

Privilege Versus Democracy in Brazil

BY

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Jair Bolsonaro represents the rise of an authoritarian neoliberalism in Brazil and across the world. If he's elected president, Brazilian democracy could collapse.

Brazil will elect its new president on October 28, 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.

Finally, the armed forces have increasingly intervened in political life, particularly through the occupation of peripheral areas in Rio de Janeiro. Their close relationship with the judiciary is encapsulated in the appointment of General Fernando Azevedo e Silva as "adviser" to the president of the Supreme Court, and in statements like the thinly disguised demand for Lula's incarceration issued by army commander General Eduardo Villas Boas.

The state's shift towards an exceptionally draconian variety of neoliberalism was challenged by attempts to rebuild the Left through Lula's campaign for the presidency. These attempts were especially visible in 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 some on the Right debated canceling the elections. However, this was not 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.

An escalating conflict between these events emerged, between a radicalizing "alliance of privilege" in power, and the attempted responses by the PT and the Left. This conflict 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 Right's alliance of privilege.

The coup was, then, closely associated with a crisis of political representation, and an increasingly bitter dispute between the powers of Brazil's Republic. The consequence was rising legitimacy of individual political actors, especially "avenging" judges standing up against corruption. The Army is the only institution that has managed to avoid the miasma of illegitimacy, giving recent developments a strongly authoritarian and antidemocratic trend.

In short, one of the peculiarities of the rise of neoliberal authoritarianism in Brazil is right-wing nationalist programs' lack of strong leadership, solid parties, and organized movements. The Brazilian coup is a social force independent of the individuals supposedly in positions of command.

Examples include the destruction of Rousseff's former opponent 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 (who was primed to be the candidate of capital but captured less than 5 percent of the vote); the ruin of a long list of Temer's advisers; and the implosion of the main center-right parties, the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) and the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (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 United States.

The political crisis in Brazil can be understood as a tragedy in four acts, briefly described below.

The Global Context

The world is going through a mounting tide of authoritarian neoliberalism. This is 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 hijacking 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, labor relations, and living conditions have deteriorated. 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, workers tend to become increasingly divided, disorganized, and politically impotent. Their political influence has declined almost inexorably.

These transformations have also tended to evacuate the political sphere of participation, representativeness, and legitimacy. Consequently, the "losers" are increasingly unable to resist neoliberalism, or even to conceptualize alternatives. 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 program 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 programs that harm their own political base, such as radicalized forms of globalization and financialization that increase the power of the neoliberal elite.

Society is divided even more deeply, wages fall, taxes become more regressive, social protections are eroded, economies become more unbalanced, and poverty grows. Mass frustration intensifies, fueling an unfocused discontent. Authoritarian neoliberalism is intrinsically unstable, and it creates conditions supporting the rise of contemporary forms of fascism.

From Alliance Politics to the Far Right

The political history of Brazil in the last fifteen years can be read in the power struggles between clashing alliances. Between 1999 and 2005, Lula and the PT built an “alliance of losers,” an umbrella of groups whose only commonality was the experience of losses under neoliberalism. They included the urban and rural unionized working class, especially 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,” made up of those groups that had won the most during the PT administrations. This included the domestic bourgeoisie, most formal-sector workers, and large segments of the informal working class. In contrast with the alliance of losers, the alliance of winners had a narrower top — due to the PT’s loss of support from the internationalized bourgeoisie, the mainstream media, and the middle class — attached to a massively larger base, especially among informal workers.

The Rousseff administration recomposed its support base and, between 2013-14, relied on a “progressive alliance” mainly made up of 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 reelection 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 became extremely low.

In contrast, the right-wing 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 the demolition of democracy. This process seeks 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 elections 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 US 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 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 sixty thousand murders per year, in addition to tens of thousands of other violent crimes); and a neoliberal economic discourse centered on slashing a (presumably corrupt) state, that is parasitical upon the “honest” citizens. The rupture of the progressive alliance and the hemorrhage of poor voters towards Bolsonaro represents the consolidation of an electoral majority for authoritarian neoliberalism.

Defeating the PT and overthrowing Dilma Rousseff were, then, part of a wider process of shifting Brazil's political center of gravity 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 potential support for the PT candidate, but also led to the implosion of the traditional center-right parties, which were devastated by Bolsonaro's rise. 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. Over time, the post-dictatorship 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, a politicized armed forces, and a constitutional amendment setting a ceiling on fiscal expenditures for the next twenty years (which will slowly throttle public programs). With respect to 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 center-left president would find a state in worse situation than Lula found it in 2003, thanks to 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. Successful deals always run 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 phenomena, the 2018 elections have provided five specific lessons. First, the political center of gravity in Brazil has shifted to the right. From the south to the center-west, passing through the prosperous southeast, 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 US-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 program 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 program 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 in Brazilian history and the most severe political impasse in the past century have profoundly degraded Brazilian democracy. This has 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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