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Brazil

Rio Spring - Left fights local elections in next Olympic capital

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On 7 October Brazilians vote in local, municipal elections that will be an important barometer of the political balance in the country. In spite of the popularity of President Dilma Rousseff, her governing Workers Party (PT) is not set to do well. Mostly it is expected to lose ground to other parties of the centre and right, several of which take part in the governing coalition alongside the PT. But the main party of the left that opposes the Brazilian government's social liberal policies, the PSOL (Party of Socialism and Liberty), could see a notable improvement in its position, especially in a few important cities.

The PSOL was formed mainly by former members of the PT who left or were expelled after the election of Lula as president ten years ago. In spite of many difficulties, internal and external, it has survived as the only serious attempt to build a broad party of the Brazilian left. In Belem, in the north, it has a strong chance of winning the city hall; its candidate, Edmilson Rodrigues (a member of the APS – Socialist Popular Action – current in the PSOL), was Mayor of Belem for the PT in the 1990s and put into practice one of the more radical versions of participatory democracy. In Fortaleza, Renato Roseno (of the Enlace, Fourth International current) has been bordering on 10% in the polls, while after two terms of an originally very left-wing mayor, Luisianne Lins, the PT has lost much credibility and is trailing badly in the polls.

One of the most spectacular advances of the PSOL comes in Rio de Janeiro, where the well-known human rights campaigner and current state deputy, Marcelo Freixo, is running second to the incumbent mayor, Eduardo Paes (who received the Olympic baton from London mayor Boris Johnson in July), representing a coalition of almost all the main capitalist parties, with the backing of FIFA and the IOC to boot.

IVP spoke to two of the PSOL's candidates for local city councillor, one in the city of Rio de Janeiro itself, the other in Niteroi, the city across the bay from Rio.

Renato Silva, known as "Cinco", a sociologist, is active in Rio's popular committee on the Olympics and in the campaign for the legalization of cannabis. Henrique Vieira is a protestant theologian and teacher of sociology in Niteroi, and active in human rights campaigns. Both are members of Enlace and the Fourth International.

IVP: You went into this campaign for the municipal elections just weeks after the UN's Rio+20 Sustainable Development Summit and the People's counter-summit. What is your balance of that experience, and in particular how has it affected the social movement and the left in Rio?

Henrique In our opinion Rio+20 produced totally inadequate results. The framework of the summit did not address the structural changes needed in the economy, in the logic of extraction, production and distribution of resources at a global level. The political make-up of Rio+20, its ideological and programmatic premises, meant it came up with a very timid proposal for a green economy, that is completely incapable of changing the productivist logic of capitalism, which in our view is the main cause of the destruction of nature and the inappropriate and irrational expropriation of natural resources.

IVP What about the People's Summit? What impact did that have?

Henrique The People's Summit managed to bring together a variety of social movements and fronts of struggle, mainly from Latin America, and I think that in this sense its achievement was very important. It ended with a public

meeting that was historic for Rio de Janeiro, with I think more than 60 thousand people. So that was an important development, as an exchange and synthesis between very diverse experiences and struggles, and as a way of denouncing this 'green economy' that does not represent a real solution for the planet's environmental problems. The People's Summit really advanced this debate and gained an important space in the media, managing to dispute public opinion and show there is an alternative, coming from different directions, and that includes ourselves arguing for ecosocialism as a much better option for civilization..

Renato I think the balance sheet of the People's Summit is very positive, mainly because this summit had an anti-capitalist character. Even though it was very plural and diverse, I think the anti-capitalist idea was very clear, including in the documents. That was very positive. It meant rejecting the logic of the green economy and the notion that capitalism is capable of solving the problems of humanity and establishing a good relationship with the environment.

IVP Let's move on to the local, or municipal, elections themselves. These are happening in a context where president Dilma Rousseff of the PT (Workers' Party) is riding high in the opinion polls, even though there's been a sharp slow-down in Brazil's economic growth. What do you think is the significance of these local elections in the national context?

