

Black Woman In Race to Be Mayor of Rio

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Nov. 13 — In Rio, where Afro-Brazilian success stories are usually confined to soccer and samba, a black woman is rattling Latin dominance of politics by campaigning strongly in Rio de Janeiro's mayoral elections on Sunday.

The candidate, Benedita Souza da Silva, a 50-year-old congresswoman, has broken four centuries of racial tradition in Brazilian politics by bidding to lead Rio, the cultural and social bellwether for Latin America's largest country.

With the mayorship of Brazil's second largest city at stake, the two-way race is seen as too close to call. Three polls forecast a victory by Mrs. da Silva. Three other polls project a victory by her opponent, César Maia, an economist of European descent.

Whether she wins or loses, Mrs. da Silva's candidacy is expected to change racial politics in a city where about half of the six million residents are of African descent. Reflecting a pattern found across Brazil, only four members of Rio's 42-member city council are black. Demographers estimate that blacks make up nearly half of Brazil's 150 million people.

"This election is most important for Brazil: for the first time Afro-Brazilians have a chance to elect a black woman as Mayor," Mrs. da Silva said on Thursday, her voice hoarse from nonstop campaigning. "For years, a Brazilian politician has always been rich, white and male. Now we have a new profile: a black woman from a poor background."

Election Shock

To the shock of Rio's European-descended political elite, the new profile has caught on.

With polls giving her only 4 percent of the vote at the start of the campaign, Benê, as she is popularly known, placed first among six major-party candidates in the first round of the election on Oct. 3, winning 800,000 votes and knocking the candidate of Rio's ruling party out of the race. Her candidacy expanded the base of her party, the



Benedita Souza da Silva, candidate for Mayor of Rio de Janeiro, campaigning this week. The 50-year-old congresswoman has broken four centuries of racial tradition in Brazilian politics by bidding to lead Rio.

Workers Party, from middle-class beachfront zones to Rio's crowded hillside slums and sprawling working-class neighborhoods.

"Benedita could function as a non-traditional role model," said Carlos Hasenbalg, a sociologist who is deputy director of the Center for Afro-Asian Studies here. "Rio's whites have to get used to seeing blacks in positions of importance beyond sports and entertainment."

Mrs. da Silva's candidacy has set off what Mr. Hasenbalg and others call a political polarization in Rio along racial lines. According to one poll last week, 71 percent of blacks who had chosen a candidate planned to vote for Mrs. da Silva. Among decided Euro-

Win or lose, she is changing Brazilian politics.

pean voters, 65 percent said they would vote for Mr. Maia. Voters of mixed race were evenly divided.

Billing herself in television advertisements as "the face of Rio," the face of Mrs. da Silva is the kind that is rare among political candidates here.

Indeed, voters may elect a woman whose neighborhood, Chapéu Mangueira, does not appear on city maps. Rio's mapmakers routinely airbrush away the city's hillside shantytowns. The mayoral candidate's bustling district appears on maps as an unlabeled patch of parklike green overlooking Copacabana Beach.

The Rio shantytown where Mrs. da Silva was born in 1942 was later burned by a mayor determined to keep poor migrants far from Rio's beaches. One of 13 children born to a laundress and a man who washed cars, only Benê and five others reached adulthood. Today, the woman who would be Rio's Mayor counts among her siblings four sisters who work as housemaids.

At age 10, Mrs. da Silva started a long series of odd jobs — street vendor, market porter, house cleaner, nurse's aide and school janitor. Married at 16, she had five children in five years. Only two survived infancy.

Developed Fighting Spirit

By the 1960's, Mrs. da Silva was already politically active, fighting with city authorities to provide water, electricity, a health clinic and a primary school to a neighborhood that the city refused to place on the map. Today, she recalls two figures who helped forge an early fighting spirit: Dom Helder Câmara, a Roman Catholic prelate who defended the rights of the poor in face of Brazil's military dictatorship, and a grandmother, Maria Rosa, who in 1888 was freed from slavery.

Although her mother was a priest of the macumba Afro-Brazilian religion, Mrs. da Silva, whose first name means "blessed" in Portuguese, embraced evangelical Protestantism at age 26. She joined the Assembly of God church and gave up smoking and drinking.

Today, her dresses are simple, her shoes are low-heeled, and she wears no earrings. Regularly denounced as "sects" by the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil, evangelical Protestant churches claim to have two million adherents in Rio alone.

In the late 1970's, Mrs. da Silva joined the fledgling Workers Party, Brazil's most powerful leftist party. In 1983 she was elected a Rio city councilwoman on the party ticket. Winning elections with increasingly high margins, Mrs. da Silva, a widowed grandmother, was recently elected national vice president of the party.

Mrs. da Silva said she gives 30 percent of her congressional salary to her party and 10 percent to her church.

First Black Congresswoman

In 1987, Mrs. da Silva became the first black woman elected to the Brazilian Congress. Although Brazil often claims to have the largest black population outside Nigeria, fewer than 10 members of Brazil's 584-member Congress consider themselves black.

The pioneering nature of Mrs. da Silva's presence in Brasília was captured in a conversation she had with a fellow freshman congresswoman, Márcia Kubitschek, daughter of a former Brazilian President.

"Remember me?" Mrs. da Silva said as a smile froze on the face of the heir to one of Brazil's most famous political names.

Turning the clock back 25 years, the congresswoman from Chapéu Mangueira recalled she was the daughter of the washerwoman who regularly delivered clean laundry to the Kubitscheks' Copacabana apartment.