

Brazil's champion set for landslide win

ANDREW DOWNIE IN RIO DE JANEIRO

FOUR years after winning a presidential election that promised a new dawn for South America's biggest and most powerful nation, Brazil's leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, heads into his fifth election in an almost unassailable position.

With just two days to go before the poll, the only question is whether "Lula", as he is known in Brazil, will gather enough votes to win in the first round or be forced into a run-off four weeks later.

Although he has failed to enact many of the sweeping changes he promised, and in spite of a wave of corruption scandals that have destroyed his Workers' Party (PT), Lula is odds-on favourite to win Sunday's ballot against his social democrat challenger, Geraldo Alckmin.

Polls give him a lead of more than 20 points. Lula needs 50 per cent plus one vote to avoid a run-off on 29 October.

The reason for his strength is the Bolsa Familia, a wide-ranging assistance programme that has led to the biggest reduction in poverty in Brazil in almost four decades.

For a nation with more than 40 million poor, the handout has been vital.

"It is definitely going to win them the election," said Dr Timothy Power, a lecturer at Oxford University's centre for Brazilian studies. "That and the fact that the minimum wage has gone up by about 23 per cent in real terms since 2003.

"If you ask people, 'Are you better off?' the vast majority are going to answer, 'yes'."

The Bolsa Familia, which translates as family grant, revolves around a project to encourage mothers to keep their children in school.

To qualify for the payout of up to £35 a month, parents must ensure that children between the ages of six and 15 attend at least 85 per cent of classes and get all the vaccinations on offer.

With 11.1 million families living below Brazil's poverty line, the project has benefited 45 million people. It has also breathed some much-needed life into the economy. This is especially true in the north and north-east, where the money narrows the gap between rich and poor that made Brazil the world's third most unequal society, according to a 2001 World Bank report.

While sales of goods in the prosperous south of the country are static, sales in the north and north-east rose by 16 per cent in the year to May, thanks to the influx of cash, said Marcelo Neri, the author of a recent report on inequality.

The number of people living in poverty has fallen by 19 per cent since 2001, while the income of the poorest ten per cent of Brazilians has risen by 23 per cent and the income of the richest 10 per cent has fallen by 7.5 per cent, Mr Neri said.

"This is reversing a historical process. The decade that began in 2001 will be marked by the reduction of inequality. The Bolsa Familia is a fundamental part of that process," he added.

Brazilians acknowledge this, and, mindful they elected Lula precisely to narrow that gap, they are keen to

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grant him more time to complete his work.

His landmark social programmes have even eclipsed the rampant corruption that has blighted his administration and torn his party apart.

In the most outrageous scandal, Lula's government was accused of paying congressmen to vote for its bills in parliament.

Just last week, his campaign manager resigned after his aides were accused of trying to smear the PT's electoral opponents.

In less than 18 months, the party's president, secretary-general and treasurer have been forced out, along with dozens of others, and made a mockery of Lula's inaugural vow to govern with "ethics and morality".

But he still has the support of the poor. Perhaps believing that all politicians are corrupt, they will vote for Lula - who is not accused of benefiting from the scams personally - believing it is better to have a corrupt leader who does something than a corrupt one who does nothing.

"In spite of the corruption and robbery, he improved things," said Ricardo Gomes, a hot dog salesman in Recife, the biggest city in the north-east. "There are no other options."

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Last updated: 28-Sep-06 00:50 BST

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