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The Crucible of Local Politics

Local and state politics have turned out to be the most viable arenas in which the left can compete for power, experiment with progressive reforms, and learn how to govern.

BY JONATHAN FOX

While grassroots movements in Latin America have managed to influence national politics at critical junctures in several countries, the left has fared poorly in recent national elections. Since the region's widespread turn to elected civilian rule, political parties that call for participatory social policies and redistributive economic reforms have had little role in governing at the national level. At most, left parties have become very junior partners in centrist governments, as in Chile and Venezuela, or institutionalized minority oppositions with partial veto power, as in Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Pro-business parties are staying in power by successfully marketing "economic stability" to fearful and cautious national voters.

But state power is not limited to the "commanding heights" alone. If one looks at electoral contests for local and state offices in the 1990s, alternative parties—including those that are unconventional but not strictly speaking of the left—have done quite well. The last decade has seen a dramatic weakening of both political-party structures and ideological appeals throughout the region. In their search for honest, transparent, accountable and effi-



cient governance, voters in Latin America's cities have been remarkably willing to experiment with alternative candidates. This willingness to support the opposition does not always favor the left—for instance, Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city, recently elected its first opposition mayor from the far-right wing of the National Action Party (PAN). Nevertheless, local and state politics have turned out to be the most viable arenas in which the left can compete for power, experiment with progressive reforms, and learn how to govern.

The balance sheet is surprising: of Latin America's dozen largest cities with elected governments—mayors of Mexico City and Buenos Aires are still presidentially appointed—nine were governed by left or center-left mayors at some point over the past decade.¹ The capital cities of Venezuela, Uruguay and Paraguay, for example, all recently elected radical mayors; Bogotá just elected an anarchist university professor as mayor; and Lima was governed by the United Left in the 1980s. The Brazilian experience is the most striking. In the 1988 local elections, the Workers Party (PT) won mayoralities in cities accounting for 40% of the national economy, including São Paulo, the largest city in South America. The PT won two successive elections in the industrial city of Porto Alegre, as well as an overwhelming majority in 1992 elections in even larger Belo Horizonte,

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Latin America's ninth largest metropolitan area. Brazil's center-left Democratic Labor Party (PDT), often considered populist, governed the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Curitiba in the 1980s, and Recife was governed by a mayor from the progressive wing of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB).

In the course of the 1980s, just as left parties were beginning to win municipal elections, most national governments in Latin America were devolving major responsibilities to local governments, mainly for services such as health and education.² Much of this devolution of power was enshrined in new or recently reformed constitutions, though the actual resources and autonomy ceded to local authorities varied greatly. Decentralization, which had long been a banner of the left during the difficult return to civilian rule, turned out to be politically compatible with conservative economic policies at the national level. In contrast to the optimistic, radical pro-decentralization discourse of the 1980s, some left analysts have now gone to the other extreme, concluding that decentralization must be inherently negative if conservative national governments and the World Bank favor it. But decentralization has always been ideologically compatible with *both* the left and the right, just as centralization was. In practice, decentralization has been carried out differently in different countries and regions, so there is little reason to assume that its social and political effects will be uniform.

Decentralization does not necessarily involve the democratization of local government. Pinochet's military dictatorship in Chile, for example, devolved huge policy responsibilities for social services to appointed mayors. His appointees continued in power for two years after elections were reinstituted at the national level, until a constitutional amendment in 1991 permitted municipal elections. Nor is decentralization of service delivery alone likely to promote increased accountability. If a local government is already democratic and responsive to its citizens, then



the outcome is promising. If not, then decentralization can reinforce patronage politics or even authoritarian rule at the local level. Some decentralization programs create new concentrations of elite power while others actually do decentralize control. But despite these diverse outcomes, decentralization did pave the way for left victories at the local and regional levels.

Not only have leftist candidates gotten elected, most have managed to successfully govern huge, complex cities. Overall, left local governments have made significant progress towards making city halls operate cleanly and openly, though few have managed to create the alternative institutions called for in their party platforms. While left parties encountered obstacles of their own making, including inexperience and internal conflicts, opposition local governments also faced powerful external constraints. National and international economic trends that have worsened poverty have severely constrained progressive local agendas, while political constraints have been created by combative relations with conservative national governments, and by entrenched authoritarian enclaves that block local democratization.

