

# Introduction

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The contributions to the present publication were originally prepared in the context of a virtual lecture series conducted by Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (Ibero-American Institut, IAI) in collaboration with Universidade de São Paulo (USP) between February and April 2021. In six panels, we discussed winners and losers of the fall 2020 local elections; the development of the party system; the situation of social movements; relations between the Bolsonaro administration and Congress and between the Executive and the judiciary; and Brazil's foreign policy and international relations. Some of the participants have revised their contributions in recent months and made them available for this publication. *Bruno Speck* asks how the 2017 electoral reforms affected party competition in the 2020 local elections and what the consequences might be for the 2022 presidential elections. One of his conclusions is that, despite their rather technical nature, the electoral law changes had an enormous impact on the local elections in 2020. The fragmentation of the party system has decreased significantly. Speck expects similar effects at the national level for the 2022 elections, given what is known about the dynamics of party competition in Brazil. *Fernando Limongi*, *Andréa Freitas*, *Danilo Medeiros*, and *Joyce Luz* analyze the relationship between President Bolsonaro and Congress. They conclude that the incumbent president is primarily concerned with reversing a large number of reforms implemented since the country's redemocratization, particularly by the Cardoso, Lula, and Rousseff administrations. *Luciano Da Ros* and *Matthew M. Taylor* examine the relationship between the Bolsonaro administration and the judiciary. They show that the judiciary has not shied away from open confrontations with the President in order to defend Brazil's constitutional order. On the other hand, the judiciary has reacted less forcefully to Bolsonaro's efforts to scale back relevant investigations into corruption. *Brigitte Weiffen* presents an overview of the realignment of Brazilian foreign policy under Bolsonaro. She shows the extent to which central principles of Brazilian foreign policy that have been in place for many decades have been called into question during this period and replaced by a confrontational, ideological approach; how the professionalism and much-vaunted pragmatism of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Brazilian diplomacy have suffered; how much Brazil's regional and international presence has declined; and the extent that the country's credibility at the global level has suffered.

While the contributions to this publication focus largely on an analysis of developments after Bolsonaro's election as president in 2018, in the following pages I would like to take a look at a number of new books published in the last three years that have attempted to analyze the Bolsonaro phenomenon from a longer-term perspective. Bolsonaro's election and the associated fears about a fundamental threat to Brazilian democracy have led to a large number of articles

in academic journals (see the overview in the introduction to the book by Hatzikidi and Dullo 2021). In terms of book publications, it is first worth mentioning a number of journalistic works that deal with developments in Brazil with dense descriptions and reportage, but usually without a theoretical basis. These include *Tormenta. O governo Bolsonaro: crises, intrigas e segredos* [Storm. The Bolsonaro Government: Crises, Intrigues, and Secrets] by Thaís Oyama (2021). The book is devoted to Bolsonaro's first year in office, addressing, for example, the President's difficult relationship with Justice Minister Sérgio Moro, Bolsonaro's family environment, and, last but not least, Bolsonaro's psyche. The chapter heading "Paranoias, ideias fixas, medos e outros tormentos" [Paranoia, fixed ideas, fears, and other torments] already hints at the personality traits she attributes to Bolsonaro. Despite all the criticism, among other things for his mixing of the public and private spheres and the instrumentalization of state institutions for personal issues, for example, the protection of his son Flávio from prosecution, Oyama also shows that Bolsonaro is a fairly popular personality with whom many people identify.

Two journalistic works dealing with the developments under Bolsonaro were written by Cesar Calejon Ibrahim. In *A ascensão do Bolsonarismo no Brasil do século XXI* [The Rise of Bolsonarism in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Brazil] (Calejon Ibrahim 2021a), Calejon addresses five aspects that he believes can explain Bolsonaro's victory in the 2018 presidential election: anti-PT sentiments, historical elitism, religious dogmatism, anti-system sentiments, and the spread of fake news or hate and fear speech through the use of platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Calejon's second book, *Tempestade Perfeita: o bolsonarismo e a sindemia covid-19 no Brasil* [Perfect Storm: Bolsonarism and the COVID-19 Syndemic in Brazil] (Calejon Ibrahim 2021b), is a detailed analysis of how the President, through his inappropriate pandemic policy, has worsened the consequences of COVID-19 in Brazil. Following US medical anthropologist Merrill Singer, Calejon speaks of a *syndemic* [synergistic epidemic]. The concept accounts for different and multiple crises that add up to create a single great calamity. The intersection between Bolsonarism and COVID-19 created a "perfect storm": Brazil not only had to deal with a health crisis, but also with a social, political, and economic crisis – that is, different crises interacting simultaneously. According to Calejon, this crisis started with the 2013 protest movements, passed through the media collusion that formed around the major corruption scandals of the following years, the subversion of the democratic game that led to the ousting of President Dilma without criminal responsibility in 2016, and the impeding of former President Lula's candidacy in 2018 (Calejon Ibrahim 2021b, 25s.).

