

The rise of the far right: Brazil

Introduction

Bolsonaro and his would-be ‘super-minister’ of the economy Paolo Guedes campaigned on the promise of ultra-liberal economic policies, pledging to shrink the public sector, cut taxes, privatise state assets and flexibilise labour markets. Brazil’s stock market reached a record high in the immediate aftermath of Bolsonaro’s election, even as the international markets were in meltdown. This was a sure sign of confidence among investors that the government would swiftly administer their desired remedy of economic shock therapy.

Bolsonaro picked up where his predecessor Temer left off in attacking trade unions, disbanding the country’s Ministry of Labour within days of taking office. In March 2019, his administration ended automatic deduction of union subs without warning, compromising the financial independence of trade unions.¹ Yet, it has been far from plain sailing in terms of implementing other aspects of his programme. Bolsonaro’s government spent much of 2019 battling to enact reform of the country’s pension system, and this passed only because a cross-party coalition of legislators decided to back it. The government lacks an overall majority in Congress and the parliamentary arithmetic has become even more fragmented following Bolsonaro’s resignation from the Social Liberal Party (PSL) to establish the Alliance for Brazil (APB). The protests in Chile and Lula’s release, both of which emboldened the opposition, also contributed to the government’s prevarication when it came to delivering on the rest of its economic programme.² While Guedes was active in the implementation of deregulation measures and privatisation, this did not represent the kind of economic shock therapy that big capital had expected or been promised.³

The pandemic has hit Brazil especially hard, in part because of Bolsonaro’s refusal to take the virus seriously and coordinate a major public health response. The president has repeatedly clashed with state governors who have introduced stay-at-home measures, spoken at anti-lockdown rallies and even sacked his health minister for promoting the World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance.⁴ As of November 2020, the country has the second-highest number of deaths in the world behind the US, with over 167,000 deaths officially recorded.

Bolsonaro’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis has had a significant impact on workers and trade unions. Health unions, trade union federations and social movements, backed by the Public Services International (PSI) and UNI Global, have lodged a complaint before the International Criminal Court (ICC) alleging that the president’s actions constitute crimes

¹ Moss A (2020). “The edge of democracy”. TUC Blog, 10 February 2020. Available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/edge-democracy>.

² Stott M, Schipani A and Harris B (2019). “Brazil reforms: has Jair Bolsonaro missed his moment?”. *Financial Times*, 3 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/840a29fc-14f0-11ea-9ee4-11f260415385>.

³ MacDonald SB (2020). “Bolsonaro’s first year: balancing the economy and cultural wars”. *Global Americans*, 9 January 2020. Available at: <https://theglobalamericans.org/2020/01/bolsonaros-first-year-balancing-the-economy-and-cultural-wars/>.

⁴ “Brazil’s Bolsonaro joins protest against coronavirus restrictions”. Al Jazeera, 20 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/20/brazils-bolsonaro-joins-protest-against-coronavirus-restrictions/?gb=true>.

against humanity. The complaint demands that Bolsonaro be held accountable for acting against the recommendations of health authorities and irresponsibly exposing people to contagion, including the 60 per cent of health workers who do not have access to PPE.⁵ In economic terms, more than 10 million workers have been impacted by the arbitrary suspension of contracts and reductions in hours and wages, facilitated by an emergency law that was introduced at the beginning of the pandemic and has been extended until the end of 2020.⁶ Approximately 40 per cent of Brazil's informal workers have lost their jobs, while overall unemployment has risen to 14.4 per cent (13.8 million people) in the third quarter of 2020, its highest rate since 2012.⁷

There have been signs of the government moving to advance its privatisation agenda during the pandemic. Plans have been announced for the privatisation of key public assets such as the post office, the National Bank for Economic Development (BNDES) and Electrobras, the power utility, and the accelerated privatisation of Petrobras, the state-owned oil company – to name but a few.⁸ However, Bolsonaro, Guedes and their backers remain frustrated with the slow pace of progress owing to the political context, something that led to the resignation of Brazil's privatisation minister in August.⁹ In October, Bolsonaro signed a decree authorising the exploration of public-private initiatives in the health system, only to revoke the decree one day later after receiving fierce criticism from opposition politicians and the health sector.¹⁰ The government has also suffered setbacks in its efforts to embed certain aspects of anti-worker and anti-trade union legislation. A presidential decree introduced at the start of the pandemic, known as Provisional Measure 927/2020, gave priority to individual agreements between employers and workers over existing collective agreements. Yet this measure expired in July after Congress could not come to a consensus as to whether it should be extended or replaced.