International economic integration limits the scope for national governments to regulate markets, to generate employment or to redistribute income. Economic growth has not led to significant job creation or poverty reduction in most Latin American countries, and income distribution is becoming more and more uneven. As in the United States since the 1970s, national policies have exacerbated the structural causes of poverty while shifting the burden of increased demand for services to local governments. Local governments have very limited scope to pursue alternative economic policies, and decentralization of responsibility for service provision often involves the thankless task of "administering the crisis." At the same time, however, local governments are gaining control over an increased share of what public spending is left.

Political and economic tensions between local and national governments also strongly influence the possibilities for consolidating alternative forms of governance at the local level. Decentralization is new, and so are the rules for sharing power. When different levels of government are controlled by parties that are in competition, some degree of negotiated power-sharing is necessarily involved. The key issue driving "inter-governmental" relations is money: how to collect it and how to spend it. The struggle usually revolves around the amounts and terms of revenue-sharing. Indeed, this obscure but crucial issue has entered public debate for the first time. Opposition governors are leading the fight for local access to funding in Mexico and Venezuela. Revenue-sharing is also a hot topic in Brazil, where electorally motivated overspending by state and local governments is widely blamed as a structural cause of inflation, and recently elected President Fernando Henrique Cardoso has promised a constitutional amendment to rein in state governments.

National governments often retain a great deal of control over how to allocate funds to localities. In El Salvador or Mexico, the central government in fact recentralized while appearing to decentralize.³ In both countries, the national government has instituted local programs under tight federal control. There is a trend, however, towards replacing overtly political criteria for revenue-sharing with more "objective" technical criteria, such as population size and poverty levels. This "technical fix" actually favors local governments controlled by opposition parties because it makes politically motivated shut-offs by national governments more difficult, or at least more public. Brazil and Argentina have reduced the amount of discretion national governments have in revenue-sharing, while recent municipal democratization in Chile and Colombia was accompanied by greatly increased local access to revenue-sharing.⁴

Another major obstacle to "peaceful coexistence" between competing parties at different levels of gov-



ernment is the winner-take-all political tradition, a style deeply entrenched across the spectrum. While some hostility from conservative-dominated national governments is to be expected, opposition mayors have considerable incentive to establish a working relationship. As many leftist mayors have discovered, a city hall in permanent confrontation with state or national government will have great difficulty delivering basic services or bringing innovative programs to large numbers of citizens, making reelection unlikely.

Local authoritarian enclaves remain entrenched in many areas as well. Exclusionary political practices continue to be problems of *national* scope in a number of countries, including Peru, Venezuela, El Salvador, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic. Mexico is the best-known case, where the Civic Alliance watchdog coalition found that ballot secrecy was violated in 38% of polling places in the 1994 elections. Mexican analysts use the term "selective democratization" to refer to the uneven process of political opening at local and state levels. Voters are allowed to choose their rulers in some regions (mainly in those areas where the opposition comes from the center-right PAN) but not in others (mainly in the south, where much of the opposition comes from the left). Mexico's uneven political transition now includes several different "subnational regimes," ranging from the PAN's four democratically elected state governments to the militarized authoritarianism in the states of Chiapas and Tabasco. The Mexican left's problems getting elected are not, however, only the result of government opposition. The

Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) has had difficulty convincing much of its potential base that it is a viable alternative. The PAN's strategy of "gradual accumulation of forces" at local and state levels has—so far—borne more political fruit than the PRD's bet on a dramatic nationwide "transition through rupture."⁵

Local democratization in Latin America is also blocked by persistent human rights violations. For

many democratic activists trying to defend the exercise of political freedoms at local levels, civilian control over the police and their private-sector allies is a major issue. Some police forces are under direct military rather than civilian control, as in Colombia, Guatemala and—until recently—Haiti. Others are militarized, such as Brazil's state police and Chile's *carabineros*, or may be under the control of "elected" but authoritarian civilian governments, as in much of Mexico. Brazil's military recently occupied Rio de Janeiro's poor *favelas*. Local political life in rural Guatemala remains highly militarized by the army's infamous "civil patrols." El Salvador's current effort to launch its first civilian police force, as part of its negotiated transition to full democracy, is a crucial test case for the region. Overall, however, elected local government's lack of control over the key police forces is a major constraint on the construction of accountability.

