Religion and Politics in Brazil: the role of religion in the 2010 presidential campaign

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In recent decades, Brazil has witnessed a significant growth in the neo-Pentecostalism sector. The last presidential elections in Brazil were characterized by an intense debate concerning public health issues, having these sectors altogether with other groups as the interlocutors. In this debate, neo-Pentecostal sectors played an important role in the public agenda, especially in the second round, when questions about abortion and reduction of harms policies were put in check. This report aims to analyze the factors that led to the emergence of private matters in the public arena, outlining the possible consequences of such events in the Brazilian political scene.

**Keywords:** Neo-Pentecostalism. Religion in the Public Sphere. Secularism and Religion.

**INTRODUCTION**

Brazil has experienced high expectations for economic growth and for the first time in its history, socially excluded groups have been included in effective public policies of social assistance. A large contingent of these social classes has wide and varied religious experiences. One of the most spectacular phenomena that the country has seen is the great growth of the so considered "pentecostal" and "neo-pentecostal" sectors, charismatic forms of protestantism, which make use of marketing competition to boost their growth.

Constantly present in the Brazilian media, many of these groups adopt the most varied and possible ways to transmit their messages. Recently, the Internet was allowed for use in political campaigns, which brought up possibilities hitherto

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unknown. What we have seen was a fierce debate concerning issues that make up the theological and doctrinal atmosphere of these groups, thus inciting a true dispute over certain conceptual aspects. The debate was not calm and gentle. On the contrary, it was violent. However, what can be drawn from this experience? Perhaps the great positivity to be drawn from this experience is the view that with a greater competition in the religious market, a greater participation in wider debates arises.

Through brief notes, this paper aims at presenting the religious context and the first experience of Internet use during election periods in Brazil. Evaluating the process is an extensive and long-term work, which does not fit in this brief sketch. The intention here is to point to the possibility of certain openness in the public arena concerning issues considered taboo by religious groups who flirt with charismatic tendencies. In Brazil, this kind of spirituality is named pentecostalism, or, in a newer version, neo-pentecostalism. An allusion to the phenomenon described in the Book of Acts, Chapter 2.

1. The Brazilian religious context
   The religious context in Brazil is formed by an incredible range of religions that dispute bigger and bigger spaces in the so-called religious market. The mutual hostility has been occurring since the colonial era in which the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) was recognized as the official church. However, with the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in Brazil in 1808, due to the napoleonic hostilities, other religious denominations arrived in the territory with more specificity, such as the anglicans, the lutherans and the methodists etc. When the proclamation of the independence of Brazil took place in 1822, they had already been discussing a way to colonize the south of the country which still had no defined borders and was constantly harassed by spanish interests. The way found to solve the issue of colonization was to invite colonials from Central Europe to come to Brazil to try a new life, since that region was undergoing demographic and social unrest. Thus, the european colonization defined the parameters of another religion effectively present in the brasilis land, the protestant. These immigrations brought lutherans, baptists, mennonites and waldensians etc.

   In the same period in which the European immigrations brought several religious experiences in their baggage, protestant groups from the United States of America (USA) sent their missionaries. After this endeavor, the Presbyterian Church
was founded in Brazil, which would later give birth to other denominations such as the Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil, among others. Not only U.S. missionaries came, but also colonials arrived to work for coffee companies, and those were baptists who began the large number of denominations that make up the Brazilian Baptist context.

In the early twentieth century, in 1911, the so-called “more” pentecostal groups start to obtain a space in the religious environment. Recently, the Brazilian media even covered the celebrations of the centenary of the Assembleia de Deus (Assembly of God) Church in Brazil. This institution has split into many others. Among the Italian immigrants, the Christian Congregation in Brazil was born, about the same time. Because of the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889, these denominations could have a greater freedom of expression, but the Roman Catholic Church still had preponderance along the State, although it was not the official religion anymore. The relationship between the “so-called” Republicans groups and the Roman Catholic Church will become increasingly tense during the first decades of the republic.

The denominations, which were considered historical protestantism, made the actions connected to the communitarian group its means to articulate and communicate their religious proposal, which, as a rule, was linked to education and social work. The pentecostal denominations were relegated to the countryside and were particularly remote from any political developments and other social issues. Only later, after their massive insertion in urban contexts, they will play a more significant role in the country’s social and political scene.

