# MARINA SILVA and the rise of sustainability IN BRAZIL

In August 2014, the Brazilian political landscape was rocked by the ‘Marina phenomenon’. After the death of Eduardo Campos in an airplane accident, the presidential ticket of the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) was assumed by Marina Silva – former Minister of Environment under Lula da Silva, former Green Party presidential candidate, and one of the founders of the political platform *Rede Sustentabilidade* (Sustainability Network). Spurred by popular disillusionment with the Worker’s Party (PT) and the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) – the two parties that have dominated Brazilian politics in recent decades – the PSB quickly jumped from 8% to 21% in voting intention polls. In the end, however, Silva did not reach the second round of the election and ended up supporting PSDB candidate Aécio Neves against Dilma Rousseff, from the ruling PT. What does this turn of events mean for the ideas espoused by Silva, namely her emphasis on environmental issues and sustainable development?

It is too soon to declare the demise of the ‘phenomenon’ embodied by Silva. This article analyses the origins of Silva’s challenge to the political status quo, arguing that more important than her electoral results are the lasting implications of the sustainability discourse she espoused. This discourse not only accentuated an environmental-focused cleavage previously absent in Brazilian politics but also, and perhaps more importantly, contributed to the consolidation of an overarching, sustainability-centred political challenge. This challenge goes beyond environmental issues by conjoining a diverse range of social, economic and political demands such as the reform of the political system, the fight against corruption and the control of inflation.

## ENVIRONMENTALISM AND BEYOND

The Lula administration set out to bring together industrial elites, workers and civil society representatives around a national development agenda. Thus, traditionally excluded sectors – such as representatives of organised labour, academics and leaders of civil society movements – were included in the government. The appointment of Marina Silva – a black woman from the poor Amazonian state of Acre, illiterate until her adolescence, rural activist during the 1980s, member of the PT since its foundation and the first rubber tapper elected to the Federal Senate in 1994 – as Minister of Environment epitomized this new model of state-society relations.

During her years in office (2003-2008), Silva achieved some major successes. Between 2005 and 2011, Brazil lowered the rate of deforestation in the Amazon region by 50%, countering historical trends and achieving a reduction of GHG emissions of 30% (Hochstetler and Viola, 2012). More effective law enforcement over forest and land use was implemented in protected areas, including requirements on state governments to develop deforestation reduction plans, promoting real-time monitoring by authorities, and greater penalties for offenders. Becoming an emission reduction leader after a long track record of Amazon deforestation, enhanced Brazil’s profile in international environmental diplomacy. In recognition of her actions, in 2007 the United Nations Environmental Programme named Silva one of the *Champions of the Earth* – ‘for championing conservation while taking account of the perspectives of people who use the resources in their daily lives’.

Silva’s interest and ideals, and those of her civil society and rural allies, often clashed with the interests of the PT’s industrialist faction, in particular those represented by the Ministry of Energy, then led by Dilma Rousseff. Pro-industrial policies translated into growing energy demands, and subsequently into projects for new hydroelectric dams in the Amazon and the expansion of nuclear power. The PT government’s developmental policy also promoted the creation of ‘national champions’ in environmentally-sensitive sectors where Brazil has ample resources, including agribusiness, paper pulp, mining, and oil. This resulted in tensions between the government and environmental sectors, eventually leading to the resignation of Silva from her ministerial role in 2008, and from the PT in 2009 (Kröger, 2014).

Outside government, Silva continued to champion environmental issues, raising the profile of environmental questions in public opinion and political debates. During Senate debates in 2009, in light of the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, she pursued the formalisation into Brazilian law of post-Kyoto agreements. She then became the presidential candidate for the Greens, advancing the notion of sustainable development as a third developmental alternative for Brazil – one that would simultaneously transcend the PSDB’s financial neoliberalism and the PT’s growth-oriented industrialism. Silva wanted Brazil to assume the role of ‘environmental power’, exploiting its competitive advantages to be at the forefront in the transition to a low carbon economy.