Left-led local governments face the challenge of pursuing two different avenues of change at the same time. First, they must do what their voters expect local governments to do: deliver basic services as broadly and efficiently as possible. Left-led governments, of course, claim they can do more than this—that they are distinctive because of their commitment to change the way in which decisions are made and resources are allocated. They typically call for the creation of new institutions that would make policy more transparent and the government more accountable, while creating an enabling environment for participation and representation by traditionally excluded groups.

The Workers Party, for example, has pursued ambitious experiments in governing in new ways. At first, PT governments emphasized the creation of community-based "popular councils" to participate in the municipal policy process. In practice, however, the popular councils had difficulties representing those beyond the minority of already organized citizens. Because of their narrow base, some feared that these



new channels for direct democratic participation in local government might turn into a new kind of left corporatism, trading access to services for controlled participation based on political loyalty. While the popular councils generally failed to consolidate, PT administrations did introduce innovations in other areas, making city finances and budgeting more public and accountable, as well as encouraging significant community participation and decentralization, as in the case of health care and self-managed housing in São Paulo. Porto Alegre, as Ricardo Tavares points out in this issue, has had the most success at broad, sustained citizen participation in the city's budget process, and Belo Horizonte is reportedly making rapid progress in the same direction.⁶

One of the most promising areas for institutional innovation is the process of decentralizing decentralization—that is, using the mechanisms of decentralization to facilitate popular participation in governance. Such reforms break down the classic ideological dichotomy between direct and representative democracy. Since assembly-style direct democracy is hardly viable for cities of millions of people, institutionalizing popular participation in large cities means making representative government more representative by bringing it closer to the citizens. This means both "deconcentration"—making central city services more accessible to outlying neighborhoods—as well as decentralizing decision-making by creating new channels for local representation at the neighborhood and district level. As Peter Winn explains in this issue, this process has been especially vibrant in

Montevideo, where the left coalition Frente Amplio created elected local councils to encourage non-partisan participation and representation.

In some rural areas, new channels are being created for the representation of outlying villages in the town centers. The most dramatic recent change in the direction of rural decentralization is Bolivia's new "Popular Participation Law," which not only gives rural munici-

palities control over 20% of the national budget—up from 9% in 1993—but also creates new “base territorial organizations” that give power over these funds to the outlying villages rather than the town centers.⁷ In Mexico, the Zapatista rebellion set off a broad indigenous civic uprising that threw out the mayors in one third of Chiapas municipalities—far beyond the area of military conflict—creating in their place multi-party, multi-ethnic local councils. These councils in turn formed several regional networks to increase their autonomy and bargaining power *vis-à-vis* state and federal authorities. These “autonomous multi-ethnic regions” are on the cutting edge of institutional innovation to better represent indigenous citizens.

All told, the most widespread trend among leftist local governments is toward pragmatism. There are clear trade-offs between the ideological commitment that inspires party cadre and the political base-broadening and compromises needed to govern. This tension has provoked conflicts between elected reform politicians and their original base—the parties and social movements that expect the new officials to put their agenda first. Yet the first political fact that newly elected authorities must face is that they inherit a not-very-flexible apparatus—and a city council that may well be controlled by other parties.

This raises questions about what alternative local governments can actually achieve in practice, and how they can successfully bridge the left’s traditional commitment to *lo social* with the new importance of *lo cívico*. This shift towards pragmatism also raises basic questions about whom left mayors are supposed to represent. Conflicting definitions of accountability emerge: is the mayor supposed to follow the party line, subject to party discipline, or does the mayor consider her/himself subject to majority rule via the electorate? The voters who elect radical mayors are usually much more pragmatic than the party cadre who organize the campaigns. Rank-and-file voters usually want broader and better-quality basic services. Only ideological cadre care if that involves such heresy as privatization. Voters also want public-sector workers to do their jobs without bankrupting the city, which can mean conflict between mayors and militant unions of city workers, as has occurred in Montevideo, São Paulo and Brasília.

