Workers Party suffers major defeat in Brazil's local elections

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Brazil's Workers Party (PT), which, until PT President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment at the end of last August, had ruled the country for 13 years, suffered a major rout in municipal elections held on October 2.

Brazilians went to the polls to elect the mayors and city councils in all of the country's 5,570 municipalities. Voting is mandatory under Brazilian law for every citizen between 18 and 65 years old, with absenteeism punishable by the automatic withholding of documents necessary to apply for jobs, travel and education.

Nonetheless, in major cities, on average 22 percent of voters failed to show up at the polls. A further 15 percent cast spoiled ballots, setting historical highs for both categories since return of civilian rule in 1985 and the end of voter exclusion for illiteracy in 1988, the last barrier to full enfranchisement in the country.

These absent and spoiled ballots—which in many cases outnumbered those cast for candidates placing first and second in the elections—were widely interpreted as an expression of deep mistrust and disgust toward the entire political system, particularly given that the number of spoiled ballots had consistently declined since 1985 with general improvement in education levels.

Along with record abstention and spoiled ballots, the most significant feature in the elections was the sweeping rejection of the candidates of the county's former ruling Workers Party. The PT saw its share of the vote shrink to its smallest since the 1980s, the decade of its foundation. Additionally, the party succeeded in electing only 40 percent of the 638 mayors it placed in office in the last elections, in 2012. It lost up to 130 of these positions even before voters went to the polls as a result of defections and the removal of officials found guilty of corruption.

In parallel with the PT's decline, there was a sharp increase in votes for right-wing populist and even fascistic candidates, the most important of which is São Paulo's mayor-elect, João Doria, of the grossly misnamed and right-wing Brazilian Social Democracy Party. Set to replace the PT incumbent, Fernando Haddad, who finished with just 17 percent of the vote, Doria is widely dubbed the Brazilian Donald Trump, having even hosted the Brazilian version of "The Apprentice."

He fraudulently boasted of being a "self-made-man" and "anti-politician," despite having grown up in an oligarchic political family from the country's backward northeast and having held various secondary executive political positions. He campaigned criticizing the PT as the ally of the rich.

Likewise, populist right-wingers reduced the PT to a distant fifth, and even seventh place, in most of the large industrial cities that surround São Paulo and constitute the largest industrial concentration in South America. These formerly rural cities, which grew through mass immigration and industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s under the US-backed dictatorship, were the birthplace of the PT itself, which emerged in 1980 in a wave of mass strikes that shook the regime. Following the return of free elections, they were described as the "red belt," constituting a PT stronghold.

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's second-most populous city and its former capital, the PT proved unable to even present its own candidate, instead supporting the candidate of the Communist Party, who finished in seventh place with just 4 percent of the vote. Also in the historically left-leaning southern capital of Porto Alegre and the northeastern capital of Salvador, where the PT holds the state governorship, the party registered historic losses.

The PT was hard hit by the Lava-Jato (Carwash) investigation into a bribes-for-contracts scheme at the country's sate run oil giant, Petrobras. It was disproportionally targeted by the media in the run-up to the impeachment vote, despite the fact that virtually every party, as well as some of the country's most powerful businessmen, have also been charged in the investigation.

Nonetheless, continued attacks on social conditions over the last three years by the PT government as well as the political alliances it made with the various extreme right-wing forces, which later ousted it, had made the party virtually indistinguishable from its rivals.

The elections also followed the PT's distancing itself even from the middle-class protests of August and September against Rousseff's impeachment. Former PT president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva infamously declared that the party didn't want to set fire to the country with resistance to the process, appealing instead to businessman and foreign organizations deeply tied to

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imperialism, such as the Organization of American States.

With the victory of the regional-chauvinist João Doria, the election in São Paulo shows that, as in the United States with Trump and in Europe with various far-right forces, the right wing has been the main beneficiary of widespread hostility to the status quo under conditions in which the nominal "left" is closely tied to big business, be it Wall Street, the City of London, Brussels or the Brazilian Banking Federation.