Renato It's really a difficult situation for the left in Brazil, because ever since the capitulation of the PT, there has been a vacuum in terms of the organisation of the left. And even though many of us have been trying to fill that space, the retreats of the last decade, with the capitulation of most of the social movements linked to the PT, leave us in quite a fragile situation. But now in Rio de Janeiro especially, with the PSOL's candidate for mayor, Marcelo Freixo [1], the situation is a bit different.

Because of the PT's policy of alliances, for the first time since the end of the military dictatorship, various left parties, or supposedly left parties, have no candidate of their own. Their coalition's candidate for mayor, Eduardo Paes, is from the PMDB (the biggest centre-right party and part of the PT's governing coalition). So the PT has no candidate of its own, the PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil, a former maoist now very moderate left and an ally of the PT in government) has no candidate of its own, nor does the PDT (coming from the old populist tradition) or the PSB (moderate socialist party). This opens a very interesting space for us to dispute in the municipality of Rio.

I know that in Fortaleza the PSOL's situation is also quite positive, where Renato Roseno as candidate for mayor has about 10% in the polls, and especially in Belem where Edmilson Rodrigues is in first place ahead of the first round. The situations in Belem and Fortaleza have their specificities, but certainly here in Rio the PT's policy has opened a space for us.

IVP And in Niteroi, Henrique, is the situation similar?

Henrique Yes, I agree with Renato's analysis at the national level, of how the PT has co-opted the leaders of the main social movements. Nonetheless, we have managed some advances. In Niteroi we have a situation that for me is historic. Because for almost two decades the former populist party, the PDT, has been the dominant force in the city's politics, applying a clearly neo-liberal logic in local government. But now that dominance is in crisis, with a local government that has an 80% rejection rate in public opinion polls. At the same time, throughout this period, we have been building up our strength, alongside the social movements in the main struggles facing the city.

So in these elections there is a split between these groups who traditionally dominate the city, the PDT, the PT and the PSD (new name for a party of the traditional right), who are standing on separate tickets, even though they represent the same political project that led the city to this crisis and this widespread feeling of discontent. This

situation means that the PSOL has been very well received in the streets, because it's managed to build up an image of being really an alternative to the existing local government. Of course we suffer from a blockade by economic power and media power. We have very little time on TV. The economic interests that clearly exploit the city have a lot of power and the city hall has many means of co-option at its disposal. So this is not an easy election. But the crisis that has emerged has combined with our ability to gain in strength through the different struggles in the city, for example against the privatization of the Antonio Pedro Hospital, against the increase in fares on the boats that cross the bay to Rio de Janeiro – that was really out of order and we took part in the struggle against it that had a big impact in Niteroi.

The consequence is that this election, though difficult, presents the best opportunity we have had for 20 years, to keep growing, to open up a broad debate around our alternative vision for the city, and to win some modest electoral successes that will be an important learning exercise and give more power and a stronger voice to popular struggles.

IVP Going back to those mega-events, the 2014 World Cup, the 2016 Olympics and various others that are coming to Rio in the next few years, you are very active on these questions, Renato. How far do these shape the context for these local elections, in terms of a struggle between different visions for the future of the city?

RenatoLook, the World Cup, and especially the Olympics, in Rio de Janeiro, have a big impact. Because there is a whole range of public investments that are being brought together in a particular project for the city. This is a project that dates back to 1902, a project of the ruling class of Rio de Janeiro, to create a city of "apartheid". A city where the south, and the barrios of Tijuca and Barra da Tijuca would be places for the rich and the middle class, and the north and west for the poor and for industry. That project was never realized 100% in the twentieth century, because of several contradictions within the bourgeoisie. For example, they wanted to pay miserable wages, to domestic workers and others, which ended up generating the favelas right in the middle of the southern districts.