The 2010 presidential campaign, where the Green Party achieved a historic third place with 19,3% of the votes, enabled Silva to emerge as the new ‘honest figure’ of Brazilian politics, a role previously occupied by the PT and by Lula. The latter’s status, however, had been irrevocably shaken by the *Mensalão* scandal, in which various PT figures were found guilty of running an intricate parliamentary vote-buying scheme. Silva reaped the benefits, attracting a diverse array of voters across the socio-economic spectrum: disenchanted – traditionally pro-PT – sectors of the middle-class; environmentally-conscious young and educated upper-class voters; the influential Pentecostal community (Silva’s religious denomination); and lower-class sectors from the Northern regions. Silva’s rise coincided with a transition in her political rhetoric, from an environmental discourse that was predominantly issue-based to a more encompassing challenge to the Brazilian political system. This challenge was underpinned by the notion of sustainability, more precisely that of sustainable development.

## SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ‘NEW POLITICS’

After the 2010 elections, Silva and her allies began to develop a more assertive political project. In November 2011, Marina joined forces with Alfredo Sirkis, the founder of the Green Party, and with some of the leaders of the influential Brazilian corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement. These included Guilherme Leal, her running mate in the elections and one of the owners of the personal care giant Natura, Oded Grajew and Ricardo Young, both co-founders of the Ethos Institute for Business and Social Responsibility. Together they launched the *Movimento por uma Nova Política*. This movement aspired to be a multi-party ‘collective’ aimed at overcoming the representation deficit of Brazilian political institutions and promoting an alternative political model combining ‘development with sustainability’. The movement’s Charter of Principles stated it to be ‘free, open, autonomous and democratic, supra-party and without religious affiliation, pursuing the construction of environmental, social, economic, ethical, political, cultural and aesthetical sustainability’ (MNP, 2013). After breaking with the Green Party, accusing differences with the party’s traditional leadership, Silva and her associates moved a step further in the institutionalization of the movement: in February 2013 they announced the formation of the *Rede Sustentabilidade* in an attempt to bring together representatives from civil society, business, and politicians from other political forces – among them Domingos Dutra and Walter Feldman, co-founders of the PT and the PSDB respectively.

The network claimed to uphold a cross-party, de-centralized spirit that transcended electoral cycles. However, somewhat paradoxically, the creation of a full-blown political party seems to have been also envisaged from the onset. In the run-up to the 2014 elections, the Electoral Supreme Court rejected an application to register the *Rede*, stating that it had failed to validate all necessary signatures. This situation reinforced Silva’s ‘anti-establishment’ aura and led to the electoral alliance with the PSB. In November 2014, a few days after Rousseff’s win, efforts were resumed to create an independent political party from within the network.

The emergence of *Rede Sustentabilidade* shows the extent to which Brazilian environmentalism has expanded. The network’s manifesto – despite the vague terms in which it is written – outlines an all-encompassing plan for the transformation of Brazilian politics and society. It proposes, among others issues, changes in the economic model in the direction of a ‘socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable development project’; the reform of the political system aiming at an alternative ‘governance model’; the reduction of inequalities and poverty eradication; the democratization of the ‘communication system’, meaning freedom of expression and universal access to information; and a foreign policy committed to reducing inequalities and building effective global governance institutions (Rede\_Sustentabilidade, 2013).

The manifesto also illuminates the *Rede*’s claim to be a harbinger of a ‘new politics’ in Brazil. Riding on the wave of widespread public discontent with the political system (most visible during the June 2013 protests), the network sought to fashion an image of itself as a 21st century political movement. In light of the Arab Spring and anti-austerity mobilisations in Europe, Silva considered a new politics was necessary to represent the interests of emerging ‘non-governmental individuals’ and groups that do not identify with dominant political practices – what she referred to as *deslocamento da borda* (‘detachment from the edge’). In the local context, this entailed efforts to escape the tendency in Brazilian society to see politics as intrinsically connected with the exchange of favours and with promiscuous relations with special interests, embodied in the ‘old politics’ of the PT-PSDB binary. Hence, the network’s statutes contain a number of ‘moralizing’ regulations: no politician with previous convictions is allowed to join; the *Rede* will not accept donations from the arms, alcohol, and tobacco industries or from agribusiness; social councils tasked with the monitorization of the network have also been established.

