

Brazilian Democracy Facing Authoritarian Neoliberalism

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ABSTRACT: This article offers an interpretation of the election of Jair Bolsonaro as President of Brazil, based on the examination of its three political drivers. First the economic and political crisis of global neoliberalism, and their implications for developing countries. Second, the cycles of the Brazilian left, which culminated in the rise and decline of the Workers’ Party (PT). Third, the global rise of an authoritarian modality of neoliberalism in developing as well as advanced economies. The article concludes with an assessment of the strengths and fragilities of the Bolsonaro administration, and the challenges facing the Brazilian left.

KEYWORDS: Brazil; democracy; neoliberalism; Bolsonaro; Lula.

SUMMARY: Introduction; 1 Global shifts; 2 Cycles of the left; 3 Authoritarian neoliberalism in practice; Conclusion; References.

INTRODUCTION

The election of Jair Bolsonaro to the Brazilian presidency, in October 2018, came as a shock to most observers. He was widely seen by critics, experts and left-wingers as being unelectable because of his inexperience, lack of organised support by established political parties, big business or social organisations, and overt backing for Brazil’s military dictatorship (1964-85), torture, guns, and for discrimination against black and indigenous peoples, women, LGBTQA+ communities, and so on. Bolsonaro was also infamous for having made, regularly, outrageous statements against his perceived foes, especially female members of Congress.

Although his name polled relatively low until the middle of the year, Bolsonaro’s poll ratings started climbing rapidly in the weeks immediately before the elections. They were boosted by a well-organised social media campaign and by a (much-disputed) attempt on his life on 6 September. Paradoxically, support for his candidacy grew in response to the *Ele Não* (Not Him) women-led movement, which culminated in large demonstrations

around the country on 29 September. Despite – or, perhaps, because of – the radicalising resistance against him, Bolsonaro won comfortably the first round of the elections, on 7 October, and proceeded to win convincingly, by 55-45%, in the second round, on 28 October. The final round pitted Bolsonaro against the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) candidate, Fernando Haddad, himself standing in for PT leader and former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-06, 2007-10), currently in jail on highly questionable corruption charges¹.

This article reviews Bolsonaro's election and key traits of his administration, which was inaugurated on 1 January 2019. The study draws upon three mutually reinforcing strands. First, the worldwide rise of the political right, leading to the diffusion of an authoritarian modality of neoliberalism in several countries, including Brazil. Second, the internal dynamics of the Brazilian left, which can be examined through its historical cycles of rise and decline. The most recent of these cycles is driven by the fortunes of the PT. Third, the consolidation of a broad right-wing alliance in Brazil that has become politically dominant across a whole spectrum of areas. Unsurprisingly, this article concludes that the election of Jair Bolsonaro is symptomatic of broad social processes, with a wide social and geographical remit that are unlikely to be reversed easily, or merely through a sudden reversal of fortunes of Bolsonaro's tragically flawed administration. These strands are examined in the three substantive sections in this article, followed by a summary of the argument in the Conclusion.

1 GLOBAL SHIFTS

At a global level, the tide of authoritarian neoliberalism sweeping the world is symptomatic of three processes². First, the crisis, stagnation and stumbling recovery of most neoliberal economies since the Great Financial Crisis (GFC) starting in 2007, which subsequently morphed into a 'Great Stagnation' with no clear end in sight³. Second, the crisis of political systems and institutions of representation following the GFC and the closely related policies of economic 'austerity' in many countries that have been contributing to the decomposition of neoliberal democracy⁴. Third, the

1 For an overview of the case against Lula, see Tardelli (2017).

2 For a detailed analysis, see Boffo, Saad-Filho and Fine (2019).

3 See, for example, Gordon (2015) and Summers (2015, 2016).

4 See Boffo, Saad-Filho and Fine (2019).

hijacking of mass discontent by the far right, fronted by a new breed of ‘spectacular’ politicians, committed both to the intensified reproduction of neoliberalism and to their own self-referential power.

These processes can be summarised, necessarily briefly for reasons of space, as follows. The global transition to neoliberalism has been associated with extensive restructuring of processes of capital accumulation, including new products and technologies, new forms of production, employment and exchange, new patterns of trade, and, above all, the exponential growth of all forms of finance, debt, and fictitious capital⁵. These shifts have had profound implications for social reproduction in general and, specifically, for the composition and mode of existence of the working class⁶. Consequences include profound changes in forms and patterns of employment, modes of labour, community and class cultures and solidarities, and the decline of traditional forms of class representation, including left parties, trade unions and mass organisations.

