

Small talk

26 September 2014



Brazil has developed as an economic force under the guise of a 'soft' power, so a sharp tongued president may just be what the nation needs, says Derek Sambrook

Ouch. That must have hurt. Israeli foreign ministry spokesman, Yigal Palmor, fired a verbal missile at Brazil when he commented that although the country is an economic and cultural giant, it "remains a diplomatic dwarf". The root cause of this ill-tempered remark was Brazil's decision in July to condemn Israel for its "disproportionate use of force" in the recent Gaza Strip offensive. This was followed by Brazil's ambassador in Tel Aviv being recalled for 'consultation'; Ecuador did the same for similar reasons.

Palmor's coup de grace, however, was his reference to Brazil's defeat to Germany in this summer's World Cup when providing his interpretation of what "disproportionate" meant. He explained: "In football, when a game ends in a draw, you think it is proportional, but when it finishes 7-1 its disproportioned." Brazil cried foul and commented that it is one of only 11 countries worldwide that have diplomatic relations with all members of the United Nations.

I have frequently commented that Brazil is a gentle giant (it is a little smaller in area than the US, whereas Israel is approximately the size of the US state of New Jersey) and wishes to be a pacifist in both regional and international conflicts. Three centuries of slavery followed by 21 years of dictatorship in the twentieth century have made Brazilians acutely aware of human rights, and in fact, Israel's national holocaust museum, which recognises non-Jews who saved Jewish lives during the holocaust by the designation, Yad Vashem (righteous among the nations), has honoured two Brazilians.

Namely, Luis Martins Souza Dantas, Brazil's ambassador in France, and Aracy Guimarães Rosa, who worked at the Brazilian consulate in Hamburg. Both of them saved thousands of Jews during the war by issuing visas to Brazil.

Brazil's lower middle class now represents over half the population after five centuries of glaring inequalities. Today, the nation's global standing has rarely been higher and putting aside the UN, it has good relations (sorry Mr. Palmor) with nearly every country. It may not be a military power, but it is an emerging one. It does not have border disputes, such as India or China, and it has been described as the first big 'soft' power, although the term has been applied to China as well by some political commentators.

October sees the country immersed in a presidential election and although the gap between the main contenders is not as close as Scotland's independence polls were suggesting before the referendum, at this point the outcome is expected to be close. It was thought that Dilma Rousseff, the incumbent, would face her strongest challenge from Aécio Neves of the centre-right Brazilian Social Democracy Party; that was before Marina Silva of the centrist Brazilian Socialist Party replaced Eduardo Campos, its leader, after he was killed in a plane crash.

Hailing from Acre, a state in Brazil's Amazon region, she grew up poor (the daughter of a rubber tapper) and which doubtless contributed to her intestinal fortitude which has been constantly on display during her campaign. She taught herself to read, worked as a maid, and paid her way through university to become a history teacher. Her political history makes good reading too. She was in the vanguard of Brazil's green movement in the 1980s and was a co-founder of the Workers Party; Luis Inácio Lula da Silva was her mentor. She became a senator and between 2003 and 2008 she was environment minister in Lula's government.

After a poor economic performance during the last four years, 75 per cent of the population eagerly want change, and although she presents well and has taken a conciliatory position, Marina Silva remains an unknown factor. She has promised not to raise taxes, some of the highest in the world; Brazil taxes like Sweden but delivers very poor public services. And then there's the usual Latin American conundrum, split control of the legislature. She can count on no more than 120 votes in the 513-seat lower house.

An important component of the BRICS and unlike a dwarf whose growth is permanently stunted, Brazil continues to grow in stature on the world's stage. At this point in time, with her forthrightness, perhaps a Silva-tongued president is just what the doctor ordered.

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