As the background of the emergence of protestant, historical and pentecostals groups are the innumerous expressions of worship of the African and Indian hue. Pentecostalism will irreversibly infuse itself in these expressions. Even when fighting the religious expressions of many African-Brazilian groups, the Pentecostal denominations have been flirting with them deeply. Today, many of the well-known neo-Pentecostal denominations are considered by the sociologists of religion an urban version of these worships, because the African-Brazilian worships are not urban forms of religiosity, at least in its origin.

2. The neo-Pentecostal tendencies
From the second half of the twentieth century on, Pentecostal groups began to act in urban centers with a greater intensity. Only eighty years after the proclamation of the Republic, the separation between church and state actually established an environment propitious to a proselytizing actuation. With the secularization of the state, plurality has become a trend in the religious market, since the standard of performance is the very competitive capitalist market of trend.

In the 1970s, another form of expression strongly arises in the protestant religious scenario, the so-called neo-pentecostalism. It is characterized by breaking with the previous version which did not flirt with the largest African-Brazilian expressions and even with the catholicism. In this form of protestantism, the flirtation with the african-brazilian worships and with the catholicism is intense. The religious syncretism is assumed as a market strategy. Paradoxically, while they heavily fight the non-“evangelical” religious expressions, although this is relative, because often the denominations are digladiating each other in their proselytizing campaigns, their cultic characteristics are devoured - in a cannibalistic sense - and swallowed into new costumes.

These neo-pentecostal expressions started to use means of communication plentifully. After the elaboration of the new Brazilian Constitution of 1988, there was a noticeable change in the Charismatic and Pentecostal groups. The perception that it was necessary to participate in the political decisions of the country took shape in the guidelines and that led, over the years, to the increasing participation of evangelical candidates in the political life.\(^3\)

The Charismatic broke with certain trends assumed as "traditional" that prevented the effective growth of the number of members. This expression had many biases from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Many forms of denominations that guide their work based on activities that benefit the work with youth and actions of healings and exorcisms are registered. The largest pentecostal denomination in Brazil, the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), has an episcopal structure (imitating the RCC) and its activities are based on "victory campaigns," a method of selling products of faith. If the person who seeks the

\(^3\) In Brazil, the term ‘evangelical’ is used to describe all protestant groups, i.e. non-catholics. Although originally it is a designation for the Lutherans, the brazilian press has redefined the use of the term from the first decades of the twentieth century on. So, today, in Brazil, all religious protestant groups are seen as "evangelicals," even those who are not in terms of principles, such as the mormons and the jehovah's witnesses, etc.
denomination accepts the challenges offered by the institution, the return will become material "blessings". The denomination postulates the Prosperity Theology in the lines defined by the American Kenneth Hagin.  

Prosperity Theology was spread throughout many protestant denominations in Brazil, characterizing itself as a powerful inter-ecclesial movement. Some authors define this phenomenon as a kind of theology of resistance and there are others who define it as a religious complex adaptation of neo liberalism. The fact is that there are no limits to the religious market strategies. The media, the music and the arts, the politics, the aid actions, the education, among other expressions of society, are ways to achieve the promotion of new member. In recent years, it is the Internet that has been an important tool to divulge the objectives of these religious groups.

3. Religious groups and politics

In the last brazilian presidential elections, several charismatic and pentecostal protestant sectors led a campaign that followed a strong conservative trend through the Internet, something new in many ways. First, because the election campaign itself was newness; second, because, for the first time, the so-called evangelicals took part in the debate. It is true that, mostly, they participated in the debate in a completely passionate way, without criteria and guided by the information that was spread daily through social networks and blogs or through sites of politically conservative groups.

In fact, these groups had an effective participation in the movement of evangelical voters. However, their collaboration was only partial in the conduction of the elections for the second round. Anyway, the noise and propaganda that has spurred considerable portions of the population, sympathizers of the approach advocated by them, was the most remarkable fact. For the first time, we could see catholics and protestants united to fight a common enemy, the candidate of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) Dilma Rousseff. These groups have attacked the candidacy of the PT because they understood it was responsible for legislations and regulations that were expressed in the proposal for a National Plan

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for Human Rights, which harmed religious freedom. Accordingly, there was a massive attack on the proposals considered public health issues such as the issue of abortion, homophobia and harm reduction policies. However, something that draws our attention in this episode is how the debate was conducted over the Internet.

