade governments on the Pacific Coast and the left-leaning regimes on the Atlantic side of the continent. Lula's election, they say, could give a boost to populist left-wing candidates and other critics of US economic policies. The Spanish newspaper *El País*, for example, argues that a Lula victory would give greater impulse to "the populist wave that is sweeping across Latin America-in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay and elsewhere-in reaction to crisis and growing inequality after a decade of privatizations and economic orthodoxy."

According to Jorge Schaulsohn of Chile's *El Mercurio*, a pattern can be discerned in the radical preferences of the region's voters. "First it was Venezuela, then Argentina, and now Brazil," he writes. "Lula's triumph holds important lessons for local political groups. As long as the crisis continues, the idea of change will most likely be represented by the left, not the right wing or status quo." For some observers, Brazil is opting for an alternative path to both the neoliberal philosophy that has dominated the continent and the neopopulist or populist tendencies that have been re-emerging lately.

Colombia's *El Tiempo* newspaper views the events in Brazil as evidence of the consolidation of the country's democracy. "The best proof of this is that a lathe operator who didn't finish elementary school, who was active in the communist movement and fought underground against the military dictatorship, is today poised to assume the presidency of the largest country in the world," an editorial in the paper declares.

However, the piece goes on to mention Lula's explicit criticisms of Plan Colombia, which, the paper argues, "he considers as posing a risk of militarization and US intervention in the Amazon." In an interview with the newsmagazine *Semana*, Juan Tokatlián, director of the Political Science Department at the Universidad de San Andrés in Buenos Aires, adds that "we are going to see Brazil trying to shift from a passive and distant attitude toward Colombia in recent years to a much more active and constructive role, seeking alternatives to the rampant militarization of the conflict."

With regard to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), Lula has said that Brazil should only enter into such a pact if the US lifts all of its barriers to Brazilian products entering the American market. "Otherwise," he has been quoted as

saying, "instead of an integration project, it will be an annexation project of Latin America by the United States."

This attitude has led some observers to speculate that Lula is trying to stake out a more independent position toward the US, with revitalization of Mercosur-and its expansion to include other South American countries, such as Chile, Venezuela and Peru-a priority. In fact, this is the same strategy followed by the outgoing president of Brazil, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who declared that "for Brazil, the FTAA is an option, but Mercosur is its destiny."

In the Brazilian magazine *Primeira Leitura*, editor Andreas Adriano writes that what Lula seeks are "better negotiating conditions for pursuing a more cautious, spelled-out integration process." He adds, "Even though Lula now claims to be in the center, he is a product of the left. That ideology still implies allegiance to certain principles, such as opposing the existence of international trade blocs."

Finally, Lula's probable relations with other Latin American administrations was the subject of a recent report on CNN, in which political scientist Lourdes Sola described Brazilian diplomacy as "a very professional bureaucracy with a clear direction." She expressed doubt that the thrust of the country's diplomatic efforts would change much under a new government. "When it comes to Latin America, favorable treatment is a given," she said. "Lula has an 'ideological' sympathy toward Latin America, although I don't know if he has a good understanding of the differences between Brazil and other countries and among those other countries themselves."

Certainly, the elections in Brazil are emerging as a topic of considerable interest and importance to the rest of the region. If Lula wins, his administration could be hailed as holding out the promise of a "different path." The question is, will that path be better for Latin America?