

Maluf, Kassab, Haddad: Just Another Arab Descendant at Helm of Brazil's Biggest City

Written by Alexandre Rocha

Tuesday, 30 October 2012 13:16



Out goes Gilberto Kassab (PSD party member), in goes Fernando Haddad (PT). As of January 1st, São Paulo will have a new mayor, from a different party, with novel political and ideological orientations. One thing, though, remains the same: the Arab roots of the overseer of Brazil's biggest Metropolis.

Kassab, whose term in office is about to end, is a grandson of Lebanese grandparents, Haddad, elected last Sunday (28th), is a son to a Lebanese father. Both feel at home in São Paulo's Arab community, and yet, in the election and in their political careers, they have been in opposing camps.

The current mayor backed the candidacy of his predecessor and political mentor José Serra (PSDB), who was defeated in the municipal elections. On his part, the mayor-elect was supported by his party's two leading figures, former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and current president Dilma Rousseff. Haddad was minister of Education from 2005 until January this year.

Haddad's family history is akin to those of countless other immigrants. His father was a haberdasher, and the mayor-to-be worked in the trade while young.

"I used to work on 25 de Março Street, I would walk around the Brás and Bom Retiro [neighborhoods] with a catalogue under my arm," he said this Monday (29th) at a press conference, while discussing the revitalization of the city's central area. The three locations he mentioned are wholesale and popular trade hubs. The former two boast a strong Arab presence.

Haddad, however, did not stay in trade; instead he went to Law School at the University of São Paulo, where he presided over Academic Center August 11th, then pursued a master's in Economics, a PhD in Philosophy, and finally opted for an academic career.

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The newest Arab in charge of São Paulo - prior to Kassab, the city was governed from 1993 to 1996 by Paulo Maluf (PP), another Lebanese descendent -, one of Haddad's greatest trump cards is the acceptance he enjoys in federal government circles.

This Monday he met with president Dilma in Brasília to discuss the city. "São Paulo is a global, worldly city, and as such it needs to be more in line with the state and federal governments, for the sake of the well-being of its people," he said.

He said he wants to carry out a "high-level" transition with his predecessor, and that the president will set up a federal government team to follow up the process and establish "a working routine" between the two administrations.

According to the mayor-elect, partnership between the municipal, state, and federal governments is important anywhere in the world. He cited examples of large metropolises like New York, London, Paris and Shanghai. "Investment here [in São Paulo] needs to have nationwide repercussion," he said.

When questioned about international cooperation following his mention of foreign cities, the mayor-elect told ANBA that "these relations are currently low in intensity." He spoke of "revitalizing" the Secretariat of Foreign Relations.

This Tuesday (30th), Haddad will attend meetings with state governor Geraldo Alckmin and mayor Kassab. Alckmin is affiliated with PSDB, the same party as his defeated adversary Serra's, and the main opponent to Dilma's and the mayor-elect's PT. "My first action will be strategic alignment with the state and federal governments," he said.

Given the high crime rate, security is one of the issues to be aligned with the state, since this sphere of government is the main agent to this end in Brazil.

"The mayor cannot exempt himself from this task," said Haddad. He said he wants to

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"emphasize the community-oriented" character of the Civil Guard, the City Hall, and the "delegate operation," an agreement between the state and municipalities allowing for military policemen to work for city halls on off days. The MP is commanded by the state government and carries out police patrol work.

Right from the start of his four-year term, the new mayor intends to propose an "urban reform" based on the "Future Arc" notion set forth in his administration plan, which provides for decentralized development through job creation in "dormitory" neighborhoods and a supply of housing in neighborhoods with strong economic activity, so as to bring workers nearer the workplace. "We want to expand the city sustainably," he said. "This reconciliation will allow for the periphery to reunite with the center," he said.

According to him, the reform will take place across five different legal frameworks: Director Plan, zoning, urban operations, Code of Works, and tax laws. Changes to these areas will require approval from the City Council.

Haddad expects to mirror, in the City Hall, the same coalition of parties which backs the federal government in the National Congress. On which side the current mayor's PSD will be is yet to be known. "But I do not believe the PSD will systematically oppose us," he said.

Haddad also promised "complete transparency" in City Hall actions. "We will adhere strictly to the Information Access Act," he said, adding that this is an "absolute, fundamental right" of citizens. "Whatever can be made available online will be made available online," he said.

He also said he aims to create a Municipal Comptroller General's Office to inspect the actions of the administration, similar to the Federal Comptroller General's Office. "Creating a 'Transparency Portal' for the municipality will be very useful for keeping track of the City Hall's different partnerships," he said.

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