The current proposal takes up that old project again in a dramatic and brutal way, to a degree that has not been seen in a long time, perhaps since the time of the military dictatorship of the 60s and 70s, or since even earlier. Now we see the mayor, the state government and the federal government, all working to expand that "sociological south", the territory of the rich and middle class, on four fronts.

One front is the "Porto Maravilha" project, a revitalization of the waterfront area in down-town Rio. Another is the project of the UPPs (Police Pacification Units, which are supposedly a proposal to displace the narco gangs that control most of the favelas, not through direct military confrontation, but through a permanent presence of "community" police), which in fact are much more an urban development plan, for expropriating desirable real estate, than they are a project for public security. Because the UPPs are concentrated in those favelas located next to the rich or middle class neighbourhoods. They create the conditions for the market itself to evict in a "non-violent" way whole communities, because they cannot afford to pay the increased cost of living in these slums, with higher rents and property prices, and rising prices all round. At the same time, in the rest of the city and especially in the most violent favelas, the policy remains one of violent confrontations with drug gangs.

A third front, which has to do directly with the Olympics, is the coastal area beyond Barra de Tijuca. This area is now becoming much more accessible with the construction of the Transoeste tram system, which connects the Olympic area in Barra de Tijuca to the west of Rio. This means a wild, uncontrolled advance of land and property speculation in an area that was dedicated to agriculture and other small-scale activities.

The fourth front is where they will actually build the Olympic village, on the border between Jacarépagua and Barra de Tijuca, which is an area with many favelas and traditional communities, such as communities of African descent, like Quilombolas (originally communities of runaway slaves), who are now being evicted to make way for the Olympic

facilities and access roads.

IVP How far do these mega-events and the evictions connected with them have an impact on the electoral situation in Niteroi, Henrique?

Henrique They have an impact here too, because Niteroi follows the same logic as Rio de Janeiro city, and also suffers indirectly the impact of these mega-events. Recent data shows Niteroi is the most unequal city in Brazil. There is a well-established elite, while 20% of the population are living in extreme poverty. This inequality, combined with the deterioration of public services, the big investments in real estate and hotels, this whole vision of a city designed to attract capital investment and to open new areas of business, has increased the widespread sense of insecurity in the city. And it is true that the rates of certain types of crime, such as robbery, have shown an increase. The official answer is the criminalization of poverty, with an increase in the number of police in certain sectors of the city, with the purpose of stemming this alleged increase in crime and giving a sensation, an artificial one of course, of greater security.

So, as a result of the increasing inequality, Niteroi has a logic of control over the city's spaces, especially those where the poor live, those who cannot find a place in a city that is increasingly elitist, increasingly expensive, a city where public services are increasingly segmented. Because this is the logic of the current mayor: since the city has this image of being middle class, they want to segment everything that is public, split it up according to sectors, rather than make it universal and improve it as a right. And to do that, the answer for them is basically to increase the number of police. A few months ago there was a public hearing at the Faculty of Law at the Federal Fluminense University, which is here in Niteroi, dealing with precisely this issue: public security in Niteroi. And there you could see that for some people this question boils down to, "we want more cops in Niteroi". And it was up to us to make the counter argument, to dispute that view, arguing that public security is not about police numbers, but is the extension of rights. So this debate is out there, and a figure like Marcelo Freixo, with his record and profile as a fighter for human rights, has a real impact in the city of Niteroi. So in this election campaign we are denouncing that logic that thinks of public security as control, as repression, and we insist that security comes through ensuring rights and citizenship for everyone, through defending and improving everything that is public. So on a smaller scale, Niteroi reproduces the same tensions that exist in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

IVP So apart from that issue, what are the main issues in your respective campaigns?