In addition, with one eye on his approval ratings and the political opposition, Bolsonaro has been forced to display a certain degree of pragmatic populism in his approach to the economic crisis. With many people in crowded low-income neighbourhoods struggling, the

⁵ Public Services International (2020). "Global unions denounce Bolsonaro before the ICC for genocide and crimes against humanity". 27 July 2020. Available at:

<https://publicservicesinternational/resources/news/global-unions-denounce-bolsonaro-before-the-icc-for-genocide-and-crimes-against-humanity/?id=10986&lang=en>.

⁶ Rosely Rocha (2020). "See how the holidays are and the 13th of those who had a suspended work contract". CUT, 19 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.cut.org.br/noticias/veja-como-ficam-as-ferias-e-o-13-de-quem-teve-contrato-de-trabalho-suspensao-9f7c>.

⁷ "Unemployment rate rises (14.4%) and is the largest since 2012". CUT, 30 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.cut.org.br/noticias/taxa-de-desemprego-dispara-e-atinge-14-4-e-o-maior-indice-desde-2012-153c>.

⁸ Fenae (2020). "Privatisations are advancing and Caixa bankers warn: 'burning of assets'". CUT, 20 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.cut.org.br/noticias/privatizacoes-avancam-e-bancarios-da-caixa-alertam-queima-de-patrimonio-5f18>.

⁹ Reuters Staff (2020). "Brazil's privatization czar resigns amid economic slowdown". *Reuters*, 11 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-economy-privatisations-idUSKCN2572Z2>.

¹⁰ Petrov A (2020). "Decree leading to private investment in basic health care". *Rio Times*, 29 October 2020. Available at: <https://riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/brazil/bolsonaro-publishes-and-revokes-decree-on-healthcare-centers-privatization-under-24-hours/>.

government introduced an (albeit insufficient) emergency income supplement of R\$600 (about £90) for five months. This income support reached approximately 65 million people, or more than 30 per cent of the population, and has been extended till December 2020 at half of its original value. It remains to be seen whether this will be extended further or, as some have suggested, integrated as a permanent part of public policy. But it goes some way to highlighting the tension between Bolsonaro's stated commitment to neoliberal reforms and the demands of political expediency.¹¹

This tension is likely to become greater as 2021 progresses. Brazil had a deficit target of \$17 billion before the pandemic, but it is now headed towards \$125 billion. The country's currency has plummeted in value, foreign investment has fallen and unemployment is set to continue rising – how fast and by how much will largely depend on the level of income supports. Bolsonaro's rich backers, who fear he will try to sustain higher levels of public spending to shore up his popularity in poorer regions, will instead be demanding that the government presses ahead with austerity and the liberalisation programme promised to them.¹² Economy minister Guedes, the ultraliberal ideologue, has even said that breaking the constitutional cap on public spending could lead to Bolsonaro's impeachment, triggering another political crisis at the heart of the Brazilian state.¹³

The limits of Bolsonaro's power

One of the big differences between Bolsonaro and his counterparts (Erdoğan, Modi, Orbán) is that his ability to dominate the country's political life is to some degree obstructed by the lack of access to a party machine with deep roots in the state and civil society, and by the way the state institutions are set up. Bolsonaro's fallout with the PSL has deprived him of access to the party's considerable financial resources and networks while leaving him heavily reliant on centrist parties to secure the support of Congress for legislation. Another important factor is that the constitution gives considerable power to the legislature, as well as to states and municipalities. One consequence of this is that Bolsonaro has been unable to use the pandemic as a pretext for the granting of exceptional powers. State governors and municipal leaders have also managed to largely hold onto autonomy in dealing with the pandemic, enlisting the support of the Supreme Court and that of the Speakers of the House of Representatives and the Senate.¹⁴

¹¹ Pereira A (2020). "A change in Brazil's national populist government". OUPblog, 1 November 2020. Available at: <https://blog.oup.com/2020/11/a-change-in-brazils-national-populist-government/>.

