

# Brazil Under Bolsonaro: Social Base, Agenda and Perspectives

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*The rise of the far right is a worldwide phenomenon, rooted in the nefarious effects of neoliberal globalization which have pushed the world into mass unemployment and enormous inequalities. I consider it to be a late political effect of the global financial crisis that hit the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century.*

It is not an easy task to explain the phenomenon of [Jair Bolsonaro](#) in Brazil and to understand the groups that support him, both within and outside government. It's difficult, for anyone, to draw a truly complete and sober analysis of what we have experienced. This essay is not based on in-depth research but on collective reflections and debates. I intend to pose some key questions and try to identify some clues to answer them.

1. Despite its innumerable concessions to the bourgeoisie,<sup>1</sup> why was the Workers Party (PT) attacked by the right-wing forces, creating space for the emergence of "Bolsonarism"?

First of all, the effects of the 2008 economic crises were felt quite late, but they were profound in Brazil. Low commodity prices and economic slowdown had a perverse effect on employment levels. The [GDP dropped 7.2 per cent between 2015-2016](#), and unemployment reached 12% during the 2018 election year. The economic crisis also generated a political crisis, which led to massive street demonstrations in June 2013, and it recently turned into an ideological crisis.

On the "bourgeois side", the crisis revealed its deeply anti-social and truculent character. The modest gains that the poor had made in terms of social rights during the PT governments (yearly increases in the minimum salary, access to higher education, racial and social quotas, labour rights for domestic workers, income transfer programs, resources for the poor North and Northeast regions, etc.), were forcefully repudiated by upper classes in large urban centers and by the rural bourgeoisie linked to agribusiness. It was not acceptable, in their view, that Afro-descendants, Indigenous or Northeastern working-class individuals and families could sit side by side with white Southern upper-middle class students in a university classroom or travelers on an airplane. The difference between 'us and them' had gotten blurred in social spaces, even though the material-economic differences were still very deep.

The ideological crisis is not limited to the upper social classes; it is even more evident among the middle and lower-middle classes. These classes had enjoyed high levels of consumption, access to university and formal employment during the best moments of the PT era (2002 - 2016). However, with the economic crisis, these social strata lost their

material gains, and today, they make up a mass of unemployed and precarious workers who suffer from low quality public services.

This mass of workers without rights (typified by Uber drivers or informal cosmetics saleswomen) channeled their feelings of anger and rancor toward the PT (*anti-petismo*). Among this precarious working class, conservative values – anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ and anti-communist – were strengthened and reinforced by the proselytism of evangelical Pentecostal churches and the diffusion of ‘fake news’.

In addition to all this, traditional political parties, even right-wing parties, are experiencing a crisis of representation. The first signs of this crisis became evident during the protests of June 2013, which, along with claims for basic rights to transportation, health and education, brought out anti-political party sentiments or, in a more general way, an ‘anti-politics’ stance. The diffuse notion that ‘politics implies corruption’ has become very widespread. The inefficiencies of politics were to be solved through merit and personal efforts, the idea of ‘meritocracy’.

This crisis of representation deepened after the 2014 general elections, and it penetrated the impeachment process of Dilma Rousseff in 2016. Precarious workers do not identify themselves as ‘working class’, let alone identify with the ‘Workers Party’. Eventually, these ‘workers without rights’ identified themselves ideologically with Jair Bolsonaro, who has managed to occupy the ‘empty space’ of politics. The ‘anti-politics’ feelings disseminated among the popular masses were then filled with an over-politicization based on hatred. Bolsonaro presented himself as a charismatic leader who would liberate them from ‘all ills’ and resolve the nation’s problems as the leader who came from the ‘people’, a simple person who shared their language, tastes and culture. By communicating through social media, Bolsonaro generates a sense of closeness to his supporters.



Source: The Bullet

A second aspect that the ‘Bolsonaro phenomenon’ reveals to us are the limitations of class conciliation. In different parts of the world, the moderate left and social-democratic parties

in government, on many occasions, have shared this illusion of the possibility of class conciliation. In the case of the PT, it was possible to respond to the interests of the different social classes up to a certain point and under particular economic conditions that allowed for the expansion of public spending. But in the long run, and with the impact of the economic crisis, class conciliation did not hold up. Historically, the balance will always weigh to one side, and in Brazil, it turned against the PT itself.

