

BRAZIL



BLACK VOTE: Silva poses with children from the Paraisópolis favela, or slum. Favelas tend to have more residents of African descent than society at large, a legacy of slavery. **REUTERS/NACHO DOCE**

Marina Silva's campaign has stirred deep emotions in Brazil, where there is a taboo against discussing race.

# Why Brazil's would-be first black president is trailing among blacks

BY BRIAN WINTER

## BRAZIL RACE AND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



CAMERA READY: Silva (L) and Rousseff (R) take 'selfies' with supporters during separate campaign events. Rousseff is leading Silva among voters of African descent. **REUTERS/UESLEI MARCELINO**

SÃO PAULO, OCTOBER 3, 2014

**B**razilians could make history this month by electing Marina Silva, the daughter of impoverished rubber tappers from the Amazon, as their first black president.

Yet Silva is trailing incumbent President Dilma Rousseff, who is white, among the half of voters who are of African descent.

That disadvantage, which contrasts with U.S. President Barack Obama's overwhelming support from African-Americans in the 2008 and 2012 elections, could cost Silva victory in this extremely close election.

The reasons behind Silva's struggles speak volumes about Brazil's history, its complex relationship with race, and the recent social progress that has made Rousseff a slight favorite to win a second term despite a stagnant economy.

In recent weeks, Reuters interviewed two dozen Brazilians of color in three different cities. Many said they would be proud to see Silva win – especially in a country where people of color have historically been underrepresented in government, universities and elsewhere.

Yet they also said they were more focused on the economy than any other factor.

Since taking power in 2003, Rousseff's leftist Workers' Party has made enormous strides in reducing poverty – especially among blacks.

"No one wants to go back to the past," said Gustavo Leira, 71, a retired public servant in Brasilia. Silva's race is important, he said, "but it's not the most important thing."

Silva, who is running on a more centrist, market-friendly platform, has mostly avoided the subject of race, reflecting a long tradition in Brazilian politics and society. Brazilians overwhelmingly shy away from speaking about race, preferring to speak in terms of class instead.

Over the centuries, more than 10 times as many African slaves were brought to Brazil than to the United States. Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish the practice, in 1888. Today, blacks are more than three times as likely as whites to suffer from extreme poverty.

Asked in an interview with Reuters

**“**Nobody likes to say it, but there is enormous racism in Brazil.

**William Reis**

AfroReggae member

last week what it would mean to be Brazil's first black president, Silva replied: "Not just (that) ... I'd also be the first environmentalist."

"I'm very proud of my identity as a black woman," she continued. "But I don't make political use of my faith, or my color. I'm going to govern for blacks, whites, (Asians), believers, non-believers, independent of their color or social conditions."

Silva's stance is consistent with her especially inclusive brand of politics, which has brought together evangelical Christians, web-savvy urban youths, banking tycoons, and others.

But it has also mystified some political analysts and voters who say that, by not playing up her roots more, she is missing a golden opportunity to better connect with a huge demographic group that is mostly supporting her opponent.

A senior adviser to Rousseff called Silva's reluctance to discuss her race "the biggest mystery of this campaign."

Some, especially the young, are urging Silva to be more vocal about her background. They say that a dramatic rise in the enrollment of blacks at universities, thanks in part to new racial quotas, has fueled a growing racial consciousness. Other



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prominent black leaders have also emerged, including former Supreme Court Chief Justice Joaquim Barbosa, who has urged Brazilians to speak more honestly about racial issues.

But change has been slow. Indeed, although most Brazilian pollsters ask respondents about their race and break down results accordingly, Rousseff's lead among blacks has barely been commented upon in local media.

Regina Collson, a 23-year-old university student, said she has tried to convince classmates to vote for Silva by emphasizing how her African background, and her impoverished youth, would mark a "big change" from politics as usual.

"She would bring a different perspective," Collson said. "But people aren't talking about it (that way). It makes me mad."

### "POVERTY IN BRAZIL HAS A FACE"

Whatever tactical changes Silva makes from here on out could swing what is a very close election.

The first round of voting is on Sunday. Polls indicate that neither Rousseff nor Silva is likely to win a majority of votes.

That means the two would face each other in a runoff on Oct. 26. Rousseff has built momentum recently, and polls have shown her ahead of Silva by about 4 percentage points in a second round.

In polls over the last two weeks, Rousseff has enjoyed a solid advantage over Silva of between 6 and 7 percentage points among voters who identify themselves as black or "pardo" – a Portuguese term for people of mixed race. Together, they make up a little more than half of Brazil's population.

Among whites, who account for about 40 percent of the electorate, the campaign has been more volatile. Silva enjoyed as much as an 8-percentage point advantage over Rousseff among whites in one poll and was statistically tied with her in another.

Asians, indigenous people and other groups make up the rest of voters.