Their weakening has been closely related to the establishment of typically neoliberal institutions, ideologies, rules, policies and practices, aiming to buttress as well as promote the neoliberalisation of production and social reproduction, and to shield market processes from social accountability. Those institutions include, for example, presumably ‘independent’ Central Banks (beholden to finance), inflation targeting regimes (primed to protect financial asset values), maximum fiscal deficit rules (for the avoidance of inflation, and to limit public spending), privatisations (to curtail potential levers of public influence over resource allocation and the pattern of growth), and the ‘autonomy’ of a range of public bodies (not least a range of regulatory agencies invariably captured by the corporations that they nominally control)⁷. The decline of the left, the neoliberal reconstruction of the state, and mounting repression, especially since 9-11, have led to a marked dislocation of the political spectrum towards the right over the past four decades⁸.

The technological, economic, institutional, ideological and political changes outlined above, and the neoliberal restructuring of social

5 See Harvey (2007) for a classic account, and Fine and Saad-Filho (2017) for an alternative view.

6 See, for example, Moody (1997, 2017).

7 See Dardot and Laval (2014).

8 For a detailed analysis, see Boffo, Saad-Filho and Fine (2019), Fine and Saad-Filho (2017) and Saad-Filho (2017).

reproduction, have created a vast array of economic ‘losers’, centred – in the advanced economies – on the traditional (blue collar) working class. These ‘losers’ tend to be politically separated, structurally disorganised, ideologically perplexed, practically disenfranchised and, consequently, unable or unwilling to express their grievances through the political system that neoliberalism itself has imposed.

Instead of being channelled through the traditional (institutional) channels of conflict resolution, mass frustration has, increasingly, tended to be captured by, and expressed through, the right-wing media and far-right political organisations, movements and governments. They have induced the ‘losers’ to blame ‘the other’ for the damages inflicted by neoliberalism – with the alleged victims (stereotypically, in the advanced economies, hardworking, morally upright and ethnically privileged male-led blue-collar families) being defined through cultural and religious hierarchies, as well as pre-existing ‘racial’ categories grounded in history. These hierarchies are often ancient, and they are grounded in common knowledges and widespread prejudices; they require little explanation: a code word here and a wink there can be enough. In turn, the ‘other’ is unambiguously defined as the poor, immigrants, dark-skinned peoples, poorer countries, minority religions, and so on.

In sum, the politics of resentment foisted upon the working class, the underprivileged and the poor under neoliberalism has divided them politically, and bolstered new forms of collectivity grounded on nationalist, racial and religious discourses defined by exclusion and discrimination. More recently, these political platforms have tended to be fronted by self-appointed ‘leaders’ claiming a unique ability to ‘get things done’ by sheer force of will, against unresponsive ‘elites’ (which they purportedly do not belong to, regardless of background and personal trajectory) and institutions. Their discourse tends to mobilise through the construction of grievances based on sharp oppositions drawing upon common sense. However, when in power those leaders have tended to impose strongly neoliberal policies around taxation, trade, employment, finance, social security, housing, and so on. This experience is common to several countries – including Brazil.

2 CYCLES OF THE LEFT

The next peculiar aspect of the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism in Brazil is the trajectory of the political left in the country. This can be

outlined through a review of the two political cycles of the Brazilian left in the postwar era⁹.

The first cycle began in the early 1940s, during the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas. The left had been crushed by the Vargas regime in the late 1930s, but it reconstituted itself largely through the campaign against nazi-fascism, and for Brazilian participation in World War II on the side of the Allies. Left activity during this period was dominated by the Communist Party of Brazil (*Partido Comunista do Brasil*, PCB). The PCB was closely aligned with the USSR, and it grew rapidly during that period. In the early 1940s, the PCB had only a small band of activists, and its best-known leaders were in jail. By 1945, the PCB was a large, strong and disciplined organisation with hundreds of thousands of members, and it polled almost 10% of the votes in the national elections.