¹² Phillips D (2020). "He became a hero": Bolsonaro sees popularity surge as Covid-19 spreads". *Guardian*, 10 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/10/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-coronavirus-aid>.

¹³ Reuters Staff, op cit.

¹⁴ Peluso Neder Meyer E and Bustamante T (2020). "Authoritarianism without emergency powers: Brazil under COVID-19". *Verfassungsblog*, 8 April 2020. Available at: <https://verfassungsblog.de/authoritarianism-without-emergency-powers-brazil-under-covid-19/>; Singarajah F (2020). "Guest blog: Brazil, Covid-19 and the rule of law". Bar Council, 22 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.barcouncil.org.uk/resource/guest-blog-brazil-covid-19-and-the-rule-of-law.html>.

Bolsonaro has found the judiciary to be a particularly hard nut to crack. The Supreme Court has ruled against the President several times in the past few months, most significantly on occasions where he has sought to seize legislative powers.¹⁵ At the height of the pandemic the Court authorised an investigation into allegations that key Bolsonaro supporters were involved in a disinformation and intimidation campaign against public authorities, including members of the judiciary. This was launched in parallel with another investigation into claims by Sergio Moro, former justice minister, that Bolsonaro had pressed him to replace the chief of federal police and tried to interfere in investigations involving his sons and other family members. The Supreme Court dealt a blow to the president when it released a video of Bolsonaro swearing at a cabinet meeting, in which he appears to express frustration at not being able to replace law enforcement officials.¹⁶ A magazine exposé published shortly thereafter revealed that Bolsonaro had discussed with key cabinet allies the possibility of sending troops to shut down the Supreme Court and install substitute justices until "that was in order".¹⁷

As Bolsonaro's relationship with legislators and the courts has deteriorated, he has become increasingly reliant on a core group of military-linked advisers and ministers in his government. He has also sparked controversy by addressing anti-lockdown rallies organised by the far right, where calls are routinely made for a military coup against Congress and the judiciary. Although he has not publicly called for a military takeover, Bolsonaro often speaks favourably about the coup of 1964 and the military dictatorship that followed. He has also encouraged his supporters to arm themselves. Under new relaxed laws, gun ownership doubled in 2019, and Bolsonaro has since revoked decrees facilitating the tracing and identification of weapons and ammunition.¹⁸ This serves the dual purpose of pandering to the law and order concerns of his base and creating an army of diehard supporters willing to mobilise in his defence. It is clear that he wishes to retain the threat of violence and even the possibility of military intervention to protect himself from political and judicial challenges.

Culture wars and human rights

Bolsonaro has pushed Brazil deeper into a culture war that is having significant real-world impacts. As in the US, the country's president and his allies have directly contributed to the spread of misinformation about the severity of Covid-19, its effects and possible cures,

¹⁵ Peluso Neder Meyer and Bustamante, *op cit.*

¹⁶ Stargardter G and Brito R (2020). "In video, Bolsonaro says wanted cops replaced to stop family being 'screwed'". *Reuters (UK)*, 22 May 2020. Available at: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-brazil-politics/in-video-bolsonaro-says-wanted-cops-replaced-to-stop-family-being-screwed-idUKKBN22Y2VU>.

¹⁷ Abrantes Martins P (2020). "Supreme crisis: Bolsonaro threatens to attack the Brazilian STF". *Blog of the International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 14 August 2020. Available at: <http://www.iconnectblog.com/2020/08/supreme-crisis-bolsonaro-threatens-to-attack-the-brazilian-stf/>.