Henrique Well I am a theologian and a teacher here in Niteroi, and in a sense, both of these are aspects of my campaign. The main strength of our campaign is its collective nature, which is a principle for us. My candidacy itself is the result of a collective experience. We created a group here in Niteroi called Collective Construction, which brings together young people, mostly students, and it was from this group, discussing the problems of the city, that we began the campaign, with people inside and outside the PSOL. This is the strength of our campaign, its collective nature and the presence of these young people, from the local universities and high schools, who are beginning to rediscover their collective potential and their ability to change the direction of society.

Another front is the theological one, opposing what we call here in Brazil the "Theology of Prosperity", which is the domination of the gospel by capital, which makes individualism sacred. So I am part, in the theological area, of a whole movement that seeks to recover all the social and political character of the gospel, as a tool to denounce all forms of exploitation and violence. So within the world of Protestantism, we have built a whole movement that says 'No' to the individualization and privatization of the Christian faith, and that recuperates both its eternal and its historical sense of having an impact in society.

And of course, the issue of human rights is also very much present in our campaign, both because of my own activism in this area, and because of the historical situation we live in, with this criminalization of poverty, and the

logic of systemic genocide of the poor. So the issue of revitalizing the struggle for human rights with a class perspective is also an important part of our campaign. And that combines, as I said, with the collective development of the campaign, with the strength of youth participation, and that perspective within theology that recovers the historicity of Christianity as an expression of liberation, always of course respecting and in dialogue with all other religious expressions.

IVP Talking of the criminalization of poverty, how far has it been possible to bring into your campaigns the communities that are most affected by the evictions and law and order policies?

HenriqueIn Niteroi this is complicated because in these communities the city hall and the mayor's office have always managed to install mechanisms of control and of so-called partnership, through various institutions and associations, which has made it difficult for us to develop a deeper political presence. However, as I mentioned before, now there is this crisis and chaos within the local government. And in 2010, there was the tragedy of the rains and mudslides here, when more than 170 people died here in Niteroi. This, in a situation where 99% of poor communities live in a situation of risk, with the threat of landslides, etc., because of the total lack of an adequate housing policy. This situation really broke the hegemony of the mayor and city hall in those communities. For example, we helped to build the Committee in Solidarity with the Struggle of the Victims, allowing us much more contact, dialogue, and shared experience, with us learning from them and helping to build a common experience with those communities. So now we have won much greater acceptance among them, because there is a widespread sense of discontent with the current city government.

IVP

What about the central themes of your campaign in Rio, Renato?

RenatoOur campaign has two main axes. One is the city, the other is freedom. In the first, we're pushing that debate and struggle against the impact of these mega-events, and against the idea of the city as a commodity. That's an idea which has been central to Rio's city planners since 1992. So we denounce their attempt to use these mega-events to implement a model of the city in favour of capital. Because these mega-events really are the ultimate expression of this logic of the city as commodity, where the role of the mayor is to create the best possible business opportunities for capital. Against that idea, we advance the idea of the city as a right, where the role of the city hall would be to guarantee the rights of the population.

On the second axis, that of freedom, one of the most creative and original aspects of our campaign has been to develop a municipal policy on drugs. I have been a prominent activist for many years in a campaign for drug legalization, for legalizing marijuana. So now we had to think how to develop that struggle in the field of municipal government. What we did was open up a discussion with health workers, with social workers in the municipality, together with our own experience, and we came to the following formulation. First, we must condemn the city's current perverse policy on the question of drugs. The city hall does not currently fulfil its basic duty to guarantee basic mental health care for those who are dependent on drug use. Worse still, since July last year, the mayor declared, through the municipal department of social welfare, the mandatory detention of drug dependent adolescents. We must denounce this policy not only because it goes against everything most progressive in the treatment of this issue but because of the arbitrary, brutal and ineffective way it is being applied – this is almost pure fascism. In fact we say this just another of the policies intended to cleanse the streets of Rio de Janeiro ahead of the 2016 Olympics and the 2014 World Cup.