The historical protestant denominations, more relegated to the assumptions of a radical separation of church and state, tend not to let the religion-politics mix pass with impunity in the common sphere, while the pentecostal and charismatic denominations have shown a radical openness to the political interests within their own religious temples. Many religious leaders of this trend have shown support for certain candidates and have campaigned against the opposing candidates. In recent decades, a group of political representatives has actually been called “evangelicals”, marked by deputies and senators of these trends.6

These differences regarding the candidacy of the PT divided the groups, because a religious affiliation does not postulate, therefore, political loyalties. Although the leaders had the posture to influence the members’ vote, such a thing happened in a diffuse manner. In the case of a convergence of ideological understanding, the thing expanded from the way of understanding theology to the way the world should go. But things were not always guided by an objective calculation, since many of the members of denominations connected to the Prosperity Theology were assisted by the policies of income distribution of the PT government. And the largest neo-Pentecostal denomination, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, supported the PT candidate Dilma Rousseff, thus demonstrating the discontinuity of the process alarmed by some sectors.

4. Conservative religious groups and Internet use

Since the Constitutional Convention of 1988, the so-called "evangelical representative" has taken over the task of defending Christian morality, family values and the principles of religious freedom, based on the following idea and slogan:

6 It is a parliamentary front formed by congress related to pentecostal and charismatic denominations, ordained or lay leaders. In the period of greatest rise of the group, 2003-2006 legislatures, it was consisted of 58 participants. They do not always vote closed. Often, it can have conflicting interests with each point of view they defend. After 2006, it fell into disrepute because of the involvement of many members of Congress on corruption charges. BANCADA EVANGÉLICA no Congresso encolhe, aponta Diap. Folha online. November 11th, 2006. Available at: <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/brasil/ult96u85068.shtml>. Accessed on 23 July 2011.
"Brother votes for brother," in frank opposition to the feminists and homosexuals’ project to reach sexual and reproductive rights. For this task, in 2003, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front was created, joining other parliamentarian and conservative Catholics who also identified themselves as "traditionalists" on moral grounds.

The main objective was to defend Christian morals and good manners. In order to do so, it became essential to attack the proposals presented by the more progressive sectors. Issues such as abortion, civil union between homosexual people, legislation that would incriminate family violence, among others, were always under suspicion of assaulting the supposed religious freedom. With the election of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2002 and his reelection in 2006, and the presentation of a new National Plan for Human Rights (Plano Nacional de Direitos Humanos III - PNDH III), the conservative groups started to attack the government frontwards, because they understood that this new proposal together with a bill that would criminalize homophobia (Bill No. 122) was definitely the embodiment of a probable persecution of "Christians", since the state was attempting to create a law which they called the "Gay Gag". In Brazil, evangelical groups based on a perspective that orbits around the fundamental aspects of the Prosperity Theology feed the old idea that the woes happen due to a disregard for the laws of divinity. So, if lawmakers approve these legal institutes, according to their interpretation, the country will suffer the consequences of disasters similar to the ones of the Old Testament. Something similar happens in the U.S., where more radical groups attributed social woes to the nation's lack of obedience to the "Commandments of the Lord".

The use of the internet for election campaigns in Brazil began in 2009 when it was allowed the use of official websites and forbidden the use of social networking sites. Sites should become unavailable 48 hours before the beginning of the elections and could return 24 hours after the elections. Direct donations to parties and paid ads on the network were not allowed. In that same year, an Electoral

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7 In this regard, see the analysis developed by: FRESTON, Paul. Evangélicos na política brasileira: história ambígua e desafio ético. Curitiba: Encontrão, 1994.
8 The issues raised in this proposal intended to curb manifestations of religious and sexual intolerance, to decriminalize the abortion, to remove from the premises of the State all Christian religious symbols, to approve the civil unions between homosexuals and the adoption of children by these couples, among other issues.
Reform was approved by the National Congress to come into force the year after. From then on, news sites, blogs, social networks, and transmission of e-mails were allowed to be used freely. The anonymity was forbidden and the candidates who felt affected by untrue information and notes had the right to reply. Donations by individuals were allowed and the Web sites and blogs did not have to become unavailable. However, the publication of paid advertisements kept being banned. In the election year, the political-party propaganda on the Internet during election times was allowed from July 5th on, as well as in other media. However, manifestations of supporters in the network are allowed with no definite date to start, since there are no formal requests for votes.

The new globalizing element (internet) added to the means of political propaganda during the last presidency elections, and the American experience - the case of Barack Obama's campaign – serving as an example of how to carry out political propaganda online, the Brazilian Electoral Court allowed candidates to use it. However, the Brazilian experience has demonstrated a very poor and extremely violent debate. The dissemination of false information and the attacks on candidates with the use of false information were abundant. The PT candidate Dilma Rousseff was the one who suffered most of the attacks. However, other candidates have been vilified in equal measure.