The PCB was proscribed in 1947. Nevertheless, the Party continued to influence many trade unions, social organisations and the students' movement. A few PCB members were elected to Congress and city administrations through other political parties, and the PCB forged relatively stable alliances with important segments of the non-Marxist left, especially the left-populist Brazilian Labour Party (PTB) and the centrist Social Democratic Party (PSD). These alliances with 'bourgeois' parties were important strategically, because the PCB argued that progressive change in Brazil required a broad alliance between the working class, the peasantry, the middle classes and the domestic (industrial) bourgeoisie, in order to lead a democratic and national development project against the ruling alliance between imperialist forces and semi-feudal landed interests.

The strategy of the PCB was comprehensively defeated in 1964. The domestic bourgeoisie and most of the middle classes shunned the left-populist administration of President João Goulart, which was supported by the PCB; instead, they aligned themselves with the far right, local landed interests, and the US government. The workers, peasants and students were left isolated, and their organisations were destroyed. The dramatic failure of the PCB and the ensuing repression contributed to the fragmentation of the party, and led to the foundation of a whole range of small radical organisations inspired by Trotskyism, *foquismo*, Maoism, and so on. Some

9 These cycles were first suggested by Benjamin (personal communication, June 2004); see also Bianchi and Braga (2003) and Boito (2003). The review of the history of the PT draws on Branford and Kucinski (2003, ch.1).

of them sponsored or supported armed struggles against the dictatorship. These limited attempts at urban and rural guerrilla warfare were repressed brutally.

Mass resistance re-emerged gradually, in the mid-1970s. The defeat of the organised working class and the guerrilla movements removed part of the rationale for state terrorism, and the legitimacy of the regime was shaken by the results of the 1970 census, which showed that rapid economic growth had concentrated income and failed to deliver material improvements to the majority of the population. The regime's reputation was further damaged by the economic slowdown after the first oil shock, in 1973, followed by the second shock, in 1979, and the international debt crisis, in 1982. Inflation climbed relentlessly, from 20% per annum towards 200%, and Brazil's economy stagnated. It became increasingly difficult for the regime to justify the denial of civil liberties in the name of 'public safety' or 'competent economic management'. In 1974, the military government was comprehensively beaten in the elections for Congress. The ruling circles realised that the regime needed to respond to its political erosion, and they chose to embark on a slow, limited and tightly controlled process of political liberalisation, that ultimately led to the transfer of power to 'reliable' civilians in 1985.

The second cycle of the Brazilian left since World War 2 was defined by the fortunes of the PT. In the mid-1970s, several surviving left-wing organisations banded together with progressive Catholic groups, leftist intellectuals and young activists to demand the restoration of democracy, respect for human rights and political amnesty, as well as economic policy changes¹⁰. Petitions were followed by demonstrations, which were sometimes ignored and often repressed. At a later stage, a new trade union movement burst into the political scene. Those unions were based on the key industries emerging in the previous period, especially the metal, mechanical and auto industries located in and around the city of São Paulo, as well as finance, the large state-owned enterprises providing infrastructure and basic goods, and the civil service, especially the postal workers, nurses, doctors, teachers, and university lecturers. Over time, and in the wake of successive strikes, the

10 Two especially important organisations were the Brazilian Movement for Amnesty (MBA), a broad front campaigning for amnesty to all political prisoners and the right of return of Brazilians exiled or banished for political reasons, and the Movement Cost of Living (MCV), that collected millions of signatures in petitions demanding inflation control and real wage increases for the low paid.

metalworkers in São Paulo moved to the forefront of the Brazilian working class, led by their charismatic union leader, Luiz Inácio da Silva (Lula)¹¹.

The idea of founding a political party of a new type coalesced rapidly among those groups of activists. By late 1978, they were already discussing the foundation of a ‘Workers’ Party’ – a ‘party without bosses’ – in order to defeat the dictatorship and introduce a new model of development in the country¹². That party should be untainted by the traditional features of the Brazilian left: populism, corruption, clientelism and Stalinism. The PT was eventually launched in 1980, under the leadership of Lula. The strategy and the mode of organisation of the PT corresponded to the opportunities offered by the crumbling military dictatorship, and the needs and composition of the Brazilian working class. The party grew rapidly, reaching 800,000 members in less than ten years. Its trade union confederation, CUT, represented up to 20 million workers, and the PT made significant inroads into the students’ movement. These successes were reflected in the PT’s excellent performance at the ballot box, which culminated in Lula’s presidential election, in 2002, after three consecutive defeats, in 1989, 1994, and 1998¹³.

