

Brazil: The Collapse of Democracy? Rise of the Far Right

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Brazil will [elect its new President](#) on 28 October 2018. Since the judicial-parliamentary coup that removed elected President Dilma Rousseff, of the Workers' Party (PT), the new administration (led by her former Vice-President, Michel Temer) has advanced its agenda of neoliberal 'reforms'. The economic crisis has continued unabated, and the campaign for the destruction of the PT has intensified, leading to the imprisonment of former President and PT founder Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.¹

Finally, the Armed Forces have increasingly intervened in political life, particularly through the occupation of peripheral areas in Rio de Janeiro. Their close articulation with the Judiciary is encapsulated in the appointment of General Fernando Azevedo e Silva as 'advisor' to the President of the Supreme Court, and in statements that would be scandalous in less turbulent times, such as the thinly-disguised demand for Lula's incarceration issued by Army Commander General Eduardo Villas Boas.

The co-ordinated shift of public institutions toward an exceptionally excluding variety of neoliberalism was challenged by attempts to rebuild the left through Lula's campaign for the presidency and, in particular, through his convoy around the country in early 2018, which led to his steep rise in the opinion polls.



Given the likelihood that the coup against Dilma Rousseff would end in Lula's victory at the

polls, it is not surprising that the cancellation of the elections was mooted. However, this would not be necessary. The coup plotters managed to sentence Lula to more than twelve years in prison despite the lack of evidence and, subsequently, to bar his candidacy, in a blatant demonstration of *lawfare* against him and his party. The escalating conflict between a radicalizing 'alliance of privilege' in power, and the attempted responses by the PT and the left, consolidated Lula's position not only as the unquestioned leader of the democratic camp but, also, as the most talented leader in Brazilian political history. In contrast, a string of anonymous figures and insignificant personalities took turns leading the alliance of privilege.

The Coup: Authoritarian and Antidemocratic

The coup was, then, closely associated with a grave loss of representativeness of the main political actors, and an increasingly bitter dispute between the powers of the Republic. The consequence was the leakage of legitimacy toward individuals, especially 'avenging' judges standing up against corruption. The Army is the only institution that has managed to avoid the miasma of illegitimacy, which has given recent developments a strongly authoritarian and antidemocratic trend. In short, one of the peculiarities of the rise of neoliberal authoritarianism in Brazil is the absence of strong leadership, solid parties and organized movements around right-wing nationalist programs: *the Brazilian coup is a social force independent of the individuals supposedly in positions of command.*

Examples include the destruction of Aécio Neves, who kicked off the coup by recklessly challenging the outcome of the 2014 elections, the imprisonment of former Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Eduardo Cunha, who launched the impeachment process, the implosion of Geraldo Alckmin's presidential candidacy in 2018 (the man who had everything to be the candidate of capital-in-general but captured less than 5% of the vote), the ruin of a long list of Temer's advisors, and the implosion the main centre-right parties, the PSDB and the PMDB.

The coup has escaped the control of its creators, and they were consumed in the flames that they had stoked. The incineration of traditional center-right forces fertilized the ground for the candidacy of the far-right extremist Jair Bolsonaro (not by coincidence a retired Army captain) – something that until a few weeks before the election seemed even more unlikely than the triumph of Donald Trump in the USA. However, when contrasted with his tropical twin, Trump offers an example of mental stability, political moderation and personal refinement.

Examination of the unfolding of the political crisis in Brazil suggests a tragedy in four acts, briefly described below.

The Global Context

The world is going through a mounting tide of authoritarian neoliberalism, as the outcome of three converging processes: the crisis of economies, political systems and institutions of representation after the global financial crisis that started in 2007; the decomposition of neoliberal democracies, and the kidnapping of mass discontent by the far right.

The diffusion of neoliberalism has eliminated millions of skilled jobs, especially in the advanced capitalist economies, as entire professions either disappeared or were exported to cheaper countries. Around the world, employment opportunities in the public sector have

declined because of privatizations and the contraction of state agencies and state-owned enterprises; employment stability has declined, and wages, labour relations and living conditions have tended to deteriorate. The informal workers have suffered severe losses, both directly and through the declining availability of opportunities for stable employment. In turn, formal workers are afraid that their jobs may be exported while, at the same time, they must endure increasingly stressful and precarious work. Similar pressures are felt by an indebted, impoverished, anxious, and increasingly vulnerable middle class. Around the world, the remnants of previously privileged social strata lament their inability to secure better material circumstances for their offspring. The political counterpart of these economic processes is that, under neoliberalism, the workers tend to become increasingly divided, disorganized, and politically impotent. Their political influence has declined almost inexorably.

The transformation of social structures, institutions and laws has also tended to evacuate the political sphere across participation, representativeness and legitimacy, making the 'losers' increasingly unable to resist neoliberalism, and even to conceptualize alternatives to this system of accumulation.² These processes help to explain the worldwide decline of left-wing parties, their supporting organizations, trade unions, and other forms of collective representation. While this has supported the consolidation of neoliberalism, it has also promoted mass disengagement from conventional politics, created powerful tendencies toward apathy and anomie, and undermined the ideological hegemony and political legitimacy of neoliberalism: with the erosion of the credibility of traditional parties, leaders and organizations, the institutional paths to dissent have contracted sharply.