A journalistic examination of Bolsonaro in English comes from Richard Lapper in his book *Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro* (Lapper 2021). The book presents an assessment of recent Brazilian political developments and many of the underlying political and socio-economic developments that enabled Bolsonaro's electoral victory in 2018. Similar to Thaís Oyama, Lapper begins by describing Bolsonaro's personal and political career. After going back to the boom years under President Lula (2003–2010), he then looks at the social protests that began to increase in 2013. He shows how the growing social fear of crime and violence in the years that followed prepared the ground for a personality like Bolsonaro, who likes to present himself as a security policy hardliner. Lapper also analyzes the increasing importance of paramilitary militias and the spread of Pentecostal churches in Brazil. A chapter on the internal

conflicts within the governing coalition during its first year and a half in office offers additional interesting insights.

A first scholarly analysis of the developments that led to Bolsonaro's rise was already provided in 2019 by the anthology *Brasil em colapso* [Brazil in collapse] edited by Esther Solano Gallego. The book includes contributions on the role of the judiciary in imposing a neoliberal logic in Brazil; the importance of the media system in the construction of anti-PT sentiments and the new right; the use of targeted disinformation in social networks as a political weapon; the longstanding participation of the armed forces in Brazilian politics; and Brazilian social conservatism, among others. In the introduction, the editor characterizes the contributions as politicized critical thinking, because in times when the prevailing policy refuses to adopt sustainable strategies, a policy constructed by all is the only alternative.

The slim volume *Brasil em Transe: Bolsonarismo, Nova Direita e Desdemocratização* [Brazil in a Trance: Bolsonaroism, New Right and De-democratization] (Pinheiro-Machado and de Freixo 2019) shows a similar basic outlook. Bolsonaroism is understood here as a political phenomenon that goes beyond the figure of Jair Bolsonaro himself and is characterized by an ultra-conservative worldview that preaches a return to "traditional values" and adopts a nationalist and "patriotic" rhetoric that deeply criticizes anything even remotely identified with the left and progressivism.

The book *Bolsonarismo. Teoria e prática* [Bolsonarism. Theory and practice], edited by Geraldo Monteiro and Carlos Teixeira, was born at the Centro Brasileiro de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre a Democracia located at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (Monteiro and Teixeira 2020). This book, too, analyzes Bolsonaroism as a socio-political movement from various perspectives, but it also addresses the structure, composition and functioning of the Bolsonaro administration. This includes analyses of the relations between the different powers as well as of a number of policy areas, especially health and culture. It also deals with the political principles, rules, and practices of the Bolsonaro government from a fundamental perspective, questioning its rationality, legitimacy and institutionality. In almost all policy areas (economy, education, health, environment, foreign policy), the book finds that the Bolsonaro government has a centralizing, authoritarian understanding of politics without clear objectives, and that its main goal is to roll back the political reforms of the past 20 years.

A comprehensive panorama of recent developments in Brazil is offered by the 16 contributions to the anthology *Democracy and Brazil. Collapse and Regression* (Bianchi et al. 2021). With the concept of de-democratization, the editors aim to distance themselves from a formalistic understanding of democracy. They point out that democracies are never something given or completed once and for all, but can always be confronted with authoritarian regressions. They see the beginning of the process of de-democratization in Brazil in 2015 with the questioning of the results of the 2014 presidential elections and the instrumentalization of the impeachment process to force then-President Dilma Rousseff out of office. Parallel to the process of de-democratization, in their view, is the establishment of a new order of legitimation, which involves guaranteeing economic policies that conform to the market, through which the state attempts to decouple popular democracy from the management of the national economy. The volume is divided into two parts. The first more theoretically oriented part focuses on processes

of de-democratization, neo-golpism, and the rise of right-wing forces in Brazil. The second part then presents case studies on several policy areas: gender and ethnic equality, urban policy, education, the role of the media, and the relationship between religion and politics.