However, the network’s call for a new politics leaves many questions unanswered. It is not clear, for example, how the *Rede* relates with other environmentalist movements and green political forces. In an interview given to *Brasil Econômico* in January 2013, Silva lambasted the Green Party for succumbing to a ‘strictly pragmatic vision of politics’ and claimed to see ‘no possibility’ of a rapprochement. Going forward, she claimed that the environmentalist agenda is now an ‘agenda of resistance’ in the face of the numerous ‘regressions’ that occurred during the Rousseff administration (Venceslau, 2013). The position of the network vis-à-vis the Green Party is symptomatic of an uneasy relationship with other forces in the Brazilian political system. This is, after all, a platform that claims to be grassroots whilst including several elected politicians amongst its ranks; that declares autonomy from existing political parties and yet has entered into a coalition with the PSB; that calls for a radical re-founding of state-society relations while maintaining close links with influential corporate actors;[[1]](#footnote-1) and that declares itself above the political party fray whilst seeking to legalize itself as a party ready to run for election. Thus it remains uncertain what kind of political force the *Rede* wishes to be, how it conceives its relations with existing political institutions, and how it proposes to go about the actual process of governing.

Further questions surround the network’s understanding of sustainability. The *Rede*’s statements veer between a combative environmentalism that challenges the political and economic status quo – Silva’s ‘agenda of resistance’ – and a marked developmentalist outlook that is ultimately embedded in that status quo. The manifesto stresses the importance of reforming Brazil’s development model not exactly to question developmentalism as such, but rather to ensure that the whole society benefits from the exploitation of Brazil’s natural resources. Yet, in her 2014 campaign Silva reaffirmed her commitment to orthodox economic goals such as tackling inflation and guaranteeing the independence of the Central Bank. Thus, anyone looking in the manifesto, or in Silva’s actions, for a radical questioning of the relations between society and nature will be disappointed and struck by the numerous contradictions.

**CONCLUSION**

Looking at the manifesto of the *Rede Sustentabilidade* and the latter’s relation to other forces in the Brazilian political system, it is possible to begin to discern the nature of, as well as the difficulties faced by, the ‘sustainability challenge’. This challenge has begun to impact upon the Brazilian political landscape even though it has yet to decisively alter the balance of forces.

On the one hand, Silva and her supporters have helped position sustainability as a relevant signifier in public opinion and electoral competition, not only in relation to environmental politics, but also extending to issues of political reform and the fight against corruption. Silva and her allies have successfully mobilized sustainability to capture the social demands that erupted during the 2013 protests, interpreting them as evidence of the need for an alternative political project. This has pressured President Rousseff to make a number of concessions by increasing public participation in the policymaking process, investment in infrastructure and public transparency. The ongoing corruption investigations involving high executives of Petrobras can also be seen as a result of this emerging political landscape.

On the other hand, the extent to which the Brazilian electorate accepts the sustainability challenge as a cohesive and distinct political project, separate from and capable of overtaking the traditional parties, is yet to be electorally validated. The candidates from ‘old politics’ comfortably outperformed Silva in the latest elections. The sustainability discourse may have become an important element in Brazilian politics, but it still faces the risk of co-optation and the uphill struggle of resisting the influence of deeply-ingrained structures of political mobilization.

## References

Hochstetler K and Viola E (2012) Brazil and the politics of climate change: beyond the global commons. *Environmental Politics*, 21(5), 753–771.

Kröger M (2014) *Contentious Agency and Natural Resource Politics*. Basingstoke, Routledge.

MNP (2013) Movimento por uma Nova Política. Available from: http://novapolitica.com.br/ (accessed 3 October 2013).

Rede\_Sustentabilidade (2013) Manifesto: Diretrizes Programáticas da Rede Sustentabilidade. Available from: http://redesustentabilidade.org.br/manifesto/ (accessed 13 November 2014).

Venceslau P (2013) Não se trata apenas de criar partido e disputar eleição. *Ultimo Segundo*, 14th January.

## 

1. Natura’s Guilherme Leal, one of the richest persons in the world, was a key contributor to Marina’s 2014 campaign. Moreover, Silva’s links with the Brazilian CSR movement brought her influential allies: Marie Alice Setubal, member of the family owning the Itaú Bank and president of the Tide Setubal Foundation, is reported to have financed over 80% of the Marina Silva Foundation in 2013, and was another major individual contributor to the PSB’s campaign. Ironically, these connections allowed the PT’s campaign to spin her as the ‘candidate of businessmen’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)