But apart from denouncing it, we have formulated an alternative proposal. This alternative includes a policy to reduce drug use, municipal information campaigns to explain to users the risks and strategies to reduce those risks. We also advocate the installation of a network of health posts in the streets to serve users, teenagers and adults too, as an alternative to treatment through internment, along with an expansion of public mental health care.

IVP

What are you realistic possibilities in these municipal elections?

RenatoWith Marcelo Freixo's candidacy for Mayor of Rio de Janeiro, we see that this is a very difficult fight. The current mayor, Eduardo Paes, has the largest coalition of forces I have seen in my life for re-election, and also has the open support of the state government of Rio de Janeiro, the Brazilian Federal Government, and the international sporting bodies like FIFA and the IOC. The Brazilian electoral system also means that access to time on TV is very unequal. For each minute that Marcelo gets, Eduardo Paes has about 14 or more. Despite all that, Marcelo is in second place, ahead of all the other traditional parties. [2] His campaign is really enthusing many sectors of society, especially the youth, in a way we haven't seen for a long time. I think it will be very difficult to reach the second round, but we are in that battle, and certainly these elections will leave us much stronger politically, with much more support built up. Marcelo is really representing the opposition to neo-liberalism, the opposition to the hegemonic politics in our city, and he is the only one who can do this. And that could lead to a growth in the size of our group in the city assembly. In the last election we elected one councillor, and then we won another who came to the PSOL from another party. Now we have the possibility of electing three councillors, which would give us a total of four. It's hard to know for now but we have some optimism about my own chances. The last time I failed to win by a small margin, and our campaign has grown significantly in recent years, together with the social movements, and with my own profile in the media as one of the promoters of the "March for Marijuana" (for legalization), where I was imprisoned twice.

IVP

And in Niteroi?

HenriqueIn Niteroi we have good prospects. Our candidate for mayor, Flávio Serafini (a member of Enlace in the PSOL) isn't a well-known figure in the city, but he has a very different profile from the other candidates, because the others all have professional political careers, they are all part of that same dominant logic in the city. Flávio has nothing to do with that machine, he is a candidate who comes out of student activism, as a teacher, in human rights campaigns, and as an adviser to Marcelo Freixo as state deputy for the PSOL and to the PSOL federal deputy, Chico Alencar. He was also one of the protagonists of that movement of solidarity with the victims of the landslides in Niteroi. So he really represents all that collective alternative. That is why, right at the beginning of the campaign, when his name had only just been put forward, he was already at 4% in the polls. We know that polls are unreliable, but that was surprising for someone relatively unknown. But the fact is that in the streets we are finding people are very receptive to this alternative that Flávio and the PSOL represent. So it's certainly a difficult election, to get to the second round would be very difficult, but there is a lot of enthusiasm, Flávio is becoming increasingly popular, we are having an impact on the political debate in the city and our campaign is growing. Obviously that also has an impact on our campaign for councillors, and that has also grown a lot in these last few months, specially among the youth. And that's also because our campaign "looks" different, we are making a big effort to put the "enchantment" back into politics. For example there is a square in the city that we "occupy" every fortnight with cultural activities, rounds of poetry, and so on. It really is another way of thinking about the city and about how to do politics, and I think this creativity, as with Renato's campaign in Rio, means these are campaigns that are really "different".

So we are growing and we believe we have the possibility of increasing our PSOL group of councillors to three. We have two in Niteroi now and there's a real chance I could get elected to make it three.

[1] Marcelo Freixo is a Member of the Rio de Janeiro State Assembly for the PSOL and now candidate for Mayor. He has a long history in defence of human rights. As President of the Assembly's Human Rights Commission, he led a high-profile Inquiry into the "Militias", which are paramilitary groups made up mainly of retired and serving policemen.

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[2] Three weeks before the municipal elections on 7 October 2012, Marcelo Freixo had climbed from 13% to 18% in the one of the main opinion polls, Datafolha, behind Eduardo Paes who had 54%.