Without being able to maintain a conciliation of interests, neither could the Brazilian state during the last PT years sustain cohesion between the different factions of the ruling class. This is a third aspect of the current situation that has to be considered. The creation of large national monopolies that benefitted certain sectors to the detriment of others (for example, credit from the national development bank, BNDES, was given to some construction conglomerates), the government's attempts to artificially stabilize energy and gas prices, the regulation of oil and gas exploitation at the Pre-Sal coast,<sup>2</sup> etc., were among the policies that showed excessive (from a market perspective) state intervention in the economy, leading to contradictions between different factions of the bourgeoisie.

These contradictions are the central challenge for the sustainability of Bolsonaro's government: does it or does it not have the capacity to organize the interests of different factions of capital and represent them as the interests of the entire nation. All this points to the one who is in charge of this task, the Minister of the Economy, Paulo Guedes (discussed below). Proposed pension reform and labour reform would be cohesive bourgeois projects against the interests of the workers.

## 2. Who makes up Bolsonaro's social base?

The election of Bolsonaro and many parliamentarians linked to religious groups reveals the growth in the political power of evangelical Pentecostal churches. This growth had been evident in municipal and regional elections for decades, but it reached its highest level in the last election. The churches provide a solid social base for conservatism in the urban peripheries where they did grassroots work during the campaign. There are [reports of cults](#) where a pastor promoted Bolsonaro and his allies directly, distributing campaign pamphlets together with church pamphlets against abortion, etc. On the day that he won the election, Bolsonaro began his speech with a prayer led by an evangelical pastor, live on national television. For the left, the question now is how to rebuild the work at the grassroots and re-establish a dialogue with the poor in the *favelas* and in the peripheries, and in the churches, to counter reactionary groups.

Another fundamental support base for Bolsonaro is provided by the petty bourgeoisie, including the commercial and the retail sector, as well as liberal professionals, such as lawyers, doctors, engineers, etc. These are sectors that are directly affected by high taxes and the costs of labour and social security rights. There are some [significant examples](#), like the mobilization and protests of Brazilian doctors against the PT social program 'More Doctors', which had been bringing Cuban doctors to work in remote, under-served areas of Brazil, and the 2018 truckers' strike against rising fuel prices, which had the effect of stopping deliveries and crating supply shortages throughout the country. There have also been [several demonstrations](#) calling for "military intervention."

In addition, there were some grotesque episodes that involved different segments of the petty bourgeoisie during the electoral campaign: Luciano Hang, owner of Havan department

stores, called a meeting with his employees during which he tried to coerce them into voting for Bolsonaro with the [threat of closing stores](#); a businessman promised free lunch at a *churrascaria* for employees if Bolsonaro won; the owner of a house of prostitution offered a “[free beer](#)” on the day after the election if the results were positive for his candidate.

In the countryside, Bolsonaro had broad support from large agricultural producers and the agribusiness sector. In addition to their economic and ideological affinity (support for the liberalization of weapons and the criminalization of peasant movements), this sector also has a cultural affinity with Bolsonaro, [exemplified](#) by the support of national country music stars for Bolsonaro. In this regard, there was also a regional division, with the South and Central-West agricultural provinces leading in the votes for Bolsonaro, while provinces in the Northeast, and partially in the North, voted mostly for PT.

In urban areas and big cities, the middle classes and precarious workers, as already mentioned, formed a mass base that had improved its consumption power during the PT years but lost employment and purchasing power in the crisis and was forced to migrate to the informal market. They became a strong base of support for Bolsonaro, driven by ‘anti-PT’ ideology.

The financial sector and large corporations [expressed support](#) for Bolsonaro only at the end of his campaign. Other ‘outsider’ names for the presidency had been tested but didn’t succeed. Bolsonaro’s frightening method of doing politics with inflamed speeches of hatred and violence<sup>3</sup> was countered by his sponsorship of an ultra-liberal economist, Paulo Guedes. Guedes had graduated from the University of Chicago and, as he presented incisive arguments for privatization, cutting public expenditure and shrinking state bureaucracy, he gained support in the upper bourgeoisie. As a [newspaper article pointed out](#), Wall Street would have preferred PSDB candidate Geraldo Alckmin, but Paulo Guedes would guarantee, in the eyes of international financial markets, the necessary reforms and privatization of the last state-owned companies, such as Petrobras. In this sense, a Bolsonaro government would be the first truly – and contradictorily – liberal government in Brazil.

Bolsonaro and his group managed to combine, in a peculiar way, ultra-conservatism in political and social values with ultra-liberalism in economic terms. It is certain that this combination was present, for example, in the Bush administration since 2001 in the USA. In Latin America, Pinochet pursued economic ultra-liberalism in the 1970s. In Brazil, however, it is unprecedented, especially in light of the participation of the military in Bolsonaro’s coalition, which has been, traditionally, nationalistic with regard to the economy.

