

In Brazil's presidential election, abortion plays major role

Michael J. Gillgannon | Oct. 22, 2010



The Brazilian presidential candidate for the ruling Workers' Party, Dilma Rousseff, shakes hands with pilgrims at the Basilica of Our Lady of Aparecida near Sao Paulo Oct. 11. (CNS photo/Nacho Doce, Reuters)

ANALYSIS

As the candidates for the presidency of Brazil race to the wire before the run-off election of Oct. 31, abortion has become a major campaign issue.

The Catholic church and the evangelical churches, through their basic principles of defense of life, have become major players, but with quite different playbooks. Like the Brazilian team in soccer's recent World Cup, not all the players are on the same page. Nor are their coaches.

The candidates were running a seemingly predictable campaign till the last weeks before the Oct. 3 election.

Dilma Rousseff -- the anointed protégé of Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, "Lula", the two term president from the Worker's Party -- was expected to win the required 50 percent of the vote with no need of a run-off. But rumors had begun to circulate that she, and her party, would seek to legalize abortion.

The election issues had been much more about the success of the Workers' Party administration in raising 21 million people out of poverty in the last eight years and bringing Brazil into a position of leadership in Latin America and in the world.

Jose Serra, the main opposition candidate and co-founder of the Social Democracy party, had spoken of the need for change and a greater opening to private investment with less emphasis on the government anti-poverty programs and state control of businesses and natural resources.

Prior to Election Day, the South Region 1 (Sao Paulo) of the Conference of Brazilian Bishops had published a pamphlet from their regional "Commission In Defense of Life" which combined the bishops' conference's appeal for Brazilians to vote with respect for the common good of society with a series of specific criteria.

One bishop of the Region, Benedito Bem dos Santos, took this base and published 10,000 pamphlets. He distributed them to 31 parishes in his diocese, Lorena. The pamphlets specifically asked Catholics to vote

against any party or candidate in favor of a law legalizing abortion and implied that Rousseff and her party intended to do just that if elected.

Meanwhile, using another playbook -- opposed to abortion, but openly supporting powerful interests -- many evangelical pastors have come out strongly in the pulpits, and in the media (TV, e-mail, YouTube, etc.) opposing any change in the Brazilian law which only permits abortion in the case of rape or the mother's health.

Brazilian health officials estimate there are 1.5 million illegal abortions annually and about 250,000 women are admitted to hospitals with abortion related medical problems each year. Some pastors have supported by name the business candidate, Jose Serra, and an evangelical "YouTube" clip in his favor, opposing abortion, was seen by an estimated 3 million people.

On Oct. 18, Bishop Benedito Bemi dos Santos said he was only carrying out the bishops' conference's suggestions on forming consciences though his pamphlet directly stated that the Workers' Party was really carrying out the "demographic imperialism" of "international foundations" trying to limit the populations of poor nations under the pretext of protecting the "reproductive rights" of women. (The Ford Foundation, among others, is a contributor to "Catholics For The Right To Choose," now active throughout Latin America).

On Oct. 19, the Conference of Brazilian Bishops came out with an official lament:

"We profoundly lament that the name of the conference -- and the Catholic church itself -- has been used unduly throughout the campaign, and has been the object of manipulation. Certainly, it is the right -- indeed the duty -- of each bishop in his diocese to orient the faithful in his diocese in matters of faith and Christian morals ? but ? we reaffirm that only the General Assembly, or the Permanent Counsel to the Presidency, can speak in the name of the conference ? and that the conference has not favored any candidate ? and the vote is a free action of each citizen."

As the countdown continues some things are clear.

All polls indicate that the Brazilian people do not favor legalized abortion. Rousseff has published a letter to the people to say she is an active Catholic personally opposed to abortion and will not seek to legalize it.

In a television debate Serra said he is an active Catholic opposed to legalizing abortion. He accused Ms. Rousseff of double-speak.

But politics everywhere finds the muddy waters of past indiscretions to confuse the real issues of the moment.

Two former graduate students of Mrs. Monica Serra, the wife of candidate Jose Serra, have given interviews saying that in her classes in the 1990s, Mrs. Serra told her students that she had had an abortion. Her reasons were the fear and uncertainty of living and surviving under political persecution, as she did with her husband. All of Brazil and Latin America, knowing the horrors of military dictators, would understand her feelings without necessarily agreeing with her solution.

In the first election Rousseff won 47 percent of the vote. Mr. Serra won 33 percent. A dark horse from the Green Party, Ms. Monica Silva, a former member of the Workers' Party and an active Evangelical Christian also opposed to abortion, won an unexpected 19 percent.

Silva has told her followers to vote their choice as she endorses neither of the run-off candidates. And former president Lula has commented that, in fact, all the candidates and their parties proclaim the political principles of some form of "socialism" and redistributive programs of social justice given the realities of the country.

Though the polls show a narrowing in the race, Rousseff is expected to win. But the difficulties of Brazil will continue.

Analysts would say the realities of poverty, economic inequality, industrial growth (the major new off-shore oil and gas fields in the Atlantic near Rio), and the environment (the Amazon Forest) ought to be the issues of the election and will test the strength of any government.

Yet, the social problem of abortion will not go away -- particularly with the poor and those marginalized by race and class.

Brazil, with its population size and economic progress is now a leader in the hemisphere. Both the Brazilian Catholic church and the new Brazilian government will have to assume the delicate tasks of regional leadership history has now assigned to them. Mutual principles and values in favor of life must be prudently agreed upon.

These new challenges to Latin America's "Catholic Culture" demand a creative revision and renewal to respond to the continental call for a new church "mission" given by the 2007 meeting of Latin American bishops when the pope was in Aparecida, Brazil.

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