Large social groups are aware of their losses under neoliberalism and, increasingly, distrust the 'democratic' institutions that systematically support the reproduction of neoliberalism and bypass their dissatisfactions. These groups are systematically led by right-wing politicians and the mainstream media to blame 'the other' for the disasters inflicted by neoliberalism – especially the poor, immigrants, foreign countries, and minority religions.

The rise of authoritarian neoliberalism has been compared to the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s but, despite important similarities, these processes are fundamentally distinct. In particular, authoritarian leaders in Austria, Egypt, Hungary, India, Italy, Poland, Russia, Thailand, Turkey and elsewhere took power not through street clashes between their militias and a strong communist movement, but by means of political tricks, expensive publicity, modern technologies, planned agitation and brute force. They seek to impose a radically neoliberal programme justified by a conservative and nationalist discourse. This is not a policy drawing upon mass organization, but the ploy of ambitious swindlers, power-hungry demagogues, and political illusionists exploiting the fractures in the neoliberal order.

The paradox of authoritarian neoliberalism is that it promotes the personalization of politics through 'spectacular' (often fleeting) leaders, operating in the absence of intermediary institutions (parties, trade unions, social movements and, ultimately, the law), and who are strongly committed both to neoliberalism and to the expansion of their own personal power. Interestingly, these leaders promote economic programmes that harm their own political base, as they promote radicalized forms of globalization and financialization that increase further the power of the neoliberal elite. Society is divided even more deeply, wages fall, taxes becomes more regressive, social protections are eroded, economies become more unbalanced, and poverty tends to grow. Mass frustration intensifies, fueling an unfocused discontent: *authoritarian neoliberalism is intrinsically unstable, and it creates conditions*

*supporting the rise of contemporary forms of fascism.*³

From the Politics of Alliances to the Rise of the Far Right

The political history of Brazil in the last 15 years can be read off from the power struggles between clashing alliances. Between 1999 and 2005, Lula and the PT built an 'alliance of losers', including groups having in common only the experience of losses under neoliberalism. They included the urban and rural unionized working class, especially the skilled manual and office workers, the lower ranks of the civil service and sectors of the professional middle class; large segments of the informal working class; several prominent capitalists, especially among the internal bourgeoisie; and right-wing oligarchs, landowners, and local politicians from impoverished regions.

Between 2005 and 2013, Lula and Dilma Rousseff led an 'alliance of winners', including those groups that had won the most during the PT administrations; in particular, the internal bourgeoisie, most formal sector workers, and large segments of the informal working class. In contrast with the alliance of losers, the alliance of winners has a narrower top, due to the loss of support from the internationalized bourgeoisie, the mainstream media and the middle class, and a massively larger base, especially among the informal workers.

The Rousseff administration recomposed its base of support and, between 2013-14, relied on a 'progressive alliance' including mainly the organized formal workers, a large mass of disorganized working poor, and leftist groups organized into parties, social movements and NGOs. Once again, the alliance had narrowed at the top and widened at the base. This was sufficient to secure Rousseff's re-election in 2014, but the disorganized support of the poor would prove to be unable to sustain her in power. The following years were marked by the weakening and erosion of the progressive alliance, culminating in the impeachment of the president when her mass support had become extremely low.

In contrast, the opposition has clustered around a growing 'neoliberal alliance' or an elite-led 'alliance of privilege'. It includes the internationalized bourgeoisie, the vast majority of the urban middle class and small and mid-sized entrepreneurs, the mainstream media and sections of the informal workers, many of them having benefitted greatly during the PT governments, and clustered around ultra-conservative evangelical sects. The capture of the Executive by the alliance of privilege, with the support of a large mass of the poor, was part of *a process of demolition of democracy, seeking to destroy any political space by which the majority could control any part of the state, or any tool of public policy.*

The Improbable Rise of Jair Bolsonaro

Five years of political tensions and degradation of democracy culminated in the 2018 presidential elections. The electoral process revolved around the confrontation between two political phenomena of great historical significance. On the one hand, the extraordinary political talent of Lula, who, even from jail, managed to put together an alternative candidate and outsmart his potential competitors in the center-left, paving the way for Fernando Haddad's exponential growth in opinion polls.

However, Lula's political acumen was unable to stem the tide of a far right mass movement led by an obscure Deputy who emerged far ahead in the first round of the elections. Despite frequent comparisons with U.S. President Donald Trump (who had a successful career on TV, if not in business), Jair Bolsonaro stands out for having failed at everything he tried to do

before the elections, whether as a military officer (frustrated career), terrorist (amateur) or Federal Deputy (ineffective). Despite this history of fiascos, Bolsonaro made enormous gains, both among capital – desperate for *any* viable alternative to the PT – and among the workers (especially the informal working class), who flocked to Bolsonaro in the millions during the campaign.



