



March 20, 2011

# President Underscores Similarities With Brazilians, but Sidesteps One

By **ALEXEI BARRIONUEVO** and **JACKIE CALMES**

RIO de JANEIRO — From a visit to this city’s most infamous slum to a national address amid the gilded elegance of a celebrated theater, **President Obama** on Sunday sought to underscore the shared histories and futures of the United States and **Brazil**, reaching out to the people of one of the most racially diverse countries in the Americas.

But Mr. Obama, on the second day of a five-day tour of Latin America, once again seemed to sidestep mentioning his own racial background in appearances here, even as Brazilians who gathered at a plaza trying to catch a glimpse of him said that he had inspired millions in this country because of his African heritage.

“Because he knows the reality of discrimination against blacks, it would be very important for him to pass on the message that it is possible to get somewhere, to be someone, in spite of all the difficulties,” said Célio Frias, a 46-year-old businessman. “He is an inspiration.”

From their first public comments together on Saturday in the capital, Brasília, Mr. Obama and **Dilma Rousseff**, Brazil’s first female president, have been a study in contrasts in how they handle the historic nature of their presidencies.

On Saturday, Ms. Rousseff, speaking with some passion, celebrated that the election last October made her the first woman to serve as Brazil’s president, and that Mr. Obama is the first African-American president of the United States, lauding what it said about the progress and tolerance of their respective countries.

The people in the United States and in Brazil, Ms. Rousseff said, had “dared to take at the highest level someone of African descent and a woman, demonstrating that the basis of democracy allows to overcome the largest barriers to build societies that will be more generous and live more in harmony.”

At a luncheon in Brasília attended by officials and business leaders Ms. Rousseff noted that

the United States and Brazil have the largest black populations outside Africa and “a long track record of the struggle of the minorities.” Lifting her glass, she said, “I propose that we should raise a toast to you and to the dream of [Martin Luther King](#), the same dream of Brazilians and Americans, the dream of freedom, the dream of hope.”

Mr. Obama, characteristically, did not overtly address his race, or race in general, in several joint appearances with Ms. Rouseff on Saturday.

He came closest in their meeting with business executives from American and Brazilian corporations, but Mr. Obama spoke indirectly, more in terms of social and economic status than race. He hailed “the American dream” as appropriate for both the United States and Latin America, defining it as “the idea that no matter who you are, or where you come from, or how you start out, you can overcome the greatest obstacles and fulfill the greatest hopes.”

“I’m a testament to that dream,” he said.

Through his long presidential campaign and since, Mr. Obama has often seemed to address the issue only when forced to by outside events — like the campaign controversy over racially divisive sermons by his former pastor, the [Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.](#), or a 2009 furor over the arrest of [Henry Louis Gates Jr.](#), a black Harvard professor and friend, as Mr. Gates tried to enter his own home.

Senior advisers to Mr. Obama have in the past suggested that he does not want to be defined in racial terms, but as president for all Americans.

But Brazilians see the issue differently. Brazil was the last country in the Western world to abolish slavery, having done it in 1888. Yet unlike the United States, Brazil never passed Jim Crow segregation laws, and despite the persistence of racism here, many Brazilians take pride in having intermarried more than whites and blacks in the United States.

In the months leading up to his election, Mr. Obama’s popularity soared in Brazil with a wide cross-section of Brazilians. Many proclaimed that Mr. Obama’s gregarious personality made him seem like a Brazilian masquerading as an American, even as many Americans see him as too cool and detached.

“I was moved by his election, I followed everything, saved magazines, newspapers, everything that came out about him,” said Maria Helena Reis, 62, a nurse. “He gives a lot of pride to blacks.”

Opinion polls in the region show that Mr. Obama's election has also improved Latin American countries' opinion of the United States as a whole. Among Brazilians, those with a favorable view increased by 16 percentage points from 57 percent in 2008 to 73 percent in 2009, according to Latinobarometro, a polling company in Santiago, Chile. The increase was higher among blacks and those of mixed race surveyed than among whites.

Mr. Obama's activities on Sunday in Rio — first, his visit to the sprawling City of God favela, or slum, made famous the world over in the 2002 movie that bears its name, followed by a televised speech to a large audience at a historic theater — illustrated the White House's efforts to take advantage of the president's unique appeal to the broad and heavily mixed-race Brazilian public.

Mr. Obama drew raucous applause when he began his 20-minute speech by saying, in Portuguese, "Good afternoon, marvelous city!" and he said with pride that both countries had cleansed themselves of slavery.

He spoke of the progress that Brazilian officials had made in taming violent slums, saying he was inspired by the "change in attitudes" among the residents. "As one young resident said, 'People have to look at favelas not with pity but as a source of presidents and lawyers and doctors, artists,'" Mr. Obama said. "People with solutions."

Some listeners said Mr. Obama did not need to talk specifically about his race to serve as an example.

"He is a source of inspiration simply for being who he is, for having gotten to where he got, facing so many difficulties," said Maria de Matos, 82. "He is black like I am, he understands the difficulties of being black. So he knows that Dilma is also an inspiration for us. She is a woman warrior, she fought hard to get there."

But many Brazilians were disappointed that Mr. Obama did not make his address here in the Cinelândia plaza, where American officials expected some 20,000 people to watch the speech. Mr. Obama had wanted to address the Brazilian people more directly.

To administration officials' disappointment, the Secret Service's security concerns forced the speech indoors, into the Theatro Municipal, an elegant facility with a capacity of about 2,000. It lacked the feel for an address to the masses: the theater has ornate, gold-trimmed woodwork and red velvet and gold curtains. The men were mostly dressed in suits and the women in dresses.

On Sunday, hundreds stood behind police barriers a few hundred feet from the entrance to the theater, most trying to catch a glimpse of the president.

“I think he wanted to speak to the people; he doesn’t seem like a reserved person, he seems almost Brazilian,” said Zuleide Teixeira, a 65-year-old homemaker who came from three hours away by bus. “I am upset that I didn’t get to see him up close, but his visit is a source of pride for all of us. I hope he is liking our country, because if he is he will for sure come back.”

*Roberta Nápolis contributed reporting.*