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Wednesday August 18th 2010

 
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## Brazil's presidential campaign

### Reflected glory

#### Lula's lady is on course to inherit his presidency

Aug 12th 2010 | SÃO PAULO

ON PAPER, José Serra of the Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB), Brazil's biggest opposition party, should be able to win the presidential election due on October 3rd without breaking a sweat. He has held many big political jobs in a long and successful career, including congressman, senator, minister of planning and then health, and mayor and then governor of São Paulo, Brazil's biggest city and most powerful state. He is up against a political neophyte: an adviser and bureaucrat who was almost unknown just a couple of years ago, and who has never before fought, let alone won, an election.

Instead Mr Serra is struggling to stay in the race. Polls put him five to ten points behind Dilma Rousseff, the candidate of the governing Workers' Party (PT). The problem is not presentation, though Mr Serra looks dull except when he smiles, when he looks alarming. Ms Rousseff is hardly charismatic, and has a weakness for offering half-hour answers to one-line questions.

Mr Serra's problem is that Ms Rousseff is the anointed successor of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the current president. Four-fifths of Brazilians approve of Lula, and nearly half say that in the presidential election they would vote either for him (if the constitution did not bar him from a third consecutive term) or his candidate. Since selecting his successor Lula has praised her to the skies (she is "like Nelson Mandela") and criss-crossed the country with her in tow. Now most Brazilians know who Lula's candidate is—and increasingly, they intend to vote for her.

On August 5th, the day of the first televised debate between candidates, one polling firm put Ms Rousseff on 41.6%, a ten-point lead over Mr Serra. Marina Silva of the Green Party came a distant third, on 9%. Exclude invalid responses, and Ms Rousseff would be close to winning an outright majority, avoiding a run-off. This poll may be an outlier, but others give her a growing lead (see chart).

Ms Rousseff looked nervous in the debate, and struggled to keep her answers snappy. Mr Serra was somewhat better. But since the debate was scheduled at the same time as an important football match, hardly anyone watched.

More worryingly for Mr Serra, the debate foreshadowed the difficulties he will face for the rest of the campaign. Probably rightly, Mr Serra has decided that attacking a president as popular as Lula would not win him many votes. He disagrees with Ms Rousseff on some things, such as foreign policy and the role of the state in the economy. But he agrees on others. He has felt obliged to promise to continue some of Lula's programmes, such as Bolsa Família, a grant to poor families. Meanwhile, with the economy growing strongly, Brazilians are enjoying life: "feel-good factor" has entered the Portuguese language.

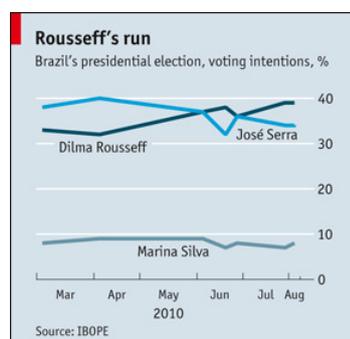
But steady as she goes sells better for incumbents than challengers. Mr Serra's slogan, "Brazil can do more," exemplifies the difficulty. He is struggling to capitalise on his own record. He is best known for his role in Fernando Henrique Cardoso's governments of 1995-2002, which, despite some solid achievements, are recalled by Brazilians without fondness.

"For Dilma it is simple: to persuade people that she represents Lula," says Rubens Figueiredo, a political consultant in São Paulo. "But Serra has to remind people that Lula is not the candidate—and somehow do it without opposing, or preferably without even mentioning, Lula."

Ms Rousseff's lead is not yet unassailable. If Mr Serra can deny her outright victory, he might have a chance in a run-off. And in Brazil there is always the possibility of a scandal or blunder.

But there are still a few more votes for Ms Rousseff to squeeze out of being Lula's woman. Some 8% still tell pollsters they want to vote for the president's candidate, but do not mention her by name.

She will soon have more opportunity to reinforce that link. From August 17th Brazilian


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television and radio stations must start running free political advertising, with more time going to candidates whose alliances command more seats in Congress. This means that Ms Rousseff will get more than ten minutes, three times a week; Mr Serra must manage with just over seven minutes. That advantage could end up being the decisive one.

The Americas

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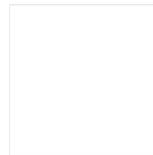
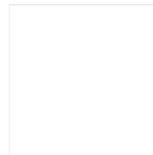
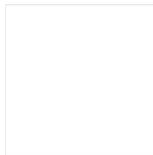
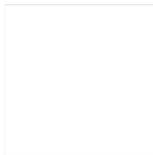
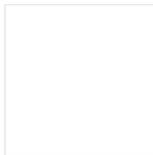
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