### 3. How did Bolsonaro succeed despite the irrationality of his discourse and all the international pressure? What were the principal means for his victory?

First, the mobilization of fear was fundamental: fear of communism, fear of feminism, fear of weakening ‘traditional family values’, fear of urban violence, fear of land invasions, fear of losing jobs ... all fueled by class, race, and gender resentments.

The alleged threats were operationalized by non-traditional ways of doing politics and campaigning, the same ones used for Brexit and in the election of Donald Trump, but adapted to Brazilian conditions. Central to the strategy was the diffusion of fake news via Whatsapp, which has become the most capillary form of communication in Brazilian society today.



The spread of fake news did not create, but it increased exponentially the more conservative values to be found in the bosom of Brazilian society. During the past year, we have experienced extreme levels of stigmatization and demonization of feminists, fueled by conservative values regarding the traditional family; an environment of violence and murder of LGBTQs ([445 murders with homophobic motivation in 2017](#)); and a vague and confused idea that Brazil was heading toward communism, generating a strong anti-communist ideology. It has reached the point of glorifying the torturers within the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship (1964-1982/88) and creating a present threat of 'communist dictatorship' emanating from the PT. For us on the Left, the question remains: how did we not see all this coming, to react in a timely manner and confront the massive dissemination of fake news in Whatsapp groups among our families and friends.

Second, Bolsonaro and his groups have succeeded in channeling the anti-corruption ethos and the demand for 'change' to their advantage. The so-called '[Car Wash Operation](#)' scandal revealed corruption schemes among construction companies and the state oil company Petrobras. Public officials and the PT were directly implicated. The Judiciary assumed a mediating and political role that is unprecedented in the country's political history. Less known are the international linkages of the scandal, especially to U.S. interests whose role still needs to be clarified, specifically the interests of oil multinationals to end Petrobras special rights over the exploitation of the oil reserves of the 'Pre-Sal' region. These were all openly discussed issues<sup>4</sup> that led to jailing of national PT figures and to a moral defeat of the entire Left.

The arrest of [Lula da Silva](#) marks the culmination of that defeat. Lula's imprisonment is eminently political, given the speed with which his condemnation and imprisonment were carried out. Moreover, there is a lack of solid evidence against him, since his trial was based on allegations of other politicians and businessmen already in jail. With Lula leading the polls, there was a slimmer chance for Bolsonaro to actually win. Once Lula was prohibited from running, election results in favor of Bolsonaro were almost a given.

It is in this context that Bolsonaro sought to convince the Brazilian electorate that he would be a new kind of political leader who would build a government with people of proven technical merit in their companies and in public institutions. He claimed he would end the practice of appointments based on political-ideological affinities. Obviously, this has not happened. Instead, one ideology has been replaced by another. Again, Bolsonaro has managed to occupy the empty space in politics.

#### 4. How is the Bolsonaro government formed, under what pillars and groups?

The restructuring of the Brazilian state began with substantive changes in its institutional and bureaucratic structure. A 'super-ministry' of the Economy was created, resulting from the merger of the Ministries of Finance, Planning, Industry and Trade, and Labour. All are now under the command of an ultra-liberal figure, Paulo Guedes. Within this super-ministry, a number of new councils, committees and secretariats have been set up, following the new economic line. These include the 'Secretariat of De-bureaucratization' and the 'Secretariat of De-nationalization and De-investment'. Their agenda includes plans for privatization of state-owned enterprises, pension reform, deepening of labour reform, greater trade liberalization and access to Indigenous land for mining corporations.

At the same time, many of the State institutions created by the PT government and linked to

social and labour sectors have been dismantled. These include the Labour Ministry, Ministry of the Cities and Urban Planning, the National Council of Food and Nutrition Security, Ministry of Culture, the agency for Indigenous issues FUNAI and the Ministry of Agrarian Development.

These changes in the institutional materiality of the state were accompanied by many new appointments to public offices. Far from following electoral promises of appointment based on technical merit, the new appointees were chosen on political and ideological grounds. Two main groups are central to the occupation of state posts. First, representatives of the military were spread in all ministries, occupying one-third of the high-ranking positions, either as ministers or in other key posts. Among the ministries headed by military appointees are Defense, Mines and Energy, Science and Technology, and Infrastructure and Institutional Security, as well as the vice-presidency.