Also in Brazil, as internationally, the right wing has been aided by the pseudo-left, which in many cases embraced the "anti-corruption" hysteria that paved the way to impeachment. The best example is the candidacy of Luciana Genro of the Morenoite MES, a political tendency that functions inside PSOL (Socialism and Liberty Party, a parliamentary splitoff from the PT) and holds observer status in the Pabloite United Secretariat.

Despite gaining more than 1.5 million votes as PSOL's candidate for president in 2014, and having held state and federal parliamentary posts for 16 years, Genro finished fifth with roughly 90,000 out of almost a million votes cast in the race for mayor of Porto Alegre.

PT mayors had previously run the city for 16 years. Porto Alegre is also the capital of the only state to have given four straight presidential victories to the PT up to their first national victory in 2002.

From 2014 until the final impeachment vote on August 31, Genro consistently supported the right-wing campaign against Rousseff and the PT, including through a series of extra-constitutional court measures and political leaks that generated widespread rejection within layers of Brazilian society. While she was formally criticized by her own party, it never questioned her status as its candidate, with the PSOL hoping that her overtures to the right would help it win control of Porto Alegre's city council.

Later, on the campaign trail, one of the most notable demands by Genro was for the thorough militarization of the city by the National Guard amid a wave of violence.

With the catastrophic results suffered by the PT and its apologists, all the attention of the pseudo-left has been focused on Rio de Janeiro's mayoral run-off, in which the PSOL's Marcelo Freixo, having finished a distant second, is to face the frontrunner, Marcelo Crivella, a Christian fundamentalist. Freixo, a former PT member and longtime state-level Rio legislator, gained national and even international notoriety for leading a 2008 commission of inquiry in the state legislature that found hard evidence of widespread police involvement in vigilante groups (known as militias) in Rio's impoverished industrial northern sector.

The inquiry led to several arrests as well as death threats against Freixo, culminating in his 15-day self-exile in Spain, at the invitation of Amnesty International, until a plan had been worked out for his security. In the run-up to this episode, the criminal judge Patrícia Acioli was assassinated in retaliation for accepting charges against members of the militias. Later, with the support of a section of the police hierarchy, Freixo was the inspiration for the depiction of an unlikely human rights champion and hero in the 2010 Brazilian blockbuster "Tropa de Elite 2," the third-most watched movie in the history of the country's film industry, with roughly 7 million theater viewers.

This is Freixo's second run for mayor. In this year's first round, the PSOL candidate won only 60 percent of the votes he garnered in 2012. While he scored well in the city's upper-middle-class southern zone, he finished a distant fifth place in the working class and gang-ridden northern sectors of the city, where his previous investigation was focused.

Political intimidation by the militias may have played a role in his poor performance in these areas. This election saw a record 13 candidates for local councils assassinated by gangs in Rio's poverty-stricken outskirts, many in connection with local crime syndicate disputes. Most notably, the city's historic Madureira district saw the murder of the district's most prominent candidate for city council, Marcos Vieira de Souza, known as Falcon, who was the president of the legendary Samba club Portela, which has won Rio's annual Carnival samba competition 21 times, more than any group. The samba club was the artistic birthplace of some of Brazil's most important popular composers.

Whatever the role of violence and the militias, Freixo's political positions have certainly played a major role in reducing his votes. Even in the northern regions, in 2012 he came in second, with double the votes he won in 2016. Like Luciana Genro, he has moved sharply to the right since 2012 in an attempt to occupy the political space left by the PT's debacle, while working to block workers from drawing any political conclusions from the party's evolution.

A critic of the impeachment process, he has consistently presented himself as a "true," "old school" PT candidate, and the "viable" left choice in the face of PT's collapse. At the same time, Rio's PSOL has embraced the most reactionary forms of identity politics, ostensibly in the name of the city's large black population. While this served to win support from a layer of the upper-middle class that constitutes the party's most important base, it only further alienated the working class.

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