The growth of the PT was based on two main drivers. First, political demands for a radical democracy, incorporating but not limited to formal (procedural or ‘bourgeois’) democratic practices and processes. The PT demanded more: it advocated a (never clearly defined) ‘socialist democracy’, delivering power and economic betterment to the poor majority. Second, the PT defended the corporatist interests of the workers closely associated with the party.

Unfortunately for the PT, and importantly for what was to follow, both drivers of growth collapsed between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. The achievement of political democracy changed radically the terrain in which the party had originally emerged. It had been relatively easy for the PT to offer a progressive alternative to a decrepit dictatorship that was increasingly powerless to discipline the populace, but that remained wedded to an anachronistic right-wing discourse while, at the same time, demonstrating staggering managerial incompetence, high levels of corruption, and an abysmal track record delivering income and welfare gains for the majority.

11 He later changed his name to Luís Inácio Lula da Silva.

12 See Bianchi and Braga (2003).

13 For a review of the trajectory of the PT, see Branford and Kucinski (2003).

The restoration of democracy changed everything. The institutions of the state were validated by their democratic veneer, compelling the PT to follow the electoral calendar and operate within the 'bourgeois' framework that the party had previously denounced. Political debates shifted away from lofty principles towards matters of detail embedded within parliamentary politics. Mass demonstrations were normalised. Implementation of PT policies now required a democratic mandate that, although feasible in principle, could be achieved only if the PT submitted itself to the logic of campaign finance, coalition-building, piecemeal reforms, negotiations with conflicting interest groups, and the imperatives of 'efficiency' and 'delivery' in local government. Those limitations tempered the PT's enthusiasm for direct action, and increased the weight of its internal bureaucracy at the expense of ordinary militants and (radical) affiliated movements.

Matters became worse in the late 1980s, with the economic transition to neoliberalism. The neoliberal 'reforms' severely weakened the groups that were the backbone of PT, provided the bulk of its votes and were affiliated to the most active trade unions: the manufacturing workers, the middle and lower-ranking civil servants, employees of state-owned enterprises, and other formal sector workers¹⁴. The trade union movement was severely degraded. Radicals lost ground to pragmatic leaders within CUT, and the unions split between those seeking immediate economic gains, and those continuing to demand radical changes in government policy. Rapid deindustrialisation and waves of privatisation weakened the manufacturing working class and the most organised sectors of the civil service. The student movement fell into irrelevance. The PT had to reconstitute its sources of support under these challenging circumstances. The party's two-fold response helps to explain its later successes, as well as the limitations of the federal administrations led by Lula and Dilma Rousseff.

After Lula's successive electoral defeats, the party leadership persuaded itself that the PT must appeal to a more centrist constituency, and downplay its commitment to social change. The PT offered a discourse based on a vaguely progressive ethics and efficiency in public administration. Increasingly, the PT presented itself non-politically, as the only party untainted by corruption in Brazil. The narrowing of the PT's transformative ambitions and the party's shift towards administrative rather than radical priorities helped it to gain

14 See Branford and Kucinski (2003, pp.32-4) and Saad-Filho and Mollo (2002).

new constituencies, especially the moderate middle class, informal sector workers, and many domestic capitalists¹⁵.

Lula's election brought the possibility of pushing for change from the top. The party was fortunate enough to reach executive power during an emerging global commodity boom, in the early 2000s. It proceeded to implement economic policies along a 'path of least resistance'¹⁶. This choice of path referred, first, to the party's commitment to political stability, that is, not trying to change the Constitution or to reform finance, land ownership, the media or the judicial system, not mobilising the workers and the poor, and not challenging the economic and political hegemony of the established economic, social and political elites in the country. The consequence was that, in order to govern, the PT had to rely on an unwieldy web of unprincipled political alliances and case-by-case negotiations. This arrangement implies that political stability during the administrations led by the PT depended on the party's ability to deliver economic gains almost to everyone, while, simultaneously, maintaining its credibility with the strongest fractions of capital. This turned out to be possible only in times of economic prosperity.

The second feature of the PT's path of least resistance was the party's attachment to the so-called macroeconomic policy 'tripod' imposed by the previous administration, in 1999, that included inflation targets, floating exchange rates with free international movement of capital, and contractionary fiscal and monetary policies. The tripod was meant to secure the government's credibility with capital, but it also limited drastically the scope for developmental initiatives and distributive policies.

