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Brazil

Marina Silva's Rise Is a Result of the Left's Failures, Not Success

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV476 - September 2014 -

Publication date: Friday 26 September 2014

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A fortnight out from Brazil's October 5 national elections, the big news has been the significant surge in support for Marina Silva, a former Workers' Party (PT) government minister and environmental activist, with some polls predicting she could end up winning the presidential race.

Incumbent president and PT candidate Dilma Rousseff maintains a narrow lead over Marina, but the elections will almost certainly go to a second round run-off on October 26.

If this occurs, current indications are that Marina has a chance of winning, a remarkable feat given that a little over a month ago she was not even a presidential candidate.

Her candidature only came about as a result of the August 13 death of PSB presidential candidate Eduardo Campos. Having previously taken up the vice-presidential spot as part of a deal between the PSB and her own unregistered party, Sustainability Network, Marina was promoted to the top spot.

Since then the PSB's fortunes in the polls have soared: while Campos had been polling around 10%, this figure more than doubled as soon as Marina took over. Recent polls give Marina between 30-35%, meaning that the PSB has pushed aside the main right-wing opposition party, the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), and currently sits in second place.

Marina's politics

Marina is no newcomer to Brazilian politics. Her background is as a long-time environmental activist who fought side by side with the legendary Chico Mendes, who was assassinated for his campaigning work in defense of the Amazon forest.

Many looked favorably upon her appointment as environment minister in the first-ever PT government, headed by Luiz Ignacio Lula de Silva. By 2008, however, with the PT government mired in corruption scandals, she resigned from her post.

Among the reasons she cited for her resignation were the government's prioritization of development over the environment, and internal resistance to her stance on issues such as biofuels, hydroelectric dams and genetically modified foods.

In 2010, she stood as a Green Party presidential candidate, and polled an impressive 19.4%. She later went on to set up Sustainability Network, arguing that the formation was neither left nor right. Instead, its focus was on creating a “new” kind of politics in which people and the environment, not parties, mattered most.

Given all this, it is unsurprising that environmentalists [\[1\]](#) and progressives disillusioned with the “developmentalist”

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policies of left-leaning South American governments have pointed to Marina as a potential "leading force for sustainable economic development, and alternatives to extractivism, throughout the region" [2]

The reality is however, that Marina's election would most likely lead to a conservative, not conservationist, shift in Brazilian politics.

Moreover, her rise can in many ways be attributed to the failures, not successes, of Brazil's lefts, starting with the "anti-extractivist" left.

Much has been made of Marina's environmental credentials and anti-development talk. However, when it comes to concrete policies and programs, Marina offers little in terms of a progressive alternative to the PT.

The problem is that much of the "anti-extractivist" left, lacking any clear strategic project and blinded by its hostility to what it calls the "developmentalist" left, has uncritically pinned its hopes on Silva.

Many have already noted the similarities between Marina and the right-wing PSDB when it comes to economic policies. Underpinning this is their shared opposition to state intervention (or as Marina calls it "developmentalism") and belief in the virtues of the market.

In these elections, both parties are advocating greater independence for the central bank, increased labor casualization, measures to improve corporate profitability, cutting down the size of the state-banking sector, slashing state bureaucracy "red-tape", and improving trade relations with the United States.

Then there are the backflips that Marina, a conservative evangelical, has done in terms of social policy, such as dropping support for gay marriage and abortion rights from her program.

Perhaps less attention has been paid to the shifts in Marina's environmental policies.

The last few weeks have seen Marina backtrack on previous anti-petroleum statements [3], saying that any government she leads would continue to see Brazil's massive deep-sea, pre-salt oil exploitation project as a priority.

Similar, Marina stated she was no longer opposed to GMOs [4]. She has also campaigned strongly in favor of Brazil producing biofuels, something ecological movements have denounced not only for its negative environmental impacts but for the fact its re-directs food product away from people and towards cars.

