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Brazil

Victory for PT in municipal elections

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The red wave has been confirmed. The electoral results for the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil's municipal elections of October 30th, 2000 were favourable in the north and south of the country. The strength of the PT as a national party of opposition to president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC) surprised the right and created a new environment for the presidential elections of 2002.

Victory in six capitals, re-election in Porto Alegre and Belem, re-conquest of the mayorships of São Paulo and Goiânia, victories in two capitals in the North east, Recife and Aracaju, the latter achieved the first round. Victory in important towns like Pelotas (Rio Grande do Sul), Vitória da Conquista (Bahia), Imperatriz (Maranhão), Governador Valadares (Minas Gerais) and Criciúma (Santa Catarina). Reelection in Caxias do Sul (Rio Grande do Sul) and Santo Andre (Sao Paulo).

The PT had won 105 municipalities in 1996; in these elections it won 187, an increase of 78%. Of the 5,500 municipalities in Brazil, the PT now administers 3% of the total. However, the mayorships won represent nearly 25 million inhabitants, which means we will govern for 15% of the Brazilian population. Of the 62 biggest cities in Brazil, the PT won 27%. In 1996 it won the mayorship in only five of these cities, which means an increase of 240%. These 62 municipalities, which include the 26 Brazilian state capitals, represent approximately 40% of the Brazilian electorate. In these cities the vote for the PT went up from 3,593,540 in 1996 to 7,838,465 votes in 2000, an increase of 118%.

In these cities, the PSDB won 4,469,463 votes, the PFL 3,846,226, the PMDB 2,492,293. [1]

In terms of the number of town halls won by the PT, pride of place goes to the state of São Paulo with 38, Rio Grande do Sul with 35 and Minas Gerais with 34. In Santa Catarina the PT won in 13 towns, 5 of them significant ones in the interior, Concordia, Criciúma, Rio do Sul, Chapeco and Blumenau. In the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, where we are in the state government, the PT went from controlling one municipality to controlling 11, its biggest percentage growth. With seven municipalities won in the state of Acre, where we are also in the state government, the PT now heads 32% of the state municipalities.

The PT's electoral expansion was also expressed in towns where we did not win. We came second with a significant number of votes in Salvador (Bahia), Teresina (Piauí), Natal (Rio Grande do Norte) and Osasco (São Paulo). Despite divisions within the PT and the controversial candidature of Benedita da Silva, we missed the second round in Rio de Janeiro by only 15,000 votes.

Of the 16 towns where the PT reached the second round as biggest party, we won 13, losing only in Curitiba (Paraná), Santos (São Paulo) and Canoas (Rio Grande do Sul). With the PCdoB [2] we won Olinda (Pernambuco) and we lost Fortaleza (Ceará), nonetheless in this town we stopped the candidature of Ciro Gomes from reaching the second round. We elected the deputy mayor in Belo Horizonte in alliance with the PSB, [3] beating the PSDB in the only capital where FHC's party contested the second round. Also, with the PDT [4] we won the municipality of Niterói (Rio de Janeiro), defeating Governor Garotinho who had supported the candidature of da rede Globo against the PDT candidate.

Overall, we increased the number of PT municipal councillors in Brazil by 38%, going from around 1,800 elected in 1996 to 2,485 at these elections. The PT elected no mayor in the states of Amapá, Alagoas, Amazonas, Roraima and Espírito Santo.

Victory for PT in municipal elections

A negative aspect must also be mentioned, the defeat of the PT in 49 cities that we governed, in the main small municipalities of less than 50,000 electors. This can be explained by poor communication on the work done by these municipalities and above all by the unity of the local right against our candidates. However it amounts to a serious concern for the PT. In Rio Grande do Sul political polarisation continues, the PT gained the most votes, and won important towns like Bege, Santa Maria and Pelotas, but we lost 15 towns that we had governed.

In the state of Minas we also lost 15 towns that we controlled and party divisions surely contributed to this result, combined with zigzags in relation to the Itamar government. [5] In Rio de Janeiro the division of the party and the coming and going in the leadership of the PDT and the Garotinho government led to a crushing defeat. We lost Angra do Reis and Barra Mansa. The subordination of the PT to ill-defined or ambiguous projects probably contributed.

Rightwing analysts had said that these elections would be dominated by municipal questions, that the choice of the electors would be decided exclusively in terms of the candidate who would present the best proposals to govern the town. This simplistic analysis masked the fear of the national character of the campaign, the fear of identification of those candidates who supported the federal government with president Fernando Henrique Cardoso; the president of recession, unemployment and despair.

This type of analysis was often adopted by PT leaders who concluded precipitately that the theme of the elections would be narrowly municipal.

