**Lula returns?**

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Brazilian voters will have to return to the polls for a presidential runoff as none of the leading candidates managed to muster the required numbers in the first round.

On October 30, former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (commonly known as Lula) of the left-wing Workers’ Party (PT) will be face to face with incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro of the conservative Liberal Party (PL) in this intense duel for the coveted post. In a highly polarized and charged political atmosphere in Brazil, where the two finalists are presenting two blatantly divergent visions, the result will certainly test the depth and sustainability of Brazil’s democracy.

Lula garnered 48.4 per cent in the first round – just shy of the majority needed for an outright victory – while Bolsonaro finished with 43.2 per cent of votes, beating opinion polls and fanning hope among his supporters. This result fell short of expectations: all the opinion polls just before the elections were unanimously predicting a convenient victory for Lula in the first round. But this did not happen. Very strangely, from an academic perspective, because of violent and intense pre-poll campaign by Lula and Bolsonaro that even witnessed nasty allegations between the two key contenders in particular, the voter turnout was massively disappointing at 21 per cent, the lowest since 1998 – indicating a simmering dissatisfaction among the Brazilians towards the chaotic politics and withering economy.

Perhaps this low voter turnout was one of the key reasons behind Lula’s inability to secure the required 51 per cent votes to finish the game in the first round. The election result was a major shock for progressive Brazilians who had been rooting for an emphatic defeat of Bolsonaro, a former army captain who has repeatedly attacked the country’s democratic institutions and wrecked Brazil’s international reputation. Brazil is still struggling to recover from the implications of its worst-ever recession, which began in 2014. Still grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic and its fallout, for example increased poverty and an ongoing education crisis, Brazil is on the path of major economic atrophy and socio-political disruption, coupled with unprecedented escalation in violent crimes – including murders, robberies, and kidnappings.

Jair Bolsonaro, who won the 2018 presidential election campaigning as a right-wing, socially conservative nationalist, promised to inhibit crime and corruption and boost economic growth. However, his tenure has turned out to be a major disappointment. Laced with many controversial decisions, including cutting funding for federal education, relaxing gun ownership laws, and weakening LGBTQ+ and reproductive rights, Bolsonaro’s stint as an ‘outsider president’ has generated frustration among Brazilians. Being a typical populist politician, he has resorted to all sorts of controversies to expand his vote bank among the politically-not-so-much-aware segments of society. He has been criticized internationally for his mismanagement of indigenous communities and the Amazon Rainforest, as well as for his mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has resulted in more than 680,000 deaths in Brazil.

During his reelection campaign, Bolsonaro has adopted a socially conservative platform, including his opposition to abortion, transgender rights, legalized drugs, and restrictions on freedom of religion and speech. Similarly, he has also projected himself as a business-friendly politician who vehemently supports an open-market economy and the privatization of state companies. Bolsonaro has woven his campaign around the nucleus of a ‘traditional Christian family’ with a more conservative vision of women. Just like all other populist politicians, he has also built an anti-corruption narrative, while projecting himself as an outsider of the system.

Following in the footsteps of Donald Trump, Bolsonaro has been able to successfully portray himself as an ‘outsider’ to attract voters previously not involved in politics. And it was a very quick transformation. He marshalled support from all kinds of voters – liberal businessmen, the evangelical community and downtrodden lower-class workers – who felt unrepresented by existing political outfits. Bolsonaro encashed this opportunity very well, throughout his election campaign labelling Lula as “thief” and “ex-convict.”

Lula da Silva, who served two terms as president between 2003 and 2010, is undoubtedly among the most popular leaders in political history of Brazil because of his successful economic management that hatched an economic boom that catapulted tens of millions of Brazilians out of poverty. Lula was convicted of corruption in 2017 and surrendered to federal authorities in April 2018 to begin serving a 12-year prison sentence. However, in 2021, the Supreme Court annulled the conviction, allowing him to run for president again. He was later imprisoned on corruption charges as part of a sweeping national investigation, though the conviction was later annulled.

Lula’s Workers’ Party, deeply entrenched in the labour union movement, brands itself as a guardian of economic and social justice. Tackling low growth, inequality, and a worsening hunger crisis are his declared top priorities. He pledges that if he’s reelected, he will enhance direct cash transfers, strengthen social housing, and introduce a debt forgiveness program. He has also shown his eagerness to remove the cap on public spending, introduce new taxes on the wealthy, and bolster conservation efforts in the Amazon.

Foreign policy is another domain where Lula and Bolsonaro have a stark contrast in their vision. By adopting anti-globalist rhetoric and accusing international institutions of jeopardizing Brazil’s sovereignty, Bolsonaro has distanced Brazil from the UN and even threatened to withdraw from the WHO and Paris Agreement on climate. While deliberately trying to divorce former close associates, like Cuba and Venezuela, Bolsonaro has been trying to establish closer ties with like-minded leaders such as Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In contrast, Lula has been advocating Brazil to revert to its more traditional role as a supporter of regional multilateral institutions. Lula’s election will further enhance the new wave of left-wing leaders taking charge of Latin American countries – for example Chile and Colombia. It will also bolster ties between Brazil and lower-income countries in the region. Lula will certainly rejuvenate the concept of the ‘Global South’ with much closer and warmer relations with the US and EU as well as a rekindling of Brazil’s leadership role in regional affairs.

As far as the runoff election is concerned, all the opinion polls after the first round are again clearly showing Lula’s emphatic victory. Many candidates, who were competing for presidency in the first round, are now supporting Lula in the second round. Centrist Brazilian Senator Simone Tebet, who finished third in the first round and was therefore eliminated from the race, pledged that she was throwing her support behind Lula. Ciro Gomes, the fourth-placed leftist candidate, went along with the decision of his Democratic Labor Party to back Lula. Similarly, former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a respected figure in business circles, announced he too would cast his vote for Lula's "history of struggle for democracy and social inclusion" over Bolsonaro. Lula is clearly leading in this game and will eventually emerge as the winner. But things will not be easy for Lula to run the show.

Bolsonaro’s conservative party has demonstrated unexpected performance in congressional elections, gaining at least seven additional seats and earning a majority. That would certainly encourage Bolsonaristas to generate momentum and make it more difficult for Lula to implement left-wing policies. A conservative majority parliament will certainly dissuade Lula from implementing his progressive agenda.

There is every likelihood that, in case he loses the count, Bolsonaro will not accept the results calmly, a number of times having threatened to reject the polls in case of defeat. He is a populist leader with acute delusion about his popularity and eventual victory. Donald Trump is his role model and Bolsonaro has shown his inclination to resort to violence to challenge the transparency of the election process. Things are already reaching a boiling point between the two. Everyone is bracing for violent days before and after the second round – certainly not a good omen for the consolidation of democracy in Brazil. Military intervention can’t be ruled out if Bolsonaro opts for violence after his electoral defeat. In that case, there will be a big mess.

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