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## Lula da Silva: the most popular politician in the world

On 3 October 2010, the first round of elections to vote in the new President of Brazil will take place, and will be the first of six since the reinstatement of democracy in 1985 that current President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has not himself contested.

Brazil's legislation prevents Lula from running for a third term in office, but living up to the excellent standard set by his presidency will be a tough challenge for his successor.

President Lula was described by US President Obama as "the most popular politician on earth" at the G-20 summit in London, April 2009. This is acclamation any President would be proud to receive, let alone one faced with the challenges that a developing and politically turbulent country such as Brazil presents. So how has Lula managed to keep his approval ratings in excess of 70% (and above 80% in some areas), even after eight years in power?

Lula's achievements are extraordinary, especially given his humble beginnings. As a child he worked as a peanut seller and shoe-shine boy, and then trained as a metal worker. He was elected leader of the Metalworkers' Union in 1975 and campaigned to increase the power and independence of Trade Unionism. Lula founded the Workers' Party (PT), the first major socialist party in the history of Brazil, in 1980, and ran for President in every election from 1989, which was the first democratic vote in almost thirty years. He finally won the public vote in 2002.

The centre-leftist Lula surprised his critics during his first few months in office, by successfully balancing the needs of his people with the needs of international financial markets: a feat often difficult to achieve, as our British government is discovering now. Enrique Hidalgo-Noriega, a Latin America expert at Eurasia group, a US firm that conducts political-risk analysis, described the first four months of Lula's government as "tremendously successful, particularly because he has been able to instil confidence within and outside Brazil as to the possibility of reform".

Apprehension expressed by international investors stemmed from a tradition of leftist governments pushing for high-expense social reform programmes which boost government spending, stoke inflation and increase public debt. There were concerns that Lula would follow in the footsteps of other hard-line left-wing South American leaders such as Cuba's Fidel Castro and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, whose controversial policies have been interpreted by some as threatening to international peace and stability.

Eva Medina, professor of economics and an analyst at the Centre for Latin American studies explains the "crisis of confidence" that marked the birth of the Lula administration: "This was caused by the concern that a leftist government would break with the tradition of orthodox policy and [increase] the public deficit. The challenge was to re-establish confidence and make the leftist measures compatible with an orthodox policy, consisting of establishing economic stability for the long run".

Soon to be ex-President, Lula certainly rose to this challenge. His government consistently prioritised the poor by spending millions of dollars on social programmes designed to reverse Brazil's historic economic inequalities; it meanwhile surprised international financial markets by maintaining economic stability in Brazil and achieving the budget surplus required by the International Monetary Fund.

With social policies such as an increase in the minimum wage, and a family grant programme, the number of people living in poverty has dropped from 49.5 million to 29 million under Lula, according to research carried out by social-policy expert Marcelo Neri.

Meanwhile, the economy in Brazil is booming: the country boasts the eighth largest economy by nominal GDP, and, according to Lula at least, things are only set to get better. "If we continue at this rate for six, seven years, we'll be the fourth world economy," said the Brazilian President.

Brazil has survived the global economic crisis better than almost every other nation: none of the banks went under and inflation is low. "People doubted it when I said we would be the last to fall into recession and the first out," Lula said in an interview with Newsweek. His country now joins Russia, India and China: the big emerging powers collectively termed BRICs, which are expected to lead the way back to economic growth.

"Brazil, Russia, India and China have a fundamental role in creating a new international order that is more just, representative, and safe," Lula told his BRIC counterparts at the April 2010 summit held in Brasilia. Brazil is becoming increasingly successful and increasingly influential in world affairs, largely due to Lula's successes. The country has an immensely important role to play in the future of not only the international economic situation, but also in international negotiations on trade, climate change, the environment, public health and other issues.

Lula da Silva will be sorely missed both within and outside Brazil, and whoever succeeds him has a major role to play in further developing the outstanding



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