



Brazil Under Bolsonaro

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Jair Bolsonaro started his four-year mandate as the President of Brazil in January 2019. Approximately one year later, the Covid-19 pandemic hit, and since mid-March Brazil has become one of the leading countries in the world in the number of cases and deaths. Forecasts for 2021 and 2022 are for a deep economic recession and rising unemployment and informal labor. This complex context has surprisingly contributed to the consolidation of Bolsonaro's antidemocratic government, as many political analysts have noted (Ballestrin, 2019; Brum, 2020; Lynch, 2020; Nobre, 2020). How is it possible that a flourishing society and "emergent" country could have elected an extreme-right populist president whose popularity has even grown, despite the complete mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic? This essay searches for answers by exploring the conditions under which Bolsonaro was elected, as well as the effects of his government on Brazilian democracy; it draws on De Souza Guilherme and Ribeiro Hoffmann (2020).

Avritzer (2018) argues, provocatively, that the current Brazilian democracy crisis is not a minor "detour" in the progressive process of democratization since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985, but rather a reflection of structural conditions such as social inequalities and weak institutions. According to him, the process of construction of Brazilian democracy can be characterized as "pendular" in both empirical and normative terms. Empirically, the country entered a new cycle of democratic instability similar to those that peaked in 1954 and 1964. This cycle implies what he calls a "democracy paradox," since discontent with democracy began in 2013, with demonstrations that demanded more democracy rather than less, when several social movements and activists called for better public services, social justice, and a fight against corruption (De Souza Guilherme & Ribeiro Hoffmann, 2020).

The 2013 protests took place under the presidency of Dilma Rousseff, the successor to President Luis Inacio da Silva (Lula), both from the Worker's Party (PT). Rousseff's government reacted to the protests with excessive repression at the hands of police and security forces, which undermined her popular support and ultimately her political base in the Congress. Even though the protests must be seen as part of a worldwide phenomenon linked to the 2008 crisis, similar to the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States and Indignados in Spain, they also reflected the fragility of Rousseff's government after the highly contested 2011 election, where she eked out a narrow win. While the center-right parties used the momentum to try to regain power, embracing an anti-corruption campaign against the PT, the fragmentation of the Left became more apparent, with more radical parties and movements accusing her of implementing neoliberal economic and financial policies. The special anti-corruption task force Lava Jato—led by Judge Sergio Moro and the traditional media—played a key role in

undermining Rousseff's party and government, and the political crisis ended with her impeachment in August 2016.

Vice President Temer assumed power as the interim president, promoting a radical transformation of the government program, embracing a neoliberal strategy and a conservative approach to society, including gender. This approach is symbolized by his all-male cabinet and his traditional wife, announcing trends that Bolsonaro would radicalize a couple of years later. In fact, machismo and misogyny have been pointed out as forces behind Rousseff's impeachment (Amorin, 2016). During Temer's government, the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis hit Brazil, and despite his attempts to promote investments and growth through liberalization, a recession set in, and unemployment increased. The approval of a constitutional amendment limiting public spending for 20 years was the apex of the deconstruction of the welfare state and of the social policies built during the previous decade under Lula's and Rousseff's PT governments. Temer's popularity decreased accordingly, and he concluded his mandate with not more than a 5% approval rating. At that time, operation Anti-Corruption Car Wash moved forward, and Lula was arrested at the beginning of 2018. During that period, a third trend that was radicalized under Temer also became apparent—the growing force and presence of military officials in politics and the political system, with the beginning of a federal intervention in the public security of the state of Rio de Janeiro led by Army General Braga Netto.

Bolsonaro was elected in this context of economic crisis and political fragmentation at home, and uncertainties abroad, including the beginning of President Trump's term in the United States in 2017, and a worldwide wave of conservative and extreme-right movements. Despite the changes to the cabinet since 2019, Bolsonaro's political support is centered on three main groups—the "neoliberals," the "military," and the "ideologists." The Minister of Economics Paulo Guedes has remained in power since the beginning of the government and has not changed his neoliberal approach even in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, when most countries in the world adopted interventionist and neo-Keynesian policies to counteract the economic effects of the lockdowns and quarantines. An exception was the adoption of an emergency financial aid of 600 Brazilian reais per month to vulnerable citizens, which the opposition demanded. The Minister of Environment Ricardo Salles has also led a neoliberal strategy, with disastrous effects for forest protection. As a result, the 2020 Amazon deforestation rate is the highest in the last decade (Brasil de Fato, 2020).