The other main group, in apparent dispute with the military sector, is made up of representatives of the ultra-conservative ideology linked to Olavo de Carvalho, a proto-philosopher who resides in the U.S. Carvalho gives courses online, is [linked to Steve Bannon](#) and is highly influential among Bolsonaro supporters. Bolsonaro's son, Eduardo, is playing the role of articulator for this group, as he was [designated by Bannon](#) as the principal leader of 'The Movement' of the far-right in Latin America. The strong influence of Bannon and Olavo de Carvalho became evident after Bolsonaro's visit to the USA.

Two of Carvalho's former students were named as heads of two key ministries: Education and Foreign Affairs. In Education, ultra-conservative followers of Carvalho and representatives of Pentecostal churches aim to combat 'gender ideology' and 'Marxist indoctrination' in schools and universities. The Minister of Education has [recently declared](#) that school history textbooks will be revised to tell 'the truth' about the [1964 Coup E'tat](#) and the subsequent 21 years of military dictatorship, arguing that it was supported by a broad social movement and succeeded in freeing Brazil from communism. In Foreign Affairs, they defend patriotism against multilateral negotiations (as in the case of climate change or migration), but the limit of this patriotism is in direct alignment with Trump and Israel. Ideologically, they intend to combat what they call 'cultural Marxism' and 'globalism'.

Despite the apparent dispute of 'Military vs. Olavistas', both groups within the government are united in the ultra-liberal economic agenda, despite the military's past nationalism. Evidence is provided by the concession of the Alcântara base for U.S. military use, the sale of Embraer to Boeing and the support for the pension reform.

##### 5. What are the government's main projects as presented to date?

The first major agenda item is the pension reform. Its pillars are the higher minimum age for retirement and increases in social security contributions. The big argument has been the 'end of privileges', with reference to the benefits of public versus private sector employees. What is really involved is a reduction in the role of the state as the guarantor of pensions, an increase in overexploitation of the labour force (40 years of contributions to social security as prerequisite for receiving a full pension) and the introduction of capitalization, which means insurance company participation even for the poorest. According to the [head of the Congress](#), "everyone can work until they're 80 years old." This shows total insensitivity and class blindness, since the average life expectancy in Brazil is 70 years.

Two other projects in the economic area will also have a devastating impact. One is the

possibility of untying the budget from the constitutional spending clauses on education and health. Currently, the Brazilian constitution stipulates that 18% of the national budget be spent on education and 13% on health. If the government succeeds in eliminating these clauses, Brazil's Congress will decide how the budget is allocated, without any obligation to these sectors.

Another economic project with potentially devastating effects is the new labour regime. It would allow workers and employers to negotiate bilaterally, without considering collective bargaining. Workers would lose collective rights to negotiate working conditions. In addition to undermining the bargaining power of unions, this project perversely poses the choice between maintaining guaranteed rights or having one's own job. The so-called "[green and yellow labour card](#)" would be an alternative to the formal (blue) labour card with collectively bargained constitutional rights.

Another major project is the public security program. A change in legislation has already taken place to permit the carrying of weapons, and the security program aims to target organized crime groups. The project signals a growing criminalization of social movements and heightened anti-terrorism measures. In the countryside, violence against activists and militants of social movements led to the [murder of 57 activists](#) in 2017. On the other hand, the project also mentions the fight against paramilitary forces, called militias, in urban centers. Yet, one of Bolsonaro's sons, Flavio, when he was a deputy in the state of Rio de Janeiro, [hired](#) for his office two members of the militia group accused of being involved in the murder of Marielle Franco. Beyond this, one of the two men arrested for murdering Marielle [was found](#) in his house in the same condominium where Bolsonaro lives in Rio. The relationship of Bolsonaro and his family to the paramilitary groups needs to be investigated, but there is no sign of this being done by former judge Moro and his team in the Ministry of Justice.

The ultra-conservative agenda on gender, feminism and LGBT rights is being implemented by the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights (formerly Human Rights Secretariat). This Ministry is led by a representative of a Pentecostal church and will have strong impact on education, health and social rights.

Finally, it is worth mentioning an [exponential increase](#) in the use of agrochemicals in Brazilian agriculture. This impacts directly on food quality and the health of the population. There is a [reinforcement of rural settlements policies](#) that changes land that facilitates private property titling, and further attacks on Indigenous peoples and *quilombolas* (historic Afro-Brazilian settlements) with the termination of Indigenous land demarcations and titling.

6. What are the contradictions among these different groups? What contradictory effects might their different agendas have?

Although the above-mentioned projects make up an ultra-conservative field, they often do not fit well together. There is no cohesion among the groups in the state structure under Bolsonaro. Different projects are not organized into one single front, and Bolsonaro may well prove himself incapable of organizing the interests of the different class factions that are now disputing his government.

