

Lula keen to protect legacy as Brazil votes

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When Brazilians go to the polls this weekend, it will be the first time in 21 years that Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva will not be among the presidential candidates they can vote for.

Even so, the presence of the outgoing leader, who rose from shoeshine boy to union boss to charismatic president of the world's eighth biggest economy, has dominated the election campaign.

If Dilma Rousseff prevails, as expected, in Sunday's poll, the candidate of Mr Lula da Silva's leftwing Workers' party (PT) will owe her success to her political patron. Plucked by the president from relative obscurity, she is a hard-nosed technocrat, with little charisma, almost no popular touch and not much of a political base she can call her own.

This has left many wondering what role Mr Lula da Silva – barred by the constitution from running for a third consecutive term – might play in a Rousseff administration.

"Lula is responsible for Dilma. If she fails, he'll be responsible for her failure," said Alberto Almeida, a political scientist in São Paulo.

The outgoing president certainly wants to protect his legacy. Until recently, he said he would stand back when he left the presidential palace and concentrate on initiatives to benefit other Latin American and Caribbean countries.

But in the past few weeks he has changed his message, saying he will point out to his successor problems he was unable to deal with and suggest that she focuses on them.

He may be learning from his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who retired from active party politics when he left office in 2003, leaving space for new leaders to pursue the liberal reform programme of his centrist PSDB.

But the party has let fall its reformist banner and José Serra, its candidate in Sunday's election, has failed to present an alternative programme to Mr Lula da Silva's powerful mixture of orthodox monetary policy and generous social spending.

"Maybe I should have stayed in the leadership," Mr Cardoso told the Financial Times recently.

Mr Lula da Silva is unlikely to take a back-seat driver's role in the way that Néstor Kirchner has done in Argentina. But he may still be a powerful influence.

One way would be in helping to form Ms Rousseff's government. Mr Lula da Silva owes much of his success to Antonio Palocci, who was finance minister until he fell foul of a corruption scandal in 2006 and who remains an influential figure.

He is Ms Rousseff's chief economic adviser and, at Mr Lula da Silva's urging, is a clear candidate for a future senior role.

Ms Rousseff may also want to call on her predecessor's powerful political skills in what will be the difficult task of balancing the interests of the two biggest parties in her coalition: the PT itself and the PMDB, a loose conglomeration of regional interests.

Both parties look certain to emerge stronger from the election, in which Brazilians will also vote for federal and state deputies, senators and state governors. A stronger governing coalition would make it easier to direct policy, but also make the job of balancing rival forces – many of them opposed to economic policy under the Lula government – that much harder.

But Mr Lula da Silva's role here may be limited. As one analyst put it to the FT recently, influence is one thing; power quite another: "Dilma will be sitting in the president's chair in

Brasília. Lula will be sitting on a sofa in São Bernardo do Campo [his home town on the outskirts of São Paulo].”

It may also be hard for her to repeat Mr Lula da Silva’s trick of walking away unscathed from corruption scandals. She retains her lead in opinion polls despite recent allegations that unseated her former right-hand woman, though the affair has reduced her advantage.

That episode could have a lasting influence, in that it could tip the balance on Sunday and deny Ms Rousseff an absolute majority of valid votes. This would force a second-round run-off vote on October 31.

“If it goes to a second round, she will have to make more promises to more people,” said Luciano Dias, a political consultant in Brasília.

He pointed out that Mr Lula da Silva would have made more progress on fiscal reform, if he had not had to face two run-offs. “A second round makes things much more confused.”

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