SAY IT WITH MUSIC: Silva's official campaign song, unveiled last month by Gilberto Gil (pictured), probably Brazil's most famous contemporary black musician, praises her "brown skin and popular appeal." **REUTERS/RICARDO MORAES**

Over the centuries, more than 10 times as many African slaves were brought to Brazil than to the United States. Brazil abolished slavery in 1888.

In numerous TV ads, Rousseff has warned that voting for Silva could endanger the social gains of the last decade. Her party has also portrayed Silva's advocacy of tighter fiscal policies and her friendship with Neca Setubal, a member of a prominent family of bankers, as a sign that she would govern on behalf of the rich.

Silva has denied that, pointing to her own socialist background and the fact she was herself a member of the Workers' Party until 2009.

Meanwhile, Rousseff's government has not shied away from describing its own achievements in racial terms.

"Poverty in Brazil has a face, and that face is black," Tereza Campello, Brazil's minister for social development and combating hunger, said in an interview.

She pointed to data showing that some

22 million people have been lifted out of extreme poverty over the past decade thanks to robust economic growth and social welfare programs. Among them, 78 percent were blacks or pardos.

"We have invested in this like no one else," Campello said. "So people say: 'My life has improved. Am I going to vote for the other candidate? Just because she's black?'"

Such questions have led some Brazilians to compare Silva's candidacy with Obama's historic campaign.

In 2008, Obama won 95 percent of the African-American vote. That advantage, plus his support from two-thirds of Hispanic voters, helped him overcome a 12 percentage point deficit among white voters. The margins were broadly similar when Obama won re-election in 2012.

While Obama did not make race a theme of his campaigns, he did address it at key moments – including a famous speech in March 2008 in which he discussed the anger felt by many in the black community, and what it was like to be the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya.

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**TIGHT RACE:** Dilma supporters (top) hold flags during a campaign rally in Sao Paulo, while a boy (below L) shows Silva and her vice-presidential candidate Beto Albuquerque how to shoot a basketball. A youth (bottom R) plays a tambor during an Afro-Brazilian culture celebration marking the anniversary of the abolition of slavery, in Valenca, Rio de Janeiro. **REUTERS/NACHO DOCE/PILAR OLIVARES/RICARDO MORAES**





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Silva also comes from a mixed racial background – just like many, if not most, Brazilians.

Ever since the Portuguese began bringing African slaves here in the 16th century to harvest cash crops like sugar cane, races have intermingled far more than they did in the United States – meaning the line between white and black is often blurred and, in the minds of some Brazilians, nonexistent.

In fact, several voters said that Silva's own background would make it hard for her to emphasize her black identity in the campaign. They highlighted Silva's indigenous blood and her birth in the Amazon – far from the Afro-Brazilian heartland in the northeast.

"I see her as more Indian than black," said Lisa Moraes, 43, a black schoolteacher at a mall food court in Brasilia. Her friends at the table nodded vigorously. "Her experience is not the same as mine," said Francesca, her sister.

Silva's official campaign song, unveiled last month by Gilberto Gil, probably Brazil's most famous contemporary black musician, praises her "brown skin and popular appeal."

Some say she should be even more explicit about racial issues.

"Nobody likes to say it, but there is enormous racism in Brazil," said William Reis, 29, a member of AfroReggae, a prominent non-profit group in Rio de Janeiro that promotes black culture in the city's slums.

"Young people want our politicians to talk about this. It's a reality. Why don't we debate it?"

### A RACIAL DEMOCRACY?

An estimated 5 million Africans were brought to Brazil between 1525 and 1866, compared to about 450,000 who were taken to the United States, according to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, compiled by academics.

Segregation was never enforced in Brazil as it was in the United States and South Africa. When the American South was roiled by the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Brazilian leaders proudly proclaimed their country a "racial democracy."