Third, the commitment to a national development project based on the expansion of domestic demand through public expenditures and transfers and the expansion of consumer loans, as well as state support for large domestic capital both at home and abroad. Inspired by the perceived success of the South Korean *chaebol*, the Brazilian government provided regulatory, financial and diplomatic support to large domestically-owned companies in the oil, shipbuilding, telecoms, construction, food processing, and other sectors, in order to facilitate their expansion both at home and abroad. It was hoped that the combination of demand growth at home and support for

15 Medeiros (2013, p.65).

16 See Loureiro and Saad-Filho (2019).

the expansion of key firms would help to set off a virtuous circle including employment creation, the development of new technologies, growing competitiveness, and improvement in the country's balance of payments.

Fourth, the pursuit of distribution at the margin, primarily through the expansion of low-paid employment and rising transfers and minimum wages (which rose by 72% between 2005 and 2012, while real GDP per capita increased by 30 per cent). This led to a remarkable recovery of the wage share of national income, while also leaving unchanged the distribution of assets.

The limitations of the path of least resistance emerged gradually, first, through the continuing deterioration of the post-crisis environment and the tightening of the balance of payments constraint. Second, through an intractable productivity gap with the OECD, the inability of the state to deliver improvements in infrastructure and living conditions in urban areas, and the persistent dysfunctionality and speculative character of private finance. Third, the distribution of income driven by low-paid jobs and welfare transfers was limited, because it depended heavily on the marginal income created by economic growth. This model of distribution also implied that the middle class would be squeezed by the preservation of the privileges of the rich, the improvement of the poorest, and the deteriorating quality and rising cost of urban services. This could be compensated only temporarily by the expansion of personal credit and the appreciation of the currency. Fourth, for all its strengths, the administration led by Lula's successor, Dilma Rousseff, suffered from severe political and administrative shortcomings. This led to the gradual loss of support of core social groups and political parties in her coalition, to the point that, by 2016, the government could count only on disorganised, conditional and minority support across the country. A large alliance of elites, including most right-wing political leaders, finance, the media, the upper middle class, business and the higher echelons of the civil service, with strong US support, moved to impeach the President on trumped-up charges of fiscal malfeasance¹⁷. The coup against Rousseff marks the closure of the second cycle of the Brazilian left. Since then, the administrations led by Rousseff's former Vice-President, Michel Temer, and,

17 For detailed accounts of Dilma's impeachment, see Amaral (2016, part I), Gentili (2016) and Saad-Filho and Morais (2018, ch.9). Nobre (2017, p.139) argues that Rousseff fell because her government could no longer function according to the rules of the Brazilian political system: it was incapable of protecting allied politicians from judicial attack, and unable to secure access to public funds for the parties in her coalition.

more recently, by Jair Bolsonaro, have devoted themselves to imposing a vicious modality of economic neoliberalism by authoritarian means, with a severe attack on fiscal policy tools and the emerging Brazilian welfare state.

3 AUTHORITARIAN NEOLIBERALISM IN PRACTICE

The emergence of the alliance of elites that overthrew President Rousseff also marks the third key aspect of the election of Jair Bolsonaro. In contrast with previous right-wing mobilisations – most recently, in the mid-1930s, between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s, and in 1990-92 – the current alliance of elites did not appeal centrally to outdated anti-communist discourses inspired by the Cold War, which would have been absurd, and it was not inspired by Catholic values, due to the much greater influence of protestant sects today. Instead, the new alliance of elites mobilised against a poorly defined danger of ‘Bolivarianism’, and the fictional threat of ‘left-wing authoritarianism’ led by the PT. The alliance also called for ‘the end of corruption’, which was code for ‘the destruction of the PT’. It has become evident that the strategic goal of the alliance of elites was the restriction of democracy, through the imposition of an authoritarian modality of neoliberalism, in order to eliminate government autonomy from the privileged classes, reinforce the structures of exclusion, and abolish the spaces by which the majority might control any levers of public policy¹⁸.

The middle class provided critically important support for the alliance of elites. Their frustration is understandable. While large capital tended to prosper, not least through the implementation of neoliberal policies by successive governments, the workers and the poor also gained under the PT, through higher minimum wages and expanded welfare provision, the creation of millions of low-wage jobs, and new avenues for social mobility, for example through racial quotas for universities and the civil service. In the meantime, the middle class was squeezed by the erosion of its traditional careers, especially in middle management, banking, and the upper layers of the civil service¹⁹. The scarcity of ‘good jobs’ intensified with the economic slowdown since 2011.