Mass support for the incompetent fascist was supported by four platforms: the fight against corruption (the traditional way in which the right gains mass traction in Brazil, for example, in 1954, 1960, 1989 and 2013); conservative moralism (pushed by the evangelical churches); the claim that ‘security’ can be achieved through state-sponsored violence (which resonates strongly in a country with over 60,000 murders per year, in addition to tens of thousands of other violent crimes), and a neoliberal economic discourse centred on slashing a (presumably corrupt) state, that is parasitical upon the ‘honest’ citizens. The rupture of the progressive alliance and the haemorrhage of poor voters toward Bolsonaro is the Brazilian version of the process of consolidation of an electoral majority for authoritarian neoliberalism in other countries.

Defeating the PT and overthrowing Dilma Rousseff were, then, part of a wider process of displacement of the political center of gravity in Brazil upwards (within the social pyramid), and to the right (in terms of the political spectrum). These shifts have created, for the first

time in more than half a century, a far-right mass movement with broad penetration in society. This not only drained the potential support for the PT candidate, but also led to the implosion of the traditional center-right parties, which were devastated by the rise of Jair Bolsonaro. Political chaos has seized the country.

The Impasse

In the short term, the Brazilian political impasse implies that the administration to be inaugurated in 2019 will be inevitably unstable, and over time, the 1988 Constitution is likely to become unviable, leading to the disintegration of democracy.

Any elected president would have serious difficulties governing with a sluggish economy, a hostile Congress, an overly autonomous Judiciary making a habit of trespassing into the other republican powers, excited Armed Forces, and a Constitutional amendment setting a ceiling on fiscal expenditures for the next 20 years (which will slowly throttle public administration). At the level of popular mobilization, since 2013 the streets are no longer the monopoly of the left; they now include large masses on the far right, surrounded by a violent fringe.

A centre-left president would find a state in worse situation than Lula found it in 2003, because of the institutionalization of the neoliberal reforms imposed by the Temer administration. These constraints would make it difficult to govern without a constitutional reform; however, a constituent assembly would inevitably be dominated by the right, which would seek to impose an even worse Constitution than the current one: *the left is discredited, disorganized, and institutionally immobilized*.

A far-right president, with no experience of government, without the support of a stable party structure, and unprepared in every way, will have to confront History: Presidents Janio Quadros and Fernando Collor were also elected by elite alliances that had traded common sense for a victory at the polls; both administrations were cut short.

In a decentralized political system, authoritarian leaders face grave difficulties to govern, regardless of their legitimacy or social basis. Further, the 'coalition presidentialism' instituted by the Brazilian Constitution demands continuous negotiations in Congress, always running the risk of breaking the law, especially when the President has few reliable allies at the top, or is being challenged by a mass opposition.

In addition to these broad principles, the 2018 elections have led to five specific lessons. First, the political centre of gravity in Brazil has shifted to the right. From the south to the centre-west, passing through the prosperous south-east, the right-wing electorate has achieved a solid majority. Given the importance of these regions, the left is electorally hemmed in. Second, Bolsonaro's rise derives from the combination of class hatred in a society bearing huge scars from centuries of slavery, recent right-wing insurrections, and transparent U.S.-led intervention in the Brazilian political process. Third, since 2013, Brazilian politics has been defined by a *convergence of dissatisfactions* that has consolidated a neoliberal alliance around an economic and political programme that is economically excluding and destructive of citizenship.

Fourth, the Brazilian right is deeply divided. While the left, in defensive mode, can unite under Lula's shadow, the right – surprisingly, given its hegemony over the institutions of the state and its ability to overthrow Dilma Rousseff – cannot generate leaders worthy of note,

nor unify around its own programme of radical neoliberal reforms. Its traditional political parties are imploding, leaving in power a rabble of inexperienced, inept, idiosyncratic, and reactionary politicians.

Fifth, the worst economic contraction recorded in Brazil's history and the most severe political impasse in the past century have degraded profoundly Brazilian democracy, and made it impossible for any plausible composition of political forces to stabilize the system of accumulation. The tendency, then, is for these impasses to be resolved by extra-constitutional means. This will be an inglorious end to a democratic experiment that has marked two generations, and that achieved unquestionable successes. Unfortunately, it has proved impossible to resolve the conflict between neoliberalism and democracy in Brazil, inside the political arena built in the transition after the military dictatorship. •

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Notes

1. Noam Chomsky [correctly described Lula](#) as "the most prominent political prisoner in the world" (accessed 16 October 2018).
2. See M. Boffo, B. Fine and A. Saad-Filho, "[Neoliberal Capitalism: The Authoritarian Turn](#)," *Socialist Register* 2019, pp.247-270.
3. "Neoliberalism ... has helped create the conditions for the re-emergence of the far-right whilst, at the same time, the far-right has focused on attacking what it sees as the symptoms of neoliberalism through racializing its social, political and economic effects ... It is not then that neoliberalism *causes* racism in the sense that racism is an organic dimension of it, but rather that neoliberalism is grounded on a *collective socio-economic insecurity* that helps facilitate a revival of pre-existing racialized imaginaries of solidarity" (N. Davidson and R. Saull, "Neoliberalism and the Far-Right: A Contradictory Embrace," *Critical Sociology*, 43(4-5), 2017, pp.715-716.

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