Leftist local governments have become pragmatic. They have had to make trade-offs between the ideological commitment that inspires party cadre and the political compromises needed to govern.

Local politics has also sharpened the question of coalition-building on the left. How important is it to win, for example, if it means having to share power with more moderate parties? In contrast to Lula’s 1994 presidential campaign effort to broaden the PT’s coalitions, many more orthodox PT branches rejected coalition politics in state and local elections. Though the PT did win its first two governorships in 1994—in the Federal District and Espiritu Santo—in many governors’ races where the PT had little chance of winning alone, party branches preferred challenging the center-left to being the junior partner on a winning ticket. The issue of coalition politics is relevant because the PT does not have a monopoly on local-government reform and innovation in Brazil. In the poverty-stricken northeastern state of Ceará, for example, two successive governors from the center-left Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB)—the party of President Cardoso—showed that effective and honest public administration is indeed possible in a region renowned for corrupt patronage politics. Ceará state governments promoted a program of rural community health that managed to reduce the state’s infant mortality rate significantly.⁸ Coalition-building is, however, a double-edged sword in ways that Steve Ellner discusses in the case of Venezuela in this issue. While the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) is a member of Venezuela’s governing coalition after having backed Rafael Caldera in the general elections, the party is now struggling to establish its own identity and power base in the president’s shadow.

Since the transition to elected civilian rule swept Latin America, left parties in local office have implemented significant “good government” reforms. Where these parties have been successful in sweeping away entrenched traditions of corrupt clientelism, they have gained national political influence even if, as in Brazil, they have been out of national office. Left parties still face the major challenges of (re)building public institutions to treat all citizens with equality and of representing the vast majority of the excluded who remain outside the organized grassroots movement. At a time when radical parties have failed to project convincing national alternatives, local government provides the opportunity to begin to build states that both listen and deliver. ■

intransigent opposition to Caldera, who it claims has fallen into the arms of AD and powerful financial interests.

Nor do the two parties see eye-to-eye on the question of decentralization itself. The Causa R has wholeheartedly thrown itself into the fight for the devolution of powers to the localities, while the MAS leadership has been more cautious. As junior partners in the federal government, many MASistas have been sympathetic to President Caldera who has insisted on greater deliberation prior to the transfer of authority to the states, a policy which has earned his Secretary of Decentralization the unjust pejorative "Secretary of Centralization." MAS leader Teodoro Petkoff defends this cautious approach as far preferable to that followed by former President Carlos Andrés Pérez "with all his empty rhetoric which served as a prop for neoliberalism. Caldera has done right in not accepting the extremes of decentralization."⁹



Victorious Causa R candidates Aristóbulo Istúriz (second from left) and Andrés Velásquez (third from left) celebrate 1992 election results.

The left must evaluate its experiences in local and regional government, and design a coherent and fairly uniform strategy for local-state rule. While MAS managed to bring the party's 22 mayors and four governors together for the first time last December, the result was characterized by meeting organizer David De Lima as "an event which for all practical purposes did not occur."¹⁰ Indeed, MAS has been a victim of the

very decentralization which brought to the fore regional leaders who have so ably vied for control of one third of the nation's governorships. In the name of decentralization, MAS' state leaders have refused to accept national evaluation, let alone supervision, of key policies and decisions. Gramsci might have approved of MAS' electoral inroads at the regional level. But he would certainly turn over in his grave at the prospect that the very successes of regional organization and governance could rule out taking power at the national level. ■

