

Moving Right in Brazil: The Rise of Jair Bolsonaro

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Moving left has been a Brazilian political tendency for some time, a tendency affirmed through the 1990s and 2000s with the presidential administrations of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. But this is the same country also famed for its share of murderous military dictatorships and political convulsions. The worm would eventually turn.

Between 1964 and 1985, the military privileged itself with direct interventions in civilian and political life, ensuring a line of generals for president in the name of protective emergency. The trumping of civilian rule in 1964 had come in response to the centre-left reformist government of the Brazilian Labor Party's João Goulart. The brutal reaction became an inspirational blueprint for Latin American governments to follow: right wing governments obsessed with corporatist principles and suspicious of civil liberties.

That particular model, and precedent, offers lessons in the coming to power of former army parachutist Jair Messias Bolsonaro. At the 2016 impeachment vote held in the Lower House of the Brazilian Congress against President Dilma Rousseff (notably cast by a chamber half-filled by members facing various criminal investigations), Bolsonaro recalled 1964, the year when the country was supposedly rescued from the relentless approach of godless communism. His own ballot, as Perry Anderson [reminds us](#), was dedicated to the conscientious torturer-in-chief, Colonel Carlos Brilhante Ustra.

Colonel Ustra was [adamant](#) before a Truth Commission hearing in May 2013: "I fought terrorism." Like Bolsonaro, he saw no moderation in any left-wing platform, a scourge that needed to be tortured into oblivion. "Their aim was to depose the military and implement communism in Brazil. That was written in their programmes." In 2016, Bolsonaro aired views drawn straight from the Ustra school of simple thinking: torture was appropriate, the right to vote should be questioned and the National Congress needed to be opposed.

The overthrow of Goulart had been premised on the military's harnessing of opposition from large landowners, the interests of big business and corporations, the Catholic Church and elements of the middleclass. The forces that threaten the legacy of leftist reforms (30 million [lifted](#) out of poverty between 2002 and 2014), tarnished by the lingering stains of corruption linked to the state oil firm Petrobras and the Odebrecht construction firm, are similar. These are, however, marked by a fundamental difference: the very same middle class boosted in numbers by progressive governments are now falling for personalities of reaction.

In the considered [opinion](#) of sociologist Atilio A. Boron,

"They see those that declare an inferior economic position a threat, and

therefore they are prone to have discriminatory, aggressive and offensive positions to the popular sectors.”

Poverty, as the ultimate, dangerous crime.

Despite every major Brazilian political party being implicated in the orgiastic exercise of graft exposed in the economic downturn following 2013, Bolsonaro proved savvy enough to distance himself, and members of his own Social Liberal Party, from the filled trough. The Workers Party (PT) was left holding the can of guilt, while the far-right movement courted a troubled angst-ridden middle class.

Bolsonaro’s approach to the period of military presidents is to avoid using the term altogether. (Another point of resentment towards Rousseff was her establishment of a truth commission to investigate the human rights abuses and disappearances perpetrated at the time.) He merely [concedes](#) to “excesses, because during wars innocents die”. This is the fundamental law of survival: to keep a society safe, a few skulls have to be shattered. He is keen to keep his friends close and the military even closer, promising to place the Ministry of Defence within purview of military, rather than civilian personnel, and involving members of the Armed Forces in his government.

Bolsonaro has similarly modelled his campaign, and accompanying promises, on a Trump-style agenda of making Brazil great again, a coarser programme of self-inflation that contrasts with the previous Rousseff platform of “Larger Brazil”. His trip to the United States in October last year was a mission of instruction.

He, like Trump, has his own variant of the message of draining the fetid swamp of political corruption, though, like his source of inspiration, remains reticent on what to fill it with. He, like Trump, has a certain liking for the “law and order” message that emphasises muscle and arms over the logic and sober restraint of gun control. “It won’t be any better,” he argues about the policy of reducing gun ownership as a means of reducing violence. “If there were three or four armed people here now,” he [speculated](#) on the television channel Record, “I’d be certain that some nutter wouldn’t be able to come in through that door and do something bad.”

Bolsonaro’s vision – nutters meeting nutters – features jungle retributions and protections, the state’s tactical outsourcing of violence in favour of privatised security. “Why can’t a truck driver have the right to carry a gun? Just think about it; put yourself in the shoes of a truck driver. He nods off at the petrol station... and when he wakes up the next day his spare tyre has gone.” Not that the state is entirely absent from this savage equation: where police killings (*autos de resistência*) increase, he surmises, “violence goes down in the region where they took place.”

The current political move in Latin America is to the right. Conservative governments now hold sway in Chile and Colombia. The historical dislike for the keen meddling of Washington has, temporarily, taken second place. Arms of approval are being extended. Bolsonaro, to make that point, has already made [his position](#) on what regional foreign policy will look like. “Trump is an example to me... I plan to get closer to him for the good of both Brazil and the United States. We can take his examples from here back to Brazil.”

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