Brazil's Evangelicals Push Politics to the Right

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An evangelical missionary in Africa for several years, Brazilian senator Marcelo Crivella once described Catholics and other Christian denominations as demonic and condemned homosexuality as a terrible evil.

Such opinions - outlined in his book documenting his time in Africa - would raise eyebrows coming from any politician. But Mr Crivella, a gospel singer from Brazil's evangelical Universal church, is the overwhelming favourite to become the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, one of the Americas most racially and socially diverse cities.

His imminent victory in second-round elections on 30 October reflects the emergence of an evangelical bloc that is driving Brazilian politics to the right, analysts say, and is set to become more powerful and influential.

"Its not enough for them to evangelise - they also want to influence the law," says Jean Wyllys, the only openly gay member of Brazil's congress who is a lawmaker from the leftist Socialism and Liberty party. "Since the law is universal, you dont have to convert everyone in order to control their lives."

The bloc has become so influential, critics claim it played a key role in the impeachment of leftist former president Dilma Rousseff in August. Evangelical politicians form the "biblical bloc" in congress, accounting for a total of 199 seats in the 513-seat lower house, according to the houses website.

During the impeachment, the biblical bloc joined up with other conservative blocs - the public security and agricultural blocs - to form the so-called three "Bs" - the "bible, bullet and bull" faction to force Ms Rousseff out.

The impeachment itself was led by one of the congress most prominent evangelical leaders, Eduardo Cunha, then house speaker. Last week Mr Cunha - previously known for championing bills on "heterosexual rights" and toughening abortion laws for rape victims - was arrested in relation to a corruption scandal at Petrobras, the state-owned oil company.

The rise of evangelical politicians reflects in part demographic changes in Brazil. While still home to the world's largest population of Catholics, the last Brazilian census in 2010 showed that evangelical churchgoers had risen to 22.2 per cent of the population from 15.4 per cent a decade earlier.

A new ban on corporate donations for politicians could only serve to strengthen the blocs power. Churches do not have to declare earnings or pay tax. "The religious fundamentalists have become a political hegemony in Brazil," Mr Wyllys said.

Widespread discontent with the political classes and a rising number of abstentions and spoiled ballots play into the hands of highly organised groups, such as the church.

The rise of the churches "shows a crisis of representation that is affecting Brazilian politics in general," said Carlos Melo, a political scientist at Insper university in São Paulo.
Still, the fragmented nature of Brazilian politics means that most evangelicals would struggle to implement religious fundamentalist policies. With 35 officially registered parties, representing everything from communism to women's causes, governments are usually made up of broad coalitions that help keep radicalism in check.

"I think the propaganda against Crivella is actually quite biased," said Marco Aurélio of FGV in Rio, an academic institution. "Why shouldn't a candidate with an evangelical background govern in Brazil?"

In Rio de Janeiro, better known for its city beaches crowded with scantily clad bathers than its deeply Catholic Portuguese past, polls suggest that Mr Crivella is leading with 46 per cent support, compared with 29 per cent for his rival, leftist candidate Marcelo Freixo.

Mr Crivella has sought to distance himself from his more extreme statements. In his book, first published in 1999, Mr Crivella wrote that Hindus drank the blood of children and public health could be improved by expelling the demons that caused disease.

He said African religions were based on "evil spirits", a controversial claim in Brazil, where half of the population has some African blood.

Mr Crivella has apologised profusely for what he wrote, saying the book was the work of a young missionary, "whose immature seal led him to commit this lamentable error".

The book was published when he was 42. "I love Catholics, spiritualists, evangelicals, everyone. If I have on any occasion caused offence, I ask for pardon. The same in relation to homosexuality," he said.