

Payback time



BRAZIL'S president infuriated both Western governments and domestic conservatives in June, when he helped broker a deal with Iran to send some of its low-enriched uranium to Turkey. Now, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva hopes to show that having the ear of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, his counterpart in Tehran, can bring unforeseen benefits. During a campaign stop on July 31st for his preferred candidate in October's presidential election, Lula unexpectedly offered asylum to Sakineh Ashtiani, an Iranian woman who has been sentenced to death by stoning for adultery. Only last Wednesday, he had said he could not get involved in the matter, since Ms Ashtiani had broken Iran's laws. But according to a close adviser, after reflecting on her plight, Lula had a change of heart. "I must respect a country's laws, but for the sake of the friendship and affection that I have for the president of Iran, and the Iranian people, if this woman is causing difficulties, we will receive her in Brazil," he said.

The offer had to be carefully worded. If it is to have any chance of success, Lula cannot seem too indignant about Ms Ashtiani's fate—hence the characterisation of her as someone inconveniencing Iran's government. But leaning too far in that direction would hardly endear him to women at home. Indeed, he continued by reminding his audience that his own party's presidential candidate, Dilma Rousseff, is a woman, and contrasted the harsh treatment of Ms Ashtiani with the likely fate of an adulterous Iranian man.

Lula is prone to extemporising on policy. But in this case, the offer was probably premeditated and approved by his advisers, since it should play well in the campaign as well as with Western diplomats. Foreign affairs have become uncharacteristically important in this year's election. In a much-reported comment last Wednesday, Marco Aurélio Garcia, an adviser to Lula, called José Serra, Ms Rousseff's main rival for the presidency, a "troglodyte" or "caveman" of the right. Mr Serra promptly turned these words back against Lula and his party, saying that in his view a "right-wing troglodyte" was someone who supported a regime like Mr Ahmedinejad's, which stones women, imprisons journalists and hangs its political opponents.

Lula was surely anxious to take some of the sting out of this pointed criticism of his left-wing party. And those who think he is positioning himself for a future role as international statesman say that success here will stand him personally in good stead too.

Correction: this post originally made a reference to campaign stop made by Lula on August 31st. This should have read July 31st. Sorry.

UPDATE: Iran has not taken kindly to Lula's request. On August 3rd, a Tehran spokesman said that Lula had been misguided by his "emotional and humane temperament"—"soft in the head", paraphrased one hawkish American commentator—and lacked the full facts regarding

Ms Ashtiani's case. Iran is now saying she murdered her husband, but that the courts did not publicly disclose that conviction because the crime was "too horrific".

Undaunted, Lula reiterated his offer of asylum later the same day. However, he did try to mollify Tehran by criticising the recently imposed UN sanctions on the country, and saying that "every country has its own laws, constitution and religion, which we must learn to respect, whether we agree with them or not." If the Iranian government relents, such words can be seen as the necessary price to pay to save a life. If not, Mr Serra's "troglodyte" jibe is sure to run and run.

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