

By Colin Darch

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil—The press often derisively refer to her as the "Queen of the Congo," but Benedita da Silva hasn't let that or other prejudices slow her historic campaign to become the first black woman elected mayor of this city of 5 million.

Backed by a coalition of four left-wing parties, the 50-year-old da Silva is hoping to best nine other opponents when Brazilians troop to the polls to vote in municipal elections on Oct. 3. Da Silva, a founding member of Brazil's Worker's Party, known by its Portuguese initials as the PT, is the first black woman ever to be nominated in a major Brazilian mayoral election. She garnered support from 73 percent of the party when it held its equivalent of a primary last April.

In Brazil, race and gender barriers to full political participation are subtler than in the United States, yet they are just as pervasive and effective. If da Silva is elected mayor of Rio de Janeiro, she will have kicked down an invisible but durable wall in the land of so-called "racial democracy."

It is estimated that 15 percent of Brazil's 80 million self-described whites would be considered black by U.S. standards. Some 60 million others claim they are of African descent—making them the world's second largest black population after Nigeria. But black office-holders are a rarity here.

The reality of racial discrimination is still just as Brazilian as the carnival or the samba.

It was only in 1990 that a black, Albuino Azeredo, was elected state governor for the first time, in the tiny state of Espirito Santo, north of Rio de Janeiro. Yet in the absence of a high-profile history of national struggle for political and civil rights, many whites here, even on the left, glibly claim that racism isn't an issue in Brazil.

Unlike the United States, where it is at least recognized that racism exists, Brazil's governing white elite has for decades successfully managed to sweep racial issues under the carpet, arguing that because most Brazilians are of mixed descent, there is no discrimination.

Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre had an expression for this idea—"lusotropicalism"—which means that Portuguese-speaking people have an affinity with the tropics and hence are less racist

Rio's first black woman mayor?



One of da Silva's primary concerns is improving Rio's public education system.

than other Europeans, because former Portuguese colonies like Brazil and Angola have large mulatto populations.

While luso-tropicalism was widely accepted in the 1960s, the reality of racial discrimination is still just as Brazilian as the carnival or the samba. There are few people of color in the universities or in senior corporate management. The overwhelming majority of slum-dwellers are black, as are most of the unemployed. And just as in the United States, blacks in Brazil are over-represented in the prison population.

"Mulatto escape hatch"

Nonetheless, Brazil's image as a racial democracy has been widely accepted. When African National Congress President Nelson Mandela visited the country in August 1991, he enraged and disappointed local black militants by calling Brazil an "advanced model" of a multiracial society, a comment he later retracted.

One key difference in the way most Brazilians see race has been termed the "mulatto escape hatch." According to Thomas Skidmore, director of the Center for Latin American Studies at Brown University, the United States, broadly speaking, has a bi-racial system in which a person is either black or white. In Brazil, however, most people think of themselves as mulatto, with white and black minorities at each end of the spectrum.

In that context, the achievements of mulattoes can be attributed to their white ancestry, as in the case of Brazil's most famous 19th-century writer, Machado de

Assis. During his lifetime, de Assis' growing reputation was accompanied by a progressive "whitening" of his social identity. But his escape hatch has always been closed to dark-skinned people.

For da Silva, who is unmistakably African in appearance, there has been a price to pay for defying the unwritten rules of Brazil's racial—and macho—politics. She called a press conference last year to denounce racist and sexist hate mail, which she routinely receives.

But the feisty da Silva learned to look after herself early. She was born in a wooden hut in a favela, perched above a middle-class beach-front suburb in Rio. The favelas are hillside slums that cling precariously to the sides of the city's many rocky outcrops. Most of the favelas, especially the many ridden with drugs and crime, are effectively off-limits to police. Residents pay no rent and receive no government services.

Da Silva's father cleaned cars and her mother took in laundry to support her and her 14 siblings. She worked from the age of seven, and after a period as a street kid, da Silva was married at 16. She put herself through high school and college by working as a domestic servant and a street peddler. Da Silva now holds a degree in social work and a nursing certificate.

'Black, female, from the ghetto'

Benedita, or Bené as her supporters affectionately call her, has served as city councillor and is a two-term federal congress member. In her most recent congressional victory in 1990, she campaigned under the deliberately provocative slogan "black, female, from the ghetto."

Da Silva feels that the Workers' Party, a loose alliance of trade union and women activists, Marxists, greens, progressive religious groups and socialist intellectuals founded in the early 1980s, has been successful, even though it holds only 36 seats in the 503-member national assembly. "We have been able to work pluralistically even during the most critical moments," she argues. "We have Trotskyists, Leninists, Marxists and Christians. We've won cities, and I believe that in 1994 we're going to win state governorships."

In Congress, as one of three black deputies, she was instrumental in setting up a House Committee on the problem of street kids, which she says "looked at the real [problems] of Brazil." But, she adds angrily, there's no political willpower to change the situation. She laments what she calls the institutionalized trade in

children, especially young girls, who "are fattened up for prostitution as if they were animals."

Gender issues and the plight of Brazil's homeless children remain two of her main concerns. At the party's congress in November last year, she was instrumental in forcing the male-dominated Workers' Party to accept a measure requiring 30 percent of leadership positions at all levels to be filled by women. "We don't want any favors," she told delegates, "We just want you to guarantee what we've already won in practice in the PT."

After being selected by the PT as its candidate in the mayoral contest, the party entered into an electoral alliance with three other left parties, the People's Social Party, the Socialist Party and the hard-line Communist Party of Brazil. The coalition has christened itself the "Happy City Front."

Backs better schools

Benedita's platform gives priority to improving Rio's public education system, widely acknowledged to be in crisis. She wants to renovate at least 200 of the city's schools and to finish the ambitious educational-community service centers started, but never finished, by the outgoing administration.

"I want to push for a new pay scale for teachers to improve the quality of teaching," she says. "School attendance for all children will be an objective of my administration." To pay for those improvements, da Silva wants to upgrade Rio's tourist services. "The Earth Summit showed that tourism isn't just about sunshine and beaches," she explains. "We can run more conferences and festivals."

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Bené's campaign is underfunded, but she is raising money through the sale of a book, "The PT Way of Governing," and through an innovative call-in system that debits contributions directly from supporters' telephone bills. But she faces a tough fight, especially against her main opponent, the ruling Democratic Worker's Party candidate Cidinha Campos, a white woman who is widely respected on the left here.

Campos' party, known as the PDT, is a machine in the grip of Rio de Janeiro State Governor Leonel Brizola. (Brizola hates the Workers' Party, which, in turn, thinks he is an opportunist—especially in light of his recent support for the scandal-plagued conservative president, Fernando Collor de Mello.) Analysts say Campos' candidacy was largely created by Brizola, who is strongly backing her. Campos has achieved much of her fame and popular support through her own call-in radio show, in which she dispenses advice and aid to try to solve callers' problems.

The prospect of victory has nonetheless not bloated da Silva's ego. She still lives in the same favela and likes to kick off her shoes and walk barefoot on the grassy slopes near her home. Looking out to sea from the top of a rocky outcrop over the world-famous Copacabana beach, she grins. "My little corner may be up here, but I have a view, way above my problems."

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