18 See Fortes (2016), Saad-Filho and Morais (2018, ch.9), and Singer (2015).

19 For example, while 950,000 jobs paying more than 5 times the minimum wage were created in the 1990s, 4.3 million were lost in the 2000s; see Pochmann (2012).

The middle class was penalised further by rising minimum wages and the extension of employment rights to domestic workers (cleaners, nannies, cooks, drivers, gardeners, security guards, and so on, which are ubiquitous in middle class households). They also lost out because of the diffusion of means-tested transfer programmes, which the middle class helps to fund through the tax system, but cannot claim because their incomes exceed the threshold by a large margin. Perhaps even more serious was the expansion of citizenship rights to the poor, which threatened the paternalistic relationships in middle class homes. During the PT administrations, while both the rich and the poor prospered, the middle class found it difficult to maintain their (relative as well as absolute) economic and social status, and their children had limited scope to emulate the achievements of their parents.

Under intense economic and ideological pressure, middle class groups became increasingly attached to a neoliberal-globalist project that secures their advantages against the poor, even though it inevitably slows down economic growth. For example, it was often claimed that the deterioration of urban infrastructure and public services was due to rising incomes and the expansion of rights under the PT; that is, the government 'allowed' too many people to own automobiles, fly, and access universities and private health facilities which, logically, should be privatised and become more expensive in order to restore a more convenient balance between demand and supply²⁰. The implications of low investment and weak development policy were ignored, perhaps because they would suggest the need for higher levels of public spending²¹. These pressures led the middle class to abandon the PT *en masse* and shift their support to the PT's main rival, the PSDB (*Partido da Social-Democracia Brasileira*, Brazilian Social-Democratic Party) and other right-wing parties in the mid-2000s. Gradually, the middle class became, once again, the mass base of the far right in Brazil²².

The social and political realignment in the country led to the rise of a mass movement supporting an authoritarian variety of neoliberalism. The rise of authoritarian neoliberalism in Brazil had two peculiar features, in contrast with similar political processes and movements elsewhere. First, a relatively subdued role for overtly racist and nationalist discourses; instead, the Brazilian variety of authoritarian neoliberalism pursues close links with

20 For a review of middle class ideologies and policy preferences, see Ricci (2012) and Tible (2013).

21 See Medeiros (2013, p.59).

22 See, for example, Nepomuceno (2015).

the USA, bordering on outright submission (see, for example, the sale of aerospace giant Embraer to Boeing, and the concession of the Alcantara rocket launch base to the USA, among many possible examples). Second, while in the advanced economies the main ‘losers’ are, typically, found among the blue collar working class (see above), the most prominent losers during the federal administrations led by the PT were in the middle class²³.

President Jair Bolsonaro emerged from this milieu. His electoral campaign was supported by an assortment of small parties and neophyte politicians, coalescing around four themes. First, allegations of ‘corruption’ against a broad swath of politicians, drawing upon Bolsonaro’s purported status as a political outsider (despite a 28-year career as Federal Deputy). Second, conservative moral values and the rollback of citizenship. The candidate attacked social movements and the left because they are ‘corrupt’, ‘communist’ and ‘godless’, and advocated the restoration of ‘lost’ cultural values by deathly violence. Third, public security and easier access to weapons, which has a strong appeal in a country enduring over 60,000 murders per year. Fourth, a neoliberal economic programme, drawing upon the intuitively appealing notion of reducing bureaucracy and the deadweight of a corrupt state.

Once in power, the Bolsonaro administration rapidly degenerated into comical chaos, at least in its political side. In contrast, its implications for the environment were nothing short of disastrous, as was amply demonstrated by the accelerated devastation of the Amazon rainforest. Finally, the economic side was dominated by Finance Minister Paulo Guedes, a minor ‘Chicago Boy’ in General Pinochet’s Chile, and a banker and occasional academic in Brazil. Guedes’s main priority is to dismantle Brazil’s progressive pensions system in order to introduce one based on individual accounts, minimal redistribution between generations or classes, and tough restrictions upon drawing up pension income. His proposal is so restrictive that most low earners with unstable jobs will never achieve the contributions threshold required to claim benefits, while the rich will tend to choose private pensions offering more flexible conditions and uncapped returns. At a further remove, Guedes has announced plans to privatise ‘everything’, starting with the country’s airports, parts of Petrobras and a whole raft of state-owned enterprises, and, finally, a tax reform introducing a less progressive system.