The contributions to the volume *A Horizon of (Im)possibilities. A Chronicle of Brazil's Conservative Turn* (Hatzikidi and Dullo 2021) are based on a symposium organized in London in 2019. They focus both on processes before the 2018 elections (“How did we get here?”) and on developments since then (“Where are we going?”). The look back points to continuities and discontinuities in Brazilian history and the paradoxical situation of a country that has long been characterized by the self-image of a tolerant, open, and diverse society, with simultaneous high levels of inequality in numerous social spheres, widespread violence, and entrenched hierarchies. In their conclusions, the editors emphasize the far-reaching effects that Jair Bolsonaro’s government has had not only on Brazilian politics but also on the daily lives of Brazilians. There have been deteriorations in almost all areas of society. Like most of the other volumes, this one is characterized by a multi-disciplinary approach, incorporating ethnographic, political science, sociological, and historiographical perspectives.

An important contribution to understanding contemporary Brazil is the comprehensive, theoretically informed analysis of Bolsonaro’s rise offered by the book *The Bolsonaro Paradox: The Public Sphere and Right-wing Counterpublicity in Contemporary Brazil* (Rocha, Solano, and Medeiros 2021). One core message of the book is that Bolsonaro and his supporters turn their criticism and attacks primarily against the political arrangement that came into effect with the 1988 constitution after the end of the last military dictatorship. The constitution set the stage for greater integration of subaltern groups in many areas of Brazilian society (Rocha, Solano, and Medeiros 2021, 1). It took up many demands that had long been formulated by workers, indigenous peoples, environmentalists, and women’s rights activists, and made possible the expansion of the public sphere. It was precisely against this public sphere, described by the authors as “post-bourgeois,” that Brazil’s new right turned. The authors explain the multiple dimensions of this process, which includes technological developments such as the massive emergence of the new social media as well as processes of political and cultural change (4s.). To this end, they make use of the concept of *counterpublics*: “With the explicit aim of attacking the state and the established order, they try to circulate discourses that oppose a cultural horizon perceived as dominant and that stands out for its performative character, causing shock and disturbance in the social order” (6). Many of those who belonged to this counterpublic ended up in important government positions after Bolsonaro’s 2018 election victory. The central goal of this group, according to the authors, is:

to destroy the cultural and institutional foundations of the public debate and of the political system associated with the democratic pact of 1988 and, in order to do this, actively seek to refuse consensus, naturalize extremism, and signal a future authoritarian political regime for radicalized groups, which could also be individually abandoned along the way if their actions threaten Bolsonaroism’s continuation in power (145).

The good news, according to the authors, is that – contrary to the diagnoses given by some other approaches – the Brazilian public sphere has so far neither collapsed nor is it on the verge of collapse. Despite Bolsonaro’s rise to power, it continues to exist and is characterized by dynamic

and complex processes “of institutional construction, questioning, and attempts at deepening, contesting, and de-institutionalization” (143).

Brazilian democracy has so far survived the stress test triggered by President Bolsonaro’s assumption of power, but the quality of democracy has deteriorated enormously in many areas. Even though the rehabilitation of former President Lula now provides a candidate who could jeopardize Bolsonaro’s re-election in the 2022 presidential elections, the country’s prospects are anything but clear. After the November 2020 midterm elections, the President increasingly used the very negotiating tactics toward Congress that he had so vehemently rejected as tantamount to corruption before taking office. He may not have consolidated majorities in Congress, but he has succeeded in helping people to victory in both the House of Representatives and the Senate in the elections in spring 2021 who, while not close political confidants, are at least politicians who are close to him. As a result, it is unlikely that any of the numerous impeachment proceedings initiated against Bolsonaro will be successful. In the meantime, Bolsonaro’s political goals have not changed. He continues to pursue the destruction of those social and societal gains that were made possible by the 1988 constitution and enforced by the Cardoso, Lula, and Rousseff governments. It can only be hoped that the checks and balances of Brazilian democracy are strong enough to prevent this from happening.

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