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Popularity, political change, economic and social development agenda and potential for South American integration: Four key points to consider in the Brazilian elections

*Brazilians will go to the polls next Sunday. By touching upon popularity, political change, socioeconomic development and South American integration, **Francisco Panizza** shows that, regardless of the outcome of the election, it signals some positive changes but also some problems that are still very much part of the Brazilian political system.*

The idea that politics is purely about rational debate is a misconception of current liberal understandings. All over the world, politics is as much about reason as it is about emotions, identity and identification. In the case of Brazil, there is a widely recognised stereotype of its people being warm, expressive and passionate. In the recent history of the country, this was very much captured by former president Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva, who had a strong hold amongst the Brazilian population.

While the fact that there are two women running for president in Brazil is commendable in political terms, it is also true that these two candidates are being portrayed under 'emotional' lenses. President Rousseff is seen as a much-restrained person –after all, as stereotypes suggest, she comes from the Brazilian South. She has a number of positive personal and political qualities, but while personally popular, having an easy emotional rapport with the people is not one of her strengths. Marina Silva, in contrast, has captured this emotional side and direct connection with the common people that Lula was so good at. If we add this to the tragic and unexpected death of Eduardo Campos, then we have a coherent explanation for why emotions are playing such an important role in this campaign.



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Connection with the people and popularity are not, however, the main traits that differentiate the two leading candidates. At the moment, for political analysts, there is a great question mark about the future of Brazilian politics. The second great difference between president Rousseff and Marian Silva is the potential for change. A pending problem in Brazil is the way politics are executed. After twelve years of government by the PT, the Brazilian political system has changed very little and, while there is internal recognition of the social progress that the country has made along these years, there is

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also deep dissatisfaction amongst sections of the electorate. The biggest failure of the PT was that they created expectations of a new way of doing politics, and there has been little evidence that they fulfilled these expectations along these years.

And herein lies the difference in terms of potential for political change: Marina Silva is a political figure who holds a biography and personality that embodies hopes for a new politics for important sections of the electorate. She represents a host of social movements, new identities and a new agenda in Brazilian politics, mainly associated to the environmental question but, more broadly, to the aspirations of many citizens in Brazil for a new kind of politics being implemented in their country.

The two female candidates also share two challenges, which are related to the refocusing of Brazil's leading role in South America and the world, and to unifying the economic and social development agendas. Regarding the former issue, the PT government, particularly during Lula's government, prioritised a South American UNASUR and MERCOSUR agendas. At the same time, a strong programme was put forward to strengthen economic and political links with Africa, and other countries of the Global South. Lula became a leader in promoting Brazil and its new agenda. President Rousseff, in turn, has kept a lower profile internationally and, while there has been no explicit change in policies, these became more focused on the BRICS countries, with relatively little progress in terms of the South American region. Perhaps more importantly, many think that if Brazil seeks a more substantial leadership in the region, it would need to allocate the necessary resources to promote its leadership. The current government, however, has been reluctant to do so, probably relying more on soft power than on economic or political influence in a region that presents too many problems for Brazil, including Argentina and Venezuela with their own challenging situations.

In the case of Marina Silva, it is to be expected that, if elected, she would further this shift in Brazilian politics away from prioritising the South American region. In the near future, Brazil would have a strong interest in the region but also a more global agenda, including possible free trade agreements with the European Union and other developed economies. President Rousseff, in contrast, would continue to have a little bit more emphasis on the region.

It is not very clear how the two agendas, South American and Global, will work, given the challenges of the region, particularly in terms of economic integration. Similarly, one of the relative successes of Brazil has been regional policy through the setting up of UNASUR. However, a further pending question is Brazil's relation with the United States. We know that president Rousseff had to cancel a meeting with the US because of the Snowden affair but relations between Brazil and the US go far beyond Snowden's revelations and this is something that a new government will need to address.

As for the economic and social development agenda, the PT has made great progress in terms of addressing extreme poverty and raising the standard of living of the population. It has made, as some have said, a silent social revolution, including the rise of the so-called low middle class, improvements in educational standards and effectively higher wages and higher consumption. There has been a great transformation in Brazilian society in this period but, because of the deeply rooted causes of these problems and due to problems that are common to other countries in the region, particularly crime and violence, the social agenda is very far from being completed.

It will be impossible to address many of Brazil's social problems if the country does not continue the path to development. The PT government has developed a very impressive social agenda but there are some problems with the current economic model. Over the past two or three years economic development in Brazil has been lagging behind, not as strong as it was expected. Hence, there remains a question about the economic model of Brazil: making the State more efficient, increasing productivity, increasing investment and reducing the so-called 'custo Brasil' (the cost of

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doing business in Brazil) are points to be addressed by any government that comes to power. The two agendas, social and economic, go hand in hand.

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Regardless of what the outcome of the election is, it signals already some positive changes in Brazil but also some problems that are still very much part of the Brazilian political system.

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