23 For a detailed overview of this period, see Saad-Filho and Morais (2018).

Across all its dimensions, then, as well as personal corruption, abetment of crime and sheer crassness and brutality, Bolsonaro's administration expresses the worst of the worst political times in living memory.

CONCLUSION

The election of Jair Bolsonaro was part of the rise of an authoritarian modality of neoliberalism in Brazil which, in turn, is one instance among many of the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism globally. These experiences are contextual, including different combinations of organised mass movements, political parties, 'spectacular' self-referential leaders, racism, nationalism, and distinct sets of economic and social 'losers' from neoliberalism. Across these experiences, in countries as diverse as Brazil, Egypt, Hungary, Italy, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Thailand, Turkey and the USA, among others, common traits are also present among the diversity of processes, institutions and outcomes. Across this diversity of cases, it remains clear that global neoliberalism has entered a distinctive phase of crisis management in the economic sphere, through specific (authoritarian, personalistic, overtly nationalist but, at the core, radically neoliberal) modalities of crisis politics²⁴.

In the case of Brazil, the rise of Jair Bolsonaro, as a clear instance of authoritarian neoliberalism, can be examined from four angles. First, since 2013 Brazilian politics has been defined by a convergence of dissatisfactions. Disparate demands and conflicting expectations have buttressed an alliance of elites supporting an authoritarian neoliberal economic, social and political programme, that is destructive of collectivity and citizenship. The regressive nature of this programme was veiled by a media-sponsored far-right discourse stressing the 'incompetence' of the PT's administrations, their 'populism', and rampant corruption.

Second, the cycles of the Brazilian right, including the most recent one, suggest that, in Brazil, the powerful tend to rise up if their wealth is directly threatened, or if economic privilege fails to secure political prominence. Nevertheless, mass support for the revolt of the elites depends heavily on the mobilisation of the middle class.

24 For an overview, see Boffo, Saad-Filho and Fine (2019).

Third, in recent years the far right has achieved ideological hegemony and a solid electoral majority in Brazil, despite the lack of stable leadership, strong movements and solid parties. This is a paradox, and the Brazilian experience stands in sharp contrast with authoritarian neoliberalism experiences elsewhere. That is, while in several countries well-organised movements led by experienced leaders succeeded in achieving power by electoral or other means, in Brazil the state was hijacked in 2016 by a squabbling band of reactionary and deeply corrupt politicians who, in turn, passed the baton to a rabble of inexperienced, inept, idiosyncratic, corrupt and ultra-reactionary mobsters and conmen, thriving despite the lack of stable structures of support, and sowing a politics of hatred that they barely control. Their greatest ambition is to impose an uncompromising neoliberal and anti-national development strategy, which cannot flourish in a democracy: their rule can be enforced only by authoritarian means, and the inevitable political impasses will tend to be resolved outside the Constitution.

Fourth, despite the fractures and insufficiencies on the right, the Brazilian left remains hampered by internal disputes about the past (especially the role of the PT and the consequences of its political choices), and it lacks a cogent programme for the future. The absence of alternatives and the pronounced shift in the political centre of gravity of the country to the far right, especially in the largest urban areas and the wealthiest regions, suggest that the left may be unable to govern Brazil even in the medium-term, unless it succeeds in reinventing itself.

The worst economic crisis in Brazil's recorded history and the most severe political impasse in the last century have degraded Brazilian democracy, and made it impossible for any plausible composition of political forces to govern the country within its democratic Constitution. The nation is tearing itself apart, socially, economically and politically. Whether or not Brazil will slide into an overt politics of violence, as in Colombia or Mexico, drawing upon drug wars, gun trafficking and state terrorism, or, alternatively, whether or not democracy will implode because of a military coup, it is highly likely that we are witnessing the inglorious end to a democratic experiment that has marked two generations, and that achieved significant successes during this period. The best – and, possibly, the only – alternative to this unambiguously negative outcome for the majority demands the protagonism of a new wave of left movements and organisations. They would offer the best hope to lift the curse to have befallen Brazil.

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Artigo convidado.