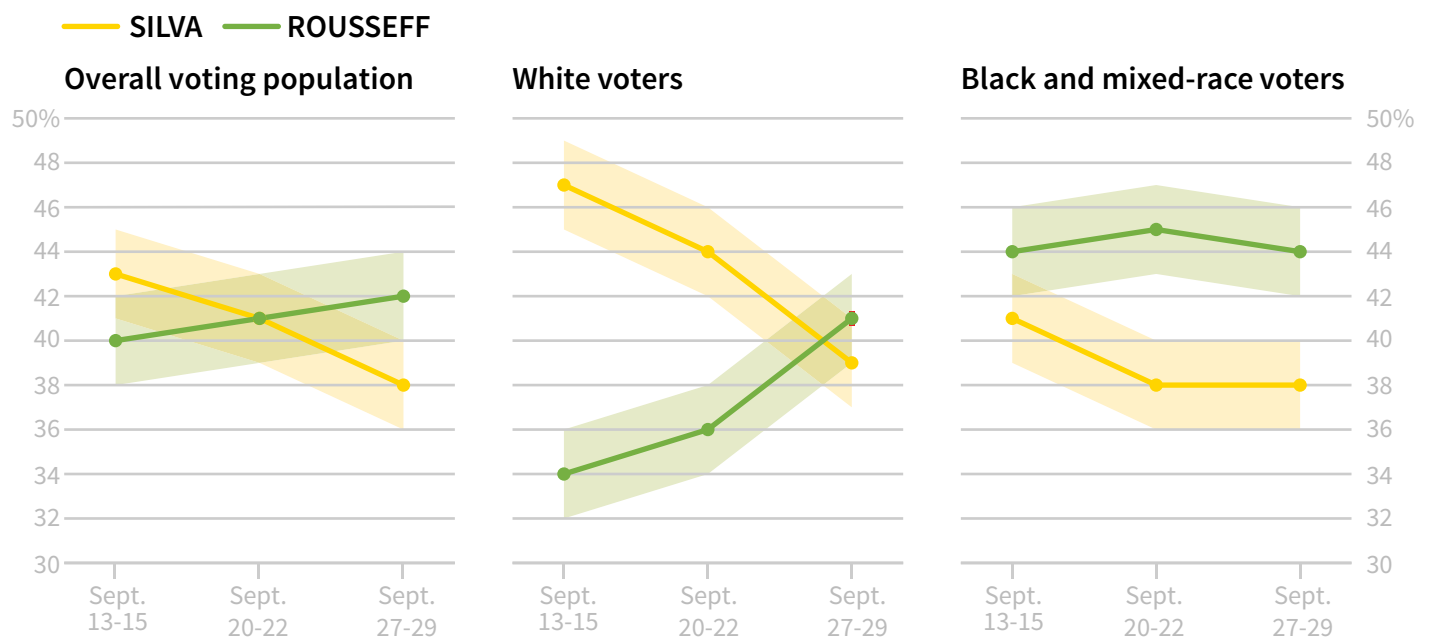
Yet many now believe such rhetoric was aimed at papering over the very real racial divisions in Brazilian society.

In the country's favelas, or slums, there are more people of African descent than society at large. Historians say that's a legacy of slavery, as the descendants of slaves did not have equal access to schools or jobs.

Even today, at children's birthday parties in rich neighborhoods of Sao Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, the only black people present are often women in all-white uniforms, working as nannies or maids.

Blacks and pardos account for roughly a fifth of university students – five times higher than in 1997, thanks in part to new racial quotas implemented under Workers'

### In a hypothetical runoff between Silva and Rousseff:



Note: Numbers do not total 100% because sample includes undecided and voters who say they will spoil their ballots in protest.

Source: Ibope poll of 3,010 voters



GLAD-HAND: Silva (L) greets supporters during a campaign rally in Ceilandia, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Brasilia. **REUTERS/UESLEI MARCELINO**

Party rule, but still less than their share of the population.

Barbosa, who became Brazil's first black Supreme Court justice in 2003 and retired this year, spoke often about the country's "latent, veiled racism." He cited what he called the overwhelming lack of blacks in Brazil's government.

In some contexts, race is treated with an openness that often shocks foreigners. For example, kiosks on Rio's Copacabana beach rate the danger sunbathers face from ultraviolet rays, breaking down the risk into four categories: "whites and blonds," "light browns," "dark browns" and "mulattoes and blacks."

Racial matters have also crept more into politics in recent years.

When Rousseff was jeered by the crowd at the World Cup's opening match in Sao Paulo in June, she blamed the hostility on the city's "white elite." Those who could afford the game's high ticket prices were also the ones who have most opposed her

government's social programs, other officials said.

### CHANGING TACTICS

Rousseff's campaign has delicately sought to highlight her record on racial issues. One adviser pointed to a recent TV ad that shows a black student in a university classroom. A narrator says such people used to be "invisible."

That said, the economic growth that made social gains possible has slowed under Rousseff. Many economists believe that Silva's proposals, including a simplification of the tax code and a push for greater trade, would stoke the growth needed to ensure continued progress for blacks, and the poor more generally.

Some observers expect that Silva could adopt new tactics once she is safely into the runoff. For example, by making it clearer how black Brazilians in particular would benefit from her policies, or talking more about her background.

Yet her opponents, including Rousseff's minister for the promotion of racial equality, Luiza Bairros, say it won't be easy for Silva to refashion her message.

Asked why Silva has not generated more support among blacks, Bairros smiled, peered over her glasses and said: "Do you really think Obama would have won 95 percent (of the black vote) if he had been a Republican?"

"What a black person knows in Brazil, or anywhere else in the world is that their situation won't improve unless you have ... policies that lead to change."

"The symbolic part is important," she said. "But it's not everything."

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