The transmission of messages with false or distorted data was intense. Even among evangelicals, who boast that the prohibition to defame others is one of the fundamental evangelical principles, something strange was seen until then, virulent manifestations and messages that mixed political extremism of a conservative content intertwined with opinions based on common sense, and, sometimes, racial and elitist attacks against President Lula’s base of electoral support, with special reference to northeastern Brazil, which he sought to transfer to the candidate Rousseff.

Dilma Rousseff being the candidate chosen by Lula to replace him as the president, polls of voting intentions (public opinion) consistently gave the PT candidate a certain victory of 51-59% in the first round. But she could not obtain an absolute majority and had to work harder in the second round. It was boasted that

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one of the reasons why the PSDB candidate José Serra was able to lead the decision to the second round would have been the theme related to issues that have already been discussed since the first mandate of President Lula, that is, themes covered by PNDH III, which does not arise from statistical data.¹⁰

During the campaign, there were some significant changes in the candidates' statements about certain issues, trying not to miss the votes of certain groups, and religion was one of these themes. The PT candidate assumed to be a Catholic, after saying she was an agnostic.¹¹ The risk of being considered a person without religious values was a burden that the candidate did not want. In fact, in Brazil, this has been a tonic present in election campaigns, that is, irreligious candidates are not well seen by a large portion of the electorate. According to surveys such as the Instituto Datafolha of October 26th, 2010, approximately 36% of the electorate sees as "very important" that the presidential candidate "be religious," while 15% considered "somewhat important."¹² On the other hand, a percentage close to 47% considered "not important" if the candidate is or is not a religious person. This shows that in an election that is decided in two rounds, the 36% of voters who consider that it is important that the candidate be a religious person becomes relevant in the consideration of any candidate for president. When it comes to a close race, religious themes end up being publicly recognized as necessary in the discussion of those who want to please the sectors that are interested in the subject.¹³

CONCLUSION

Rousseff, who proclaimed herself as a Catholic and is Lula’s political heir, was elected with 46%. Her main opponent, the catholic social democrat Jose Serra, was defeated in the second round getting 32%, and the evangelical Marina Silva got 19%. Marina, who had been a member of the PT for many years, ran for elections

¹² Interview Ricardo Mariano IHU.
¹³ According to the sociologist Ricardo Mariano, research of Instituto Datafolha November 26-29/2007 and October 26/2010 shows that in that period, the proportion of voters who consider it "very important" that the candidate "be religious" increased from 31% to 36%.
representing the Green Party (Partido Verde-PV). All identify themselves with positions of a socialist characteristic. In fact, all candidates who appeared in the surveys - the first four - are self identified with the socialist proposals.

The most important element in this whole process was, of course, the objective manifestation of religious sectors that historically tended to be in positions covertly close to the anti-progressive conservatism. The emergence of evangelical leaders in election campaigns was a major step towards the ultimate integration of these sectors in the political and social discussions of the country. This shows a progressive inclusion in the debates that have been happening since the sanction of the Brazilian Constituent Assembly in 1988. Many rated the evangelicals and catholics' participation as being reactionary, however, if we take into consideration that throughout this process the leaders called the believers to discuss matters effectively, one has to have a concrete manifestation of opinion in the public sphere, which is something essential in order to conduct a democratic state properly.

The big problem which arose in the debate initiated in the last election is the flagrant confusion between the public and the private spheres. A deeper analysis – which will not happen in these brief remarks – will demonstrate that there is a huge lack of information on the issue. Many of the themes are seen as indistinctly extended to both spheres, i.e., matters of private interest entering the public and the public making up the private. It was linked that with the approval of PNDH III a kind of "gag" concerning certain topics would occur, for example, the prohibition of the proclamation of the religious message in terms of "denunciation" of certain practices. This is partly true because the proclamation of the religious message, whether in the private or in the public scene, is guaranteed by the Constitution. The ban would be focused on linking a person's particular practice to their exclusion of some function considered public, a job in a company, for example, by way of social exclusion.

The separation between public and private has been an issue in the discussions between these sectors and the groups that are interested in approving certain laws that will curb violence and death situations. Brazil has the highest

14 Silva has recently left the PV. Silva leaves the PV after two years in the party: former senator entered the legend already guaranteed to run for president. R7 News. July 7th, 2011.

number of deaths of homosexual people due to the fact that they are homosexuals. This indicates a very serious social problem. However, the evangelicals, on behalf of a religious freedom achieved through historic discriminations, refuse to practice otherness. Perhaps, the Internet is the vehicle that will allow a greater clarification due to its spectacular range of data and interactivity.