

# A Brazilian political phenomenon

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Lula and sister Maria, photographer's studio, 1949

The presentation of the Chatham House Prize to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, President of Brazil, is not only a recognition of the increasingly important role now being played on the world scene by Brazil, the country, but of the quite extraordinary phenomenon of President Lula himself.

With a population approaching 200 million, Brazil in 2002, elected for the first time a President drawn from the very heart of that massive population, with a life experience very familiar to many millions of them. Previously, Brazilian Presidents had been drawn from the white middle and upper classes, moneyed, educated, and frequently from political dynasties. This time they had elected a President who has shared the hardships, suffering and challenges, despite enormous obstacles, of the great mass of the population.

President Lula has made good use of his heritage in applying policies to assist that great mass, whilst having the good sense to put the economy, finance, foreign affairs and defence in the hands of competent ministers drawn from the appropriate backgrounds. That combination



has underpinned the massive progress that the country is now making both economically and politically. Added to that is the fresh and shrewd approach that the President has taken to world affairs, an arena in which he had previously no experience of significance. That approach has had a massive impact. Brazil is increasingly being recognised as a new major player on the world scene, with a President clearly representative of his people, determined to play to Brazil's strengths as a sovereign, peaceful, increasingly prosperous giant. It all could have been so different. With his poverty-stricken origins, and involvement for years in the struggles of the industrial trades unions, he could have brought to the Presidency hard-left politics, Chávez-like world grand-standing, and hostility towards Uncle Sam. In practice, his unique combination of heritage, common sense and touch, and sheer enthusiasm, has given us a phenomenon so rightly being recognised tonight.

Lula, a local nickname for Luiz, was born in 1945 in Garanhuns, a small poor agricultural town 228 km west of Recife in northeastern Brazil. Known by that diminutive from the start, it became so defining a name that he formally adopted it in 1981. He was born into a poor subsistence farming family, in a tiny house, with a wooden roof, one cement floor in the main room, beaten earth elsewhere, no electricity or piped water, and reliant on firewood for cooking and water heating. He was the seventh child of the remarkable Dona Lindu, whose husband Aristides had left the previous month to travel by pau-de-arara (charabanc) the 2,500 km to Santos, São Paulo's seaport, in search of work. Like so many of the local people, they were of mixed European and Amerindian descent, with the only known provenance, being the reputed Italian descent of his grandmother. Dona Lindu maintained her family by subsistence farming, but as with so much of the northeast of Brazil, this was struck by yet another drought.

When Lula was seven his mother sold up, and took her children on a pau-de-arara to Santos in search of her husband. They travelled on the back of a canvass-covered lorry, together with 50 other migrants, carrying their own food, for 13 days. On arrival they found Lula's father, an illiterate with a weakness for cachaça (the local firewater) installed with a new partner and family, earning his living as a stevedore in Santos port, loading sacks of coffee. Nevertheless, he took them in, and provided for them. However, to make ends meet,

Dona Lindu took in washing and sorted coffee beans. The children were sent out to work. An eight year old Lula was out on the streets selling peanuts and oranges, becoming a street-wise urban child. The children worked by day, and went to school at night.

Lula's mother moved to Vila Carioca, an industrial suburb of Greater São Paulo, when he was ten and Lula, originally left behind with his drunken father, joined her a year later. They lived in a room behind a bar owned by a relative in an unpaved district, with Lula now earning money shining shoes, working in a dry cleaners, and finally in a screw manufacturers. It was here, as a teenager that he embarked on an industrial training programme and qualified as a lathe operator. During the 1964 downturn, Lula found himself unemployed for eight months, but finally achieved employment as a lathe-turner on the night shift. Not long thereafter, he suffered an industrial injury, losing a little finger when a press fell on his hand. The compensation enabled his mother to buy a small plot of land, and for them to furnish the house. He finally got a metalurgical job in a more reputable company, Aços Villares. Lula was now a typical local young working man, mad on football, disinterested in politics or union activity, but taking a lively interest in the girls. In 1969, he married a textile worker from the interior of São Paulo State. They set up home, and she became pregnant. Well into her pregnancy, she fell ill and was taken to hospital, only to suffer medical neglect, and to die with her little boy, allegedly of hepatitis.

It was at this time that Lula accidentally embarked on his union career. The previous year he had joined the Metalworkers' Union. At the insistence of his trade union activist brother, Frei Chico, Lula stood for the local union executive, and their slate won the union election. Conscientiously, Lula did his work for his local members at Villares. Why was he recruited? Perhaps Lula's brother could already see Lula's gift for leadership.

Following the death of his wife, Lula went through a period of acute depression, spending many hours at the graveside. Finally, his personal life reverted to his enthusiasm for football and the girls. A girlfriend gave birth to a little girl, but the relationship failed. A new love appeared in Lula's life, Marisa, a school secretary, whom he married in 1974, and he went on to enjoy a very stable family life with three children. He became a full-time union official. A year later, he became President of the local union in São Bernardo, opposed by a local communist slate. Lula's trade union career had well and truly begun.

The next few years were fully taken up in his union activities. Motivated by improving the lot of the industrial workers in Greater São Paulo, he naturally came to the attention of the Military Dictatorship's

security apparatus. His brother meanwhile had joined the Communist Party, and was arrested in a security sweep and tortured. Lula intervened at great personal risk, and after a court case, he was released. The net result of the episode was to radicalise Lula. He increasingly led his union into escalating labour disputes, but all with the characteristic of non-violence, which in turn gained the support of the local Catholic Church. However, the authorities, alarmed by the wide-scale of the unrest, arrested him with other trade unionists, lawyers and a churchman. Imprisoned for a month, they were finally released.

It was 1980, and Lula relinquished his Presidency of the São Bernardo metalworkers union to become the President of the newly formed Workers' Party. He unsuccessfully ran for the State Governorship of São Paulo two years later. In 1986 he achieved election as a Federal Deputy, but gave up the seat in 1990, with his eye on the Presidency. He fought unsuccessfully for the office in 1989, 1994 and 1998.

Lula ran for the fourth time in the Presidential Election of 2002, following the retirement of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, against his nominated successor, José Serra. On this occasion, Lula won. History had been made: A Brazilian with his roots in the desperate rural poverty of the northeast, with the harsh experience of life on the streets and then in the industrial heartland of São Paulo, had risen all the way to the top – to lead his nation with panache and understanding into the 21st century. **F**

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Lula (third from left), mother Dona Lindu and family, Santos beach, 1954