The second group, the military, includes various subgroups such as lower-level pro-Bolsonaro elements, and high-ranking factions often with divergent approaches. In total, the presence of the military in the public sector increased 33% under Bolsonaro's government; in July 2020, 2,558 active military officials had positions at the federal executive level (Bragon & Matosso, 2020). Herz and Rodrigues (2020) argue that the militarization trend is not exclusive to Brazil; on the contrary, many countries in Latin America and worldwide have seen an increase in the presence of military officials in politics over the last decade. Under Bolsonaro, key political positions have been filled with officials close to the president. One of the latest, General Pazuella, is in charge of the Covid-19 response, as interim minister since May 2020, after the dismissal of two civilian ministers of health.

Finally, the ideological group is even less homogeneous but shares a conservative worldview of politics and societal relations. A key reference is Olavo de Carvalho, a controversial Brazilian intellectual living in the United States since 2005, with connections to Steve Bannon and the alt-right establishment, who became one of Bolsonaro's closest political advisors. According to de Carvalho, Brazil was leading a communist movement in Latin America, and a proliferation of "cultural Marxism." He adds that the so-called São Paulo Forum, created by Luis Inacio Lula da Silva and Fidel Castro in 1990, had the goal of regaining in Latin America what had been lost in Eastern Europe, and is the strategic command of the communist and pro-communist movement on the continent (Winter, 2018).

Brazilian foreign policy is a key area where these ideological groups have had a strong influence; it has been completely reformulated under Bolsonaro, although some trends were already visible under Temer. Temer's Foreign Minister José Serra adopted new orientations and called for a "de-ideologization of foreign policy," a revitalization of Mercosur with the revival of trade liberalization, a renewed relationship with traditional partners such as the United States and Europe, and a "correction of 'South-South' strategy" in Africa and Asia (de Mello e Silva, 2018). The current Minister of Foreign Affairs Araújo has adopted a "blind" alignment with Trump's government, and gone much further in the reversion of historical approaches to multilateral institutions, adopting anti-human-rights positions, especially with respect to gender and indigenous populations, as Jamil Jade, the news correspondent at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, has reported in a series of articles (Chade, 2020). Bolsonaro's government team's conservative worldview has been reinforced by the increasing influence of Pentecostal Evangelical churches such as *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* and *Assembleia de Deus* on the broader population. In fact, Bolsonaro's election mobilized the evangelical vote, and several members of his government belong to evangelical churches, including the Minister of Human Rights, Family and Women, Damara Alves, who has taken a hard stance on issues such as gender and abortion and has defended the evangelization of the indigenous peoples.

Concluding Remarks

Bolsonaro's election and government is the result of complex global and domestic conditions, in addition to his personality, which is comparable to Trump in his self-centered, chauvinistic, clientelist, and family-centered approach. The global financial crisis that began in 2008 in the United States and reached Latin America and Brazil a few years later, and changes in the global order driven by the rise of China and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic have contributed to destabilize Brazilian society and democracy. At the domestic level, the convergence of neoliberals, the military, and conservative groups has consolidated a social base that, despite its weaknesses, has managed to drive the political agenda. Salgado and Sandrin (2020) also argue that Bolsonaro's government cannot be explained by the president's character alone, and that Latinobarometer 2018 indicators show that among eight institutions and eighteen countries surveyed, Brazilian respondents ranked the country in fifth place in trust in the Church, and third in trust in the Army, while confidence in Congress was in the sixteenth position, and in political parties, in the last position.

Unlike Trump, at the time of this writing, Bolsonaro is still in the middle of his mandate, and, as mentioned above, his popularity has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, despite unsuccessful medical and economic response to the crisis. If, as Avritzer (2018, 2020) argues, Bolsonaro's government is not simply a minor detour in the consolidation of democracy in Brazil, a great challenge lies ahead.

About the Author

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