

# Brazilians still hold great affection for Lula, despite corruption conviction

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Dom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro

Many Brazilians regard the era of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva with nostalgic warmth, and for strong, practical reasons, even if some argue the changes he wrought in Brazil were not enough to provide lasting growth.

Brazil rode a commodities boom during his presidency from 2003 until 2011, which helped its economy grow while poverty and inequality fell.

On Thursday, the supreme court rejected the former president's plea to avoid prison while he appeals a corruption conviction, in a move that likely ends his political career and deepens divisions in Brazil.

But many poorer Brazilians argue that if Lula was involved in any graft, it was less than other politicians, and he did more for the least wealthy people than anyone else. Lula has said he is innocent and the charges are politically motivated to prevent him from running for president again.

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Jucineide de Lima, 46, a maid who lives in a favela in Recife, the capital of Lula's home state of Pernambuco, said: "Who never did anything wrong? He is the only one I would vote for."

Lula's governments introduced a series of measures to increase the number of people from Brazil's badly funded public sector schools studying at universities. The University for Everyone programme, created by a 2005 law, provided scholarships at private universities. New federal universities were opened and admission procedures streamlined.

States such as Rio de Janeiro launched programmes of quotas for black and public sector school students, a policy enshrined in a 2012 law by Lula's chosen successor, Dilma Rousseff, with powerful social impact in a deeply unequal country where more than half the population identifies as black or mixed race. More than half a million more public sector students went to university during his rule.

Wesley Andrade, 20, studied at a state-funded school in São Gonçalo, a gritty, working-class neighbourhood near Rio de Janeiro, and his mother, an immigrant from the poorer north-east of Brazil, could not afford private lessons or university fees. He is now studying international relations at Rio de Janeiro State University thanks to a quota law, and said Lula's policies meant Brazil did not suffer during the 2008 financial crisis, and they still benefit people today.

“He did a lot for Brazil, for inequality, for the poor people; he reduced radically inequality and hunger in the country. He was able to stabilise the economy at a time of world economic crisis so that Brazilians did not lose their jobs,” Andrade said.

The income of poorer Brazilians outpaced wider economic growth, said **Marcelo Neri**, an economist who was also a minister in Dilma Rousseff’s government. “People perceived this rise and this was strongest among the poorest,” he said.

As wages grew, 37 million Brazilians joined an emergent new lower-middle class, called Class C, which drove a consumer spending boom. A cash transfer scheme called *bolsa família* (family allowance) benefited tens of millions of poorer Brazilians, provided their children went to school and had vaccinations. A programme called my house, my life provided low-cost apartments on generous financing terms, helping more than 13 million people by last year.

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“It is not for nothing that he has this popularity, despite the scandals,” **Neri** said. “There was a process of inclusion.”

Despite his conviction on Thursday, and six separate pending corruption trials, Lula leads opinion polls before a presidential election in October.

But while Brazil rode the commodities boom, Lula failed to introduce structural changes that could have prolonged the good times, **Neri** said.

Life expectancy in Brazil increased by six years from 2000 to 2016, but Lula failed to introduce pension reform to cut soaring public spending. Education improved, but the productivity of Brazilian workers failed to keep up. In 2014, Brazil fell into a crippling recession and some of those gains were lost.

“It was a combination of elements that generated a big social boom. But it did not have the ingredients to maintain it afterwards,” **Neri** said.