And while Marina held up a number of licenses for hydroelectric dams when she was minister, she now considers them to be a vital source of energy.

In the end, it is hard to find any issue on which the "anti-extractivist" Marina can be said to be to the left of the PT, even regarding environmental concerns.

Marina's support

However, Marina's rise can also be attributed to the failure of Brazil's other lefts – the pro-PT and anti-PT left -

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because, independently of Marina's policies, much of her support is coming from sectors that neither identify as right-wing nor pertain to traditional conservative sectors.

Most of the country's trade unions and social movements remain wedded to one extent or another to the PT. This is also true for large sections of the country's poor, who have benefited the most from the PT's social welfare programs.

At the same time, Marina has evidently been able to woo sections of the traditional middle class who have historically opposed the PT and see in Marina a viable alternative. Many of those who continue to support the PSDB will undoubtedly come behind Marina in the second round if it means defeating Dilma.

However, polls indicate that an important part of Marina's support is coming from the 45 million people that comprise the 16 to 33 year old category, many of whom are highly educated (at least in comparison to their previous generation), but find themselves with precarious jobs and living conditions. They make up a third of the electorate, have had little experience with trade unions or politics, and a majority of them believe the country would be better off without political parties [5].

Fed up with politics-as-usual, this grouping was unlikely to be inspired by traditional politicians such as PSDB candidate Aécio Neves, Campos or even Dilma, as the PT increasingly is seen as part of the system.

On the other hand, Marina's outsider status and "new politics" discourse, despite running on the PSB ticket and forming regional alliance with other traditional parties, has converted her into a viable alternative for many of these youth.

Polling that correlates political identification with voting intentions show that if Marina was to win the second round, she would do so not only with the support of right-wing identifying voters but also a majority of center and center-left voters, who together represent 48% of the electorate [6].

On the other hand Dilma would only maintain a (large) advantage among left-identifying voters.

Ruy Braga argues that it is fair to assume a large cross over between youth and center and center-left identifying voters [7]. In the context of the established two-party system, he argues that at least part of Marina's support base should be seen as "an electoral manifestation of a progressive desire for change."

This also seems to be the case if we consider the fact that these elections follow on from the massive mobilizations that shook Brazil in the middle of 2013.

Sparked by opposition to proposed fare hikes, these protests quickly mushroomed and began raising a mixed bag of issues such as expansion of public services, anti-corruption, opposition to police repression and support for greater judicial independence.

Two key sectors within these millions-strong mobilizations were this new youthful "precariat", and sectors of the traditional middle class who saw these protests as a way to undermine the PT government.

While it is fair to point out the somewhat dubious motivations of a section of these protests, it is just as true that many of the demands were driven by real shortcomings in the PT government.

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Ironically, while the PT argued that its weaknesses were the results of limitations imposed by the existing balance of forces, much of the PT left saw the protests as a threat, rather than as an opportunity to push for greater change.

Meanwhile, the anti-PT left continues to be viewed by many as dogmatic, irrelevant or little different to the PT itself.

The inability of both these lefts to harness these mobilizations towards progressive goals is a big factor in explaining Marina's rise.

None of this is to say that a Marina victory would represent a positive step forward for Brazil, much less South America, given Marina's negative comments about Venezuela and other radical governments in the region.

There should be little doubt that a Marina government will be to the right of any potential Dilma government.

Nevertheless, the demands and desires of those that may end up voting for Marina are legitimate, and the left would do well to think about how they could win over this natural ally to supporting a genuine proposal for change.

16 September 2014

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[1] <http://accionreaccion.com/?p=300>

[2] <http://nacla.org/blog/2014/9/4/elec...>

[3] <http://www.brasil247.com/%202srui>

[4] <http://www.valor.com.br/eleicoes201...>

[5] <http://www.istoe.com.br/reportagens...>

[6] <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/...>

[7] <http://www.correiciudadania.com.br/...>