

## Whose side is Brazil on?

*Time for Lula to stand up for democracy rather than embrace autocrats.*



AP

This is a grand time to be a Brazilian, and especially to be Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the country's inspirational president. Long the chronically underperforming giant of Latin America, Brazil is now on every list of the half-dozen or so new places that matter in the 21st century. It seems that no international gathering, be it to discuss financial reform or climate change, is complete without Lula, a former metal worker and trade-union leader whose bonhomie and instinct for conciliation between political opposites make him friends everywhere. "He's my man," gushed Barack Obama at the G20 summit in London; Fidel Castro calls him "our brother Lula".

Brazil's new prominence is deserved. It stems in large part from the success of Lula and his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, in stabilising a previously dysfunctional economy, ushering in faster economic growth. Already one of the ten biggest economies, it was one of the last of them to enter recession and now looks like being one of the first to leave it. When Goldman Sachs bracketed it with China, India and Russia as the BRIC economies and said they would dominate the world by 2050, there was much sniffing that Brazil did not belong in such muscular company. Certainly the BRIC tag has done Brazil a marketing favour. But it is now Russia, with its depressed, oil-dependent economy, that looks like the misfit.

Lula, too, deserves much of the praise heaped upon him. On taking office in 2003, he showed political courage in sticking to responsible economic policies, ignoring calls from his left-wing Workers' Party to default on debt. His instinct for rational economics has turned him from a protectionist into a champion of free trade. His ambitious social policies have helped to lift 13m Brazilians out of poverty; searing inequalities of income are narrowing steadily. Despite almost supernatural popularity ratings, he has wisely rejected talk of changing the constitution to run for a third term.

Success at home has given oxygen to the vaulting ambition of Lula's foreign policy. His Brazil wants to be seen as a great power by setting itself up as the leader of a united Latin America while also seeking new alliances with other rising powers of the global "south". Thanks to Lula's ability to be all things to all men, thus far Brazil has achieved influence without being weighed down by responsibility. But look more closely and he risks bequeathing a disappointingly ambivalent legacy. Above all, Brazil needs to decide what it stands for and who its real friends are—or risk that others make that choice for it.

Southern successes and discomforts

Though history has also given it kinship with Africa, whence millions were brought as slaves, Brazil is at first sight the most “Western” of the BRICs. Unlike China or Russia, it is a democracy in a mainly democratic region. But Brazil’s leaders have often preferred to see their country as a “southern” power, a leader of the developing world. Under Lula, this bias has hardened. In some ways this is healthy. Lula is right to call for the world’s institutions to be reshaped to reflect a changing balance of power. Brazil’s exports have found new markets in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. But what really unites these countries? To Brazil’s chagrin, China helped block its bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, while India did much to stop a world-trade deal. And the southern bias has gone hand-in-hand with more negative traits.

Admirably for a would-be great power, Brazil has renounced nuclear weapons. Less admirably for a country which defends the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, it has refused to sign an improved safeguards protocol, denying international inspectors full access to its civilian nuclear facilities.

Lula’s government also shows a puzzling disregard for democracy and human rights beyond Brazil’s borders. Celso Amorim, his foreign minister, argues that condemnations by rich countries of abuses in poor ones are biased and ineffective. Human-rights groups complain that at the UN Brazil aligns itself with countries like China and Cuba to protect abusive regimes. Lula congratulated Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his victory in Iran’s deeply flawed election, comparing massive opposition protests to those of football fans whose side has lost. Mr Ahmadinejad’s first post-inauguration foreign trip will be to Brasília. Mr Obama has asked Lula to “use his influence” to persuade his guest to curb his suspect nuclear work. If Brazil takes up a rotating seat at the UN Security Council next January, it may have to choose whether to back tougher sanctions against Iran.

No triangulation between democrats and autocrats

In many of these stances there is a tacit streak of anti-Americanism. This is costliest for Brazil in Latin America. Yanqui influence there is in relative decline, while the sway of China and others is growing (see article). If there are now fears of a “new cold war” in the region, as some in Brazil worry, the man who threatens to start it is not Mr Obama but one of Lula’s dodgiest friends, Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez.

Yes, Mr Chávez is elected, but he shows ever-fewer signs of being prepared to relinquish power at the ballot box and constantly stirs up tensions in the region. It was fear that Honduras’s president was turning his country into the latest chavista domino that prompted the misguided coup there in June. Now Mr Chávez threatens war against Colombia because it is updating an agreement under which it grants facilities at military bases to the United States, which is helping it fight FARC guerrillas and other drug traffickers. Only the paranoid can construe this as a threat to Venezuela or the Amazon. Yet Brazil chose to express concern about the bases while remaining silent about Mr Chávez’s arms build-up and clear evidence that his people have sold weapons to the FARC (see article).

Nobody should expect Brazil to act as America’s sheriff. But it is in its own interest to prevent a new cold war in the region. The way to do so is not to equivocate between democrats and autocrats, as Lula seems to think. It is to shame Mr Chávez by drawing a clear, public line in favour of democracy—the system that allowed a poor lathe-operator to come to power and change Brazil. Why should other countries deserve less?

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