¹⁸ Platt D (2020). "Is Brazil on the verge of a dictatorship?". *openDemocracy*, 17 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/brasil-al-borde-de-una-dictadura-en/>.

fuelling anti-lockdown sentiments and spread of the virus.¹⁹ Bolsonaro continued to downplay the threat even as the country's hospitals and morgues were full, and took the fact that he contracted and recovered fairly quickly from Covid-19 as a vindication of his approach. Bolsonaro is personally responsible for spreading a number of other conspiracy theories, for example that satellite images and videos of the Amazon burning were fake. He has talked of a conspiracy between NGOs, foreign governments and indigenous communities to prevent Brazil's development. The number of fires in the rainforest so far this year is at a decade high, surpassing the number recorded in 2019 when the destruction sparked widespread criticism of the government.²⁰

Brazilian lawyers and human rights collectives are requesting that the ICC open an investigation against Bolsonaro for inciting genocide against indigenous people. Since the beginning of his campaign in 2018, Bolsonaro has made clear his intentions to open up indigenous reserves to extractive companies. He has described the constitutional right of indigenous populations to occupy their traditional territories as 'unjustifiable', comparing them to animals kept in zoos. The ICC's prosecutors are now analysing 33 of the president's statements and decisions before deciding whether or not to request an indictment. Bolsonaro has also dismissed 21 of 27 superintendents at the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA), and sought to undermine the agency responsible for protecting the interests and cultures of indigenous tribes. As a result, the number of indigenous leaders murdered by illegal loggers, miners and land grabbers in 2019 climbed to its highest rate in 11 years.²¹

Brazil's continued descent into violence has had severe implications for workers and trade unions. The ITUC reports that the police have been cracking down heavily on strikes calling for a new direction in economic policy, using tear gas, beating up strike organisers and arresting and detaining many people linked to the trade union movement. Several trade union leaders have been subject to arbitrary arrest and multiple death threats, and a number have been murdered with no action by the authorities to investigate or prosecute the killings. In general, trade unionists are afforded little to no protection by the security services or the state. In light of all this, Brazil has been identified as one of the 10 worst countries for workers.²²

Racist police violence, meanwhile, endures in Bolsonaro's Brazil. Killings by police in Rio reached a record high of 1,814 in 2019, the highest number since records began in 1998.

¹⁹ Ricard J and Medeiros J (2020). "Using misinformation as a political weapon: Covid-19 and Bolsonaro in Brazil". *Harvard Kennedy School Mis/Information Review*, 17 April 2020. Available at: <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/using-misinformation-as-a-political-weapon-covid-19-and-bolsonaro-in-brazil/>.

²⁰ Sakamoto L (2020). "In Brazil, conspiracies are for professionals". *New Internationalist*, 9 October 2020. Available at: <https://newint.org/features/2020/10/06/view-brazil>; "Fires in Brazil's Amazon rainforest jump in October". Al Jazeera, 2 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/2/fires-in-brazils-amazon-rainforest-jump-in-october>.

²¹ Azevedo GS and Fonseca JB (2020). "How Bolsonaro is undermining human rights protection mechanisms in Brazil". LSE Blog, 02 April 2020. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationaldevelopment/2020/02/04/how-bolsonaro-is-undermining-human-rights-protection-mechanisms-in-brazil/>.

²² ITUC, op cit, pp 20–1, 25.

This accounted for almost a third of the 5,804 people killed by police in Brazil last year, the overwhelming majority of whom were black. The government excluded complaints of police violence from its 2019 human rights report, sparking allegations of a cover-up amid the global outrage over racism and the use of excessive force by police in the US. Police killings spiked once more in the first six months of 2020, even as crime rates dropped dramatically and the Supreme Court banned raids during the pandemic.²³ This has occurred on the watch of a president who campaigned on a strong law and order platform, backs police crackdowns on criminality and has long denied the existence of racial injustice in his country.

