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Post-Brazil

Brazilian Government

As Brazil is the 5th most populous country in the world, the Brazilian government has been doing all it can to help its people. With the election of President Lula de Silva in 2002, Brazilian citizens welcomed the opportunity to become a stable country. Citizens were eager for Lula to increase job opportunities and help those in need. Because Lula came from a family who rose from poverty, Brazilians were convinced that this Worker Party candidate would help lead their nation and work toward becoming a more developed nation. This clearly held true in the election polls when Lula was favored by 61% and became the first left wing president in over 40 years. After the election Lula was quoted saying, "The hard part begins now. We will work around the clock to fulfill every one of our campaign promises."

In Brazil, 30% of the population is living in poverty. The average citizens earn about \$256 US dollars a month, and only 14 million Brazilians over the age of 5 have ever been to school. In the cities, many children work in the streets instead of going to school. They can earn money for their families that way instead of "wasting" their time on education. Surprisingly, in the Amazon region of the north, the local government provides transportation for children to attend school and even offers them 2 meals a day. It is an interesting contrast from the cities where there are more kids who don't attend school. Who would have thought that kids that live in the rainforest are more educated? Poverty and education aren't the only problems occurring in Brazil, and Lula has been trying to appease as many citizens as he can.

As our group traveled to Brazil, we entered the country right after a major government scandal had been witnessed. Many of Lula's government officials had been accused of paying outside Brazilian organizations for votes in Congress. Claims from advertising executives and other businessmen said that they have given over \$17 million dollars to members of Lula's workers party. Numerous allegations that were similar appeared in the press and shocked Brazilian citizens. While Lula denied having any connection with the bribery, Lula's ex-chief-of-state, Jose Dirceu was linked to many of the allegations. Dirceu resigned from office last spring saying that he was protecting the President by giving up his position. Those who believed Lula wasn't involved in the bribery now questioned him as his closest companion removed himself from office.

Brazilians looked at the scandal in three ways. First, many believed it to be a press scam. As elections come up this October, many thought this scandal was just an attack from his opponents. Second, some Brazilians still had faith in Lula. He was elected with such high hopes that many did not want to lose faith in him. The third group of citizens believed the scandal to be accurate and lost support for the president.

The most interesting contrast to research on the government was talking with the local people. After reading countless tales of how Lula was changing Brazil for the better, it turned out that many of the locals were extremely dissatisfied with their president. Instead of hearing glorious praises, I heard countless stories of disappointment and letdowns. The first conversation was with our tour guide, Louis, in Rio de Janeiro who is assumed to be from the mid to upper class of Brazil. He expressed his concern regarding the lack of employment in Brazil. When he is in the favelas, especially, he sees many

people not working. When he is touring through the cities, he notices the children working on the streets instead of going to school. While Louis isn't sure of the solution to these problems, he is disappointed that he hasn't seen much change in his country. He is thankful for having tourists from other countries to secure his own job.

The second local was of the upper class. He firmly believed that Lula was very involved in the scandal. He found it impossible for Lula to not know what was going on around him. He insisted that there had been very few changes in the country thus far and he thought it foolish to keep a president in power that hasn't changed much. As a frequent traveler to America, he was disappointed with living in a developed nation.

The third local I spoke with was a 24 year old woman named Patricia. As a college student, I was eager to hear what she had to say about Lula. She explained that Lula hadn't done anything for their country either. The fact that job employment was still low scared her since she is now looking for a job. "Also, Patricia said, "We haven't had clean politics in decades. It is frustrating to think that our government cannot do anything without scams and bribery. Why would I want to re-elect someone who is always questioned for his wrong-doings?"

It is unfortunate that the only locals I had a chance to speak with were fairly wealthy. I would assume this is because many of the less fortunate probably don't speak that much English. During every conversation I had with Brazilian citizens, I asked them if they had visited the Brazilian slums, or, favelas. They would usually give me a strange look and reply, "Of course not." I found it extremely interesting that here they were telling me how concerned with poverty they were, yet they had never visited the locations where those people lived. It was also interesting that these 3 citizens expected so much so fast. Since Brazil is a country 3 times the size of the United States, I was surprised that they expected their country to have significant changes in only 4 years.

The knowledge that Brazilians had regarding American politics was extremely impressive, especially when conversation pertained to President Bush. It would be safe to say that many Brazilians know more about what is going on in the U.S. than Americans do. Louis, for example, is dissatisfied with the lack of interest president Bush has in his country. When Clinton was in office, he would participate in soccer games in Brazil and other cultural activities. President Bush has apparently done nothing of the sort which angers many Brazilians who are very sensitive about their culture. Patricia had no respect for President Bush because of his appearance. She noted that every time she has seen him on television making a speech he has been a terrible public speaker and known to make mistakes someone of his stature should not be making. None of the Brazilians support America in Iraq. They believe it is foolish that we are getting involved in something that has "nothing to do with us."

Hearing Brazilians rattle off facts about the American government represents the lack of interest the U.S. has in other countries. I was so impressed with what the locals could tell me about our president, yet I felt ignorant because I could not reciprocate with facts about their country. It also made me feel uninformed because of my lack of knowledge about my own country. It seems we have built a bubble around ourselves because we feel that nothing bad could ever happen to our country. By feeling so protected, we do not see the important role that our country has in world affairs. Personally I felt selfish and ignorant while traveling. It seems we have built a bubble around ourselves and not shown much interest in helping or aiding developing countries.

This correlates well with the idea of ethnocentrism and disappoints me that many US citizens continue to believe we are better than other countries. It is imperative to recognize that we need to take more interest in our government and learn more about the world around us.