The immediate consequence of this type of analysis was the "forgetting" of the red flag, the PT star, an emptiness of discourse, critique and confrontation. A style of campaign which did not chime in with the PT's militant traditions, and worse, was not what the majority of the Brazilian people expected.

In reality, the PT's success stems from a number of factors. The PT's proposals represented an overall package of concrete measures which had already been successfully applied in some places. The PT presented itself as capable of governing and experimenting, which weakened the criticism of our opponents against those of our candidates who had never led a municipality.

The question of ethics and corruption was another basic factor. Among the qualities of the future mayor, being honest was a basic demand. The fact that corruption means fewer resources for social investment was understood by the people to an unexpected extent. The numerous scandals involving mayors and municipal councillors, with a special mention for the Pitta administration in São Paulo, have given a national dimension to this type of problem.

To these factors, outside more or less favourable local conjunctures, was added a subjective element of revolt against the federal government and it is this element which can explain the PT victory. Without that, it would be impossible to understand the national result, except to analyse case-by-case, town-by-town, at the local level, which would be an error.

The PT's was a national victory. The vote for the PT was a vote for its ability to govern, for honesty, but also a vote for the opposition, a conscious vote for change. As a general rule where the PT ran enthusiastically, proud of its red flags and its star, it won. Where it camouflaged itself, or adopted a more lukewarm discourse, it lost.

One can say that the PT victory was the fruit of the competence and the opposition built by the PT over the last few years. There was need for a radical change, and it was the PT, which symbolised this desire for the majority of the population. Generally speaking, where we won, it was in alliance with the parties of the left.

Victory for PT in municipal elections

Those municipal PT leaderships who insisted on making alliances subordinated to the PSDB and PMDB (with the PT as adjunct, and in many cases not in electable positions), did not register impressive results. At Governador Valadares (Minas Gerais), with the support of the state leadership, an alliance with the PFL was proposed and it was argued that without this alliance the PT would lose. The National Executive Commission vetoed this alliance, the PT ran its own list and won. Unhappily in some places alliances of this type were set up without the PT nationally being informed.

The PT faces a big task, that of organising a social and political bloc capable of winning the next presidential elections. A national victory demands advance preparation, defined objectives, a programme of government and a political leadership with the will to win.

Against those who pursue the recipes of the IMF, the WTO and World Bank, the democratic and popular opposition of those who believe another world is possible. The social and political strength that we organise consists principally in the struggles and mobilisations of our people. However, it can only constitute itself as a hegemonic force through political confrontation and for this confrontation the PT is the principal and most valuable instrument.

During the municipal elections the abuse of economic power, the use of public goods for individual profit, the monopoly of means of communication and the manipulation of polls created an atmosphere of debate which was very unfavourable to the PT and the other parties of the democratic and popular camp. To complete this imperfect tableau of democracy, there was also the presence of innumerable parties which were the expression of no political platform other than minuscule private interests.

It is an urgent task for the PT and allied parties to begin a national debate with legislative initiatives for a political reform which put an end to re-election, create public financing of campaigns, and institute party fidelity. It is necessary also to control the unscrupulous use of opinion polls and means of communication. However, these measures to improve the electoral process are insufficient for the enormous task of helping to consolidate a democratic consciousness in the huge social sectors the PT claims to represent. It can only be done through the active political participation of millions to conquer citizenship and break the chains of exclusion and poverty which link them to the perverse systems of domination. Through the municipal institutions the PT has stimulated popular participation. The participatory budget and other initiatives are schools of political consciousness raising and the affirmation of democracy.

[1] The PSDB (Party of Brazilian Social Democracy), social-liberal in origin, is the party of the current president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (known as "FHC"). The PFL (Party of the Liberal Front), which originated from the old party of military dictatorship, is the principal support of FHC besides the PSDB. The PMDB (Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement) has its origins in the legal opposition during the military dictatorship. It supports FHC and is part of his government.

[2] PC do B (Communist Party of Brazil), ex-Maoist, ex-pro Albanian, is slowly questioning its attachment to Stalinism. It supported the candidature of "Lula" at the presidential elections of 1989, 1994 and 1998.

[3] PSB (Brazilian Socialist Party), a small party with a left social-democratic profile. It supported the candidature of "Lula" at the presidential elections of 1989, 1994 and 1998.

[4] PDT (Democratic Labour Party), a populist centre left party led by Leonel Brizola, affiliated to the Socialist International.

[5] Itamar Franco, vice-president elected with Fernando Collor de Mello in 1990, then interim president (1992-1995) after the fall of his mentor. Elected governor of the state of Minas Gerais in 1998.