Bolsonaro has at times disappointed his evangelical support base with statements and decisions that reflect broader political considerations. In October of this year, he frustrated religious conservative supporters by nominating Kassio Marques, a liberal with a record of flexible rulings, to the Supreme Court. Responding to a backlash over the decision, he sought to allay concerns among conservatives by declaring that "we are going to have a very evangelical minister in the supreme court" next year.²⁴ But he has brought other parts of the state into line with his socially conservative ideology, for example by appointing evangelical pastor Damares Alves minister for Human Rights, Family and Women. Alves' ministry has recently introduced a regulation that erects new barriers to abortion access. This follows a national row in which a 10-year-old rape victim looking to exercise her constitutional right to an abortion was hounded by anti-abortion activists, some of whom claimed to be in contact with Alves.²⁵ Bolsonaro and Alves have frequently voiced their opposition to sexual and reproductive rights, with the former also continuing to publicly express deeply homophobic views. The president described the Supreme Court decision to criminalise homophobia in Brazil, a country that has one of the highest murder rates for LGBT+ individuals, as "completely wrong".²⁶

Just as Trump has drawn on a national history of anti-communist paranoia, so Bolsonaro is reviving the anti-communism of 1930s Brazilian fascism and the military dictatorship. Attacks on communism, 'gender ideology' and 'cultural Marxism' – an antisemitic trope – were a prominent feature of Bolsonaro's campaign, and following his election supporters

²³ Krsticevic V (2020). "Brazil excludes complaints of police violence from its annual human rights report". *Merco Press*, 13 June 2020. Available at: <https://en.mercopress.com/2020/06/13/brazil-excludes-complaints-of-police-violence-from-its-annual-human-rights-report>; Acebes CM (2020). "Brazil suffers its own scourge of police brutality". *Americas Quarterly*, 3 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/brazil-suffers-its-own-scourge-of-police-brutality/>.

²⁴ Brito R (2020). "Brazil's Bolsonaro hopes to appoint evangelical minister to supreme court". *Reuters (UK)*, 6 October 2020. Available at: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-religion/brazils-bolsonaro-hopes-to-appoint-evangelical-minister-to-supreme-court-idUSKBN26R037>.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch (2020). "Brazil: revoke regulation curtailing abortion access". 21 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/21/brazil-revoke-regulation-curtailed-abortion-access>; Hennigan T (2020). "Bolsonaro embroiled in abortion row over 10-year-old rape victim". *Irish Times*, 15 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/bolsonaro-embroiled-in-abortion-row-over-10-year-old-rape-victim-1.4355496>.

²⁶ "Brazilian president says decision to criminalise homophobia 'completely wrong'". *euronews*, 15 June 2019. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2019/06/15/brazilian-president-says-decision-to-criminalise-homophobia-completely-wrong>.

chanted "Death to the communists!". Since coming to power, Bolsonaro and his allies have displayed an obsession with purging the state of 'leftist' values. Eduardo Bolsonaro, the president's son, has even proposed drafting a bill to introduce prison sentences for the production, sale or distribution of communist symbols. Anti-communist rhetoric has also played a role in the government's response to Covid-19, with the foreign minister Ernesto Araújo writing of a 'globalist' plot to usher in world communism. This 'anti-communism without communism' stokes up fears of an existential threat to the nation, "which in principle licenses almost any level of violence".²⁷

The results of the November 2020 local elections, the first in his mandate, have severely damaged Bolsonaro's prospects going into 2021. In the context of a worsening economic and public health crisis, candidates backed by the Brazilian president suffered major losses in the states where he received the greatest support during the 2018 election. Overall, centre-right and right-wing parties made the most substantial gains at the expense of Bolsonaro's coalition, although there were signs of progress and a possible basis for closer cooperation on the left.²⁸ At the time of writing, Bolsonaro looks vulnerable to political defeat sooner rather than later, particularly as he still has no official party to speak of. However, the harbingers of violent radicalisation and confrontation are also clear to see.

²⁷ Seymour R (2020). "Why is the nationalist right hallucinating a 'communist enemy'?" *Guardian*, 26 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/26/communist-enemy-nationalist-right-trump-us-bolsonaro-brazil>; Bevins V (2020). "Where conspiracy reigns". *The Atlantic*, 16 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/how-anti-communist-conspiracies-haunt-brazil/614665/>.

²⁸ Mier B (2020). "Brazilian elections: a day of shame for the far right". *Brasil Wire*, 16 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.brasilwire.com/brazilian-elections-day-of-shame-for-the-far-right/>.