On the external front, groups linked to Olavo de Carvalho want to align Brazil closely with the U.S. and Trump. This was confirmed during the recent visit to Washington. The Alcantara base, in the state of Maranhão in the Amazon region, was opened to the U.S. military.

Americans and Canadians will be exempt from visas to enter the country. Brazil wants to integrate into the OECD, to the detriment of alliances with countries of the South. Together with other conservative governments, Bolsonaro has dissolved the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR).

This leading foreign policy group stands side by side with the U.S. in containing China's economic expansion in Latin America and the world. However, China is Brazil's main trade partner, accounting for 25% of Brazil's total international trade. Sales to China became deeply [concentrated in exports](#) of agricultural and mineral commodities during the PT era, and in the last months, 90% of Brazil's soy exports went to China due to restrictions on U.S. soy in the Chinese market. In this sense, ideological impulses clash with economic ones, and Brazil stands in the middle of the U.S.-China trade war.

With regard to the Venezuelan crisis, the ultra-conservative wing was restrained from direct intervention by the military groups within the government, which resisted the impulses of the ultras out of concerns for regional destabilization.

The evangelical Pentecostal groups are demanding that Brazil move its Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, with strong support by groups linked to Olavo de Carvalho. Arab countries, however, are the main importers of chicken meat produced by Brazilian agribusiness. The announcement about moving the Embassy generated [reactions in the Arab world](#), including threats to cut imports, and the move did not go ahead. Instead, Bolsonaro announced the opening of a commercial office in Jerusalem.

Additionally, agribusiness corporate interests and their protectionist bias against the entry of foreign competitors, and against changes in import tariffs, clashed with the liberal bias of the Ministry of Economy, which sought to eliminate milk import tariffs. The Ministry had to [retreat](#) under agribusiness pressure.

Finally, the package of public security measures was sent to the National Congress, but its president has resisted a vote on them, prioritizing the pension reform instead. This has created tensions between the Legislative and Executive Branches, in the figure of the Minister of Justice, who was head of the Car Wash Operation, thus implying tensions also with the Judiciary Branch. The financial sector, which had high expectations of rapid action on pension reform, was disappointed as the reform was given less priority in comparison to other issues, such as Bolsonaro's foreign agenda. The stock market has dropped as [journalists comment](#) on how market agents "cannot understand the direction of the government."

The election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil impacts on all of the Latin American region. Just as Lula's election in 2002 influenced the start of the 'pink tide' period at the beginning of the century, today, the far-right in Chile, Uruguay and Venezuela (to name a few) becomes stronger because of the political turn that Brazil has taken since the impeachment of Rousseff in 2016. To be sure, the sustainability of the Bolsonaro government will depend on its capacity to organize the interests of different factions of the bourgeoisie and to present these as representative of the interests of the entire nation. He has not been capable of doing this so far. The international crisis scenario and popular struggles could destabilize his government even more. Bolsonaro and his allies were united in their determination to overthrow the PT but lost (or never had) control over the boat's direction.



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## Notes

1. Such as high interest rates and different benefits to the financial sector, large public credits to private monopolies, moderate (yet important) social policies that had the effect of social appeasement, among others.

2. Enormous oil reserves underneath the sea on the coast of Brazil.

3. Guedes was not known in the Brazilian mainstream until very recently. According to Joana Salem and Rejane Hoeveler in an article at *Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil*, he graduated in Chicago in 1978, but his thesis was never published and didn't receive much attention. He started teaching at the University of Chile in 1980 under the Pinochet dictatorship. It was exactly in the 1980s that Pinochet started the pension reform in Chile, forcing Chilean workers to deposit 10% of their salaries in private pension funds. Today, 30 years later, 90% of Chileans do not receive a full minimum salary when they retire. About one thousand Chilean elderly committed suicide in the last five years. Symptomatically, this is the first and major project conducted by Guedes as Minister of Economy. In the case of Chile and in the project of pension reform presented to the Brazilian congress by Guedes, the military is excluded. Cf. [Brasil, novo laboratório da extrema direita](#).

4. One of the first measures under the government of Michel Temer, after the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff was completed in August 2017, was to change the regulatory framework for the exploration of the Pre Sal areas, breaking with Petrobras's obligatory participation, and opening more space for Exxon or Shell (explicitly quoted by Temer) to have more participation in the coming auctions. Cf. [Com regras mais claras, leilão do pré-sal cria expectativa positiva na economia](#).

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