The Crucible of Local Politics

1. The data ranking Latin American cities is from Thomas Angotti, "The Latin American Metropolis and the Growth of Inequality," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (January/February, 1995), p. 15.
2. For overviews of decentralization in Latin America, see Jonathan Fox, "Latin America's Emerging Local Politics," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (April, 1994); Andrew Nickson, *Local Government in Latin America* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995); Dieter Nohlen, ed., *Descentralización Política y Consolidación Democrática* (Caracas: Nueva Sociedad, 1991); Charles Reilly, ed., *New Paths to Democratic Development in Latin America* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995); Roy Rivera, "Política Local y Descentralización," *Cuadernos de Ciencias Sociales*, No. 55 (San José: FLACSO, September, 1992); and Gerd Schonwalder, "Popular Participation in Latin American Local Governments: Inroad or Impasse?" paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association, Atlanta, 1994.
3. See John Bailey, "Fiscal Centralism and Pragmatic Accommodation in Nuevo León," and Victoria Rodríguez, "Municipal Autonomy and the Politics of Intergovernmental Finance: Is It Different for the Opposition?" in Victoria Rodríguez and Peter Ward, eds., *Opposition Government in Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1995). See also Victoria Rodríguez, "Mexico's Decentralization in the 1980s: Promises, Promises, Promises..." in Arthur Morris and Stella Lowder, eds., *Decentralization in Latin America* (New York: Praeger, 1992). On Brazil, see Anwar Shah, "The New Fiscal Federalism in Brazil," *World Bank Discussion Papers*, No. 124, 1991.
4. In Colombia, for example, municipal democratization was a direct response to citizen protest in the 1970s and 1980s, though it has met with an especially violent response. See Leon Zamosc, "The Political Crisis and the Prospects for Rural Democracy in Colombia," in Jonathan Fox, ed., *The Challenge of Rural Democratization: Perspectives from Latin America and the Philippines* (London: Frank Cass, 1990); Luis Alberto Restrepo, "Movimientos cívicos en la década de los ochenta," in Francisco Leal Buitrago and Leon Zamosc, eds., *Al filo del caos: Crisis política en la Colombia de los años 80* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1991); Pedro Santana Rodríguez, "Local Governments, Decentralization and Democracy in Colombia," in Charles Reilly, ed., *New Paths to Democratic Development*; Pilar Gaitan Pavia, *Poder Local: Realidad y utopía de la descentralización en Colombia* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo/IEPUN, 1992); and Fabio E. Velásquez, "The Municipality: Colombia's New Scene of Political Activity," *The Urban Age* (Winter, 1994).
5. For the first overview of the opposition in power, see Rodríguez and Ward, *Opposition Government in Mexico*. On the recent presidential elections, see Jonathan Fox and Luis Hernández, "Lessons from Mexico's Elections," *Dissent* (Winter, 1995).
6. On the PT's municipal reform experiences, in addition to Nylen's article in this issue, see Ana Maria Doimo "Movimentos Sociais e Conselhos Populares: desafios de institucionalidade democrática," presented at ANPOCS, 1990; Gabrielle Watson, "Water and Sanitation in São Paulo, Brazil: Successful Strategies for Service Provision in Low-Income Communities," MIT Dept. of Urban Studies and Planning, Master's thesis, 1992; the special issues of the journal *Proposta* (Rio de Janeiro), No. 45 (August, 1990) and No. 54 (August, 1992); Pedro Jacobi, "Extent and Limits of Local Progressive Governments in Brazil—The Workers' Party Administrations," presented at Columbia University's Institute of Latin American and Iberian Studies, March, 1994, and Athayde José Da Motta Filho, et al., "Angra dos Reis: Uma experiência de gestão democrática," *Democracia/PG* (São Paulo), 102 (May-June, 1994). For an excellent overview of the PT in government, see Sue Branford and Bernardo Kucinski, *Brazil: Carnival of the Oppressed* (London: Latin American Bureau, 1995).
7. Jack Epstein, "Reversing its History, Bolivia Gives Power to Indigenous People," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 16, 1995.
8. See Judith Tendler and Sara Freedheim, "Trust in a Rent-Seeking World: Health and Government Transformed in Northeast Brazil," *World Development*, Vol. 22, No. 12 (Dec. 1994). Brazil's developed south also has Curitiba, world famous for its pioneering public transportation and waste-recycling innovations. Yet the city seems to have done little to open new channels for citizen decision-making. See Silvio Caccia Bava and Laura Mullahy,

"Making Cities Livable....," in Charles Reilly, *New Paths to Democratic Development*.

Frente Amplio in Montevideo

1. Tabaré Vázquez, personal interview, September, 1993.
2. *La República* (Montevideo), September 24, 1993.
3. Arles Caruso, personal interview, August, 1993.
4. Lucía Torres, personal interview, August, 1993.
5. Isabel Ordóñez, personal interview, September, 1993.
6. Gabriel Kaplun, "Concejos vecinales, pocos o muchos?" *Brecha* (Montevideo), December 3, 1993, p. 8.
7. Alberto Roselli, personal interview, March, 1995.

The Workers Party in Rural Brazil

1. For a more detailed rendering of this argument and these case studies, see my "Heterodox Socialism and Brazil's Workers' Party (PT): Building from the Lessons of Local Governance" in *The New Politics of Inequality in Latin America* (forthcoming).
2. For an analysis of the growth of neighborhood associations in Brazil in the 1980s, see Ruth Corrêa Leite Cardoso, "Popular Movements in the Context of the Consolidation of Democracy in Brazil" in Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez, eds., *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1992), pp. 291-302; also see José Alvaro Moisés, "Poder Local e Participação Popular" in Pedro Dallari, ed., *Política Municipal* (Porto Alegre: Mercado Aberto/Fundação Wilson Pinheiro, 1985), pp. 11-26.
3. See Victor Nunes Leal, *Coronelismo: the municipality and representative government in Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) [translated from the 1949 Brazilian edition]; and Peter Oakley, "Participation in Development in N.E. Brazil" in *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1980).
4. William W. Goldsmith and Robert Wilson, "Poverty and Distorted Industrialization in the Brazilian Northeast" in *World Development*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (1991).
5. For information on the PT's experience in Fortaleza, see Ercília Maria Braga de Olinda, *A Dimensão Educativa do Partido Político* (Fortaleza: Expressão, 1991); also Valeska Peres Pinto, "Prefeitura de Fortaleza: administração popular, 1986-88," *Pólis*, No. 6 (1992).
6. Icapuí's accomplishments in public education came to the attention of UNICEF, which awarded its "Child and Peace-Education" award to the town in 1991. UNICEF co-sponsored a 15-volume series entitled *Education and Municipal Development* with Icapuí and four other PT-administered cities each meriting their own volume. See MED/UNICEF/CENPEC, "Todas as Crianças na Escola: A Experiência De Icapuí-CE, 1989/1992," Vol. 12 (Brasília: Quantum/ MED/UNICEF/CENPEC, 1993).
7. See Marco Antonio de Almeida, "Estudos de gestão," *Pólis*, No. 11 (1993); also Edson Campos, "Longe das capitais," *Teoria & Debate*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1992).
8. Luiz Teixeira, Aírton's executive assistant, personal interview, Icapuí, July 15, 1993.
9. See Odorico Monteiro de Andrade and Neusa Goya, eds., *Sistemas Locais de Saúde em Municípios de Pequeno Porte: A Resposta de Icapuí*, 2nd. edition (Fortaleza: Expressão, 1992).
10. Margaret Keck, *The Workers' Party and Democratization in Brazil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 79.
11. Francisco Gladstone, personal interview, Quixadá, August 4, 1993.
12. Francisca Alves de Sousa, secretary of education under Mayor Teixeira, personal interview, Icapuí, July 15, 1993.
13. Augusto Alvaro Jerônimo Gomes, secretary of education, personal interview, July 19, 1995.
14. José Nobre Guimarães, personal interview, Fortaleza, July 27, 1995.
15. See Cláudio Gonçalves Couto e Fernando Luiz Abrucio, "A Dialética Da Mudança: O PT confronta-se com a institucionalidade," working paper for Centro de Estudos de Cultura Contemporânea (CEDEC), São Paulo (mimeo, no date).
16. Valeska Peres Pinto, "Prefeitura de Fortaleza: administração popular, 1986-88," *Pólis*, No. 6 (1992). In 1990, just two years after the PT won municipal elections in 32 cities, 12 (or 38%) of those mayors had left or been expelled from the party. Fortaleza was looking like merely the first case of a developing model of PT "fratricidal" governance.

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