

The Challenge of Religious Populism to Constitutional Secularism in Brazil

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Brazil is currently experiencing a tense electoral campaign, in which several candidates, most notably former president Lula da Silva (Workers' Party), are trying to prevent the reelection of far-right populist Jair Bolsonaro. In the segmentation of the electorate, one group has deserved special attention from all campaigns, the incumbent and its rivals: the so-called "evangelicals", an amalgam of different christian denominations that add up to a third of the population (historically Catholic) Brazil. Evangelicals have grown not only in number, but in political energy and organization.

The evangelical electorate is more conservative, and thus has more affinities with Bolsonaro than with left-wing politicians. In Brazil, Christians in general are less permeable to liberal approaches on topics such as abortion, drugs, and family. Religious leaders from certain neo-Pentecostal evangelical denominations have moved closer to Bolsonaro throughout his tenure. There is also an engaged involvement of pastors in favor of President Bolsonaro, although the practice of preaching politics in temples is highly questionable under Brazilian electoral law. Against this background, it is not surprise that according to electoral polls, President Bolsonaro has a wide lead over his main rival, Lula, among evangelicals.

"Devilish" religions and digital disinformation

Since the evangelical electorate is largely poor – a segment in which Lula tends to outperform the current President – Bolsonaro has been explicit in his effort to portray himself as a "christian president", as he hopes to take votes away from Lula among lower class evangelicals. His approach involves not only promises of policies that will favor goals valued by evangelicals, on issues such as family, gender, and drugs, but also religious intolerance toward other faiths. Being a very popular and highly requested figure, not to mention the country's president for many years, Lula has been, over the past two decades, photographed in many churches, temples and sacred grounds in Brazil, of several different religions. As a result, there are many images of him and his wife, Rosângela da Silva (Janja), interacting with religious leaders, some of them from Afro-Brazilian religions. Bolsonaro's campaign has used the first lady, Michelle Bolsonaro, who is herself a long-time committed evangelical, to associate the image of Lula and his family with these religions, which some evangelicals denigrate as "devilish". Mrs. Bolsonaro has personally shared posts in her Instagram account that depict Afro-Brazilian blessings of Lula as sinful. She has recently declared that the presidential residence is now "devoted to God", whereas it was previously dedicated to "the Demon". All this happens against the background of rising riots against religious sites and leaders of Afro-Brazilian religions.

This overt campaign of associating Lula and his wife with religions portrayed as “devilish”, personally viralized by Mrs. Bolsonaro, is additionally topped by a clandestine digital disinformation campaign against Lula, falsely claiming that he will shut down temples and churches if he becomes president again. This deeply polarized campaign around religious issues tends to leave a costly political legacy for Brazil, testing the limits of secularism in our Constitution.

“Good Citizens” and the Challenge for Secularism

The 1988 Constitution does not state textually that the Brazilian State is “secular” or “lay”, but this characteristic is unanimously accepted by authors and courts due to other constitutional provisions. Besides there being no official state religion imposed by the constitutional text, as there was during Brazil’s post-independence monarchy (1822-1889), our charter of fundamental rights guarantees the right to religious freedom, both at the level of conscience (“belief”) and of public ceremonies (“worship”). It also mandates that no one be discriminated against because of his or her religious or philosophical convictions.

These principles coexist, however, with the constitutional recognition of “churches” and “temples” and the possibility, also provided for in the Constitution, for the Public Administration to enter into agreements with religious entities for „collaborations in the public interest”. This possibility might produce socially beneficial results in some cases, but lends itself to abuse in other situations: there are several entities maintained by churches for the treatment of people addicted to illicit drugs and alcohol – the supposedly welcoming branch of the repressive drug policy sponsored by christian churches in Brazil – that receive large amounts of public money for their maintenance, within which intense religious proselytism is practiced. Anyhow, this constitutional provision, as well as a part of the preamble of the Constitution where „God“ is mentioned, is invoked by politicians and jurists linked to christian churches to justify the legitimacy that laws, rites, and public policies that violate religious neutrality and are incompatible with the secularism of our institutions.

The provision that churches should be recognized and respected is absolutely compatible with a secular State that respects the moral autonomy and dignity of its citizens. This same provision, however, is often used to legitimize certain policies whereby certain churches end up being prioritized over others. The claim is quite simple: since the Constitution acknowledges churches, and even mentions “God” in its preamble, there would be nothing wrong with the State being partial towards Christianity as long as that is what the people, through their representatives, want. Bolsonaro has turned this idea into a personal slogan: “the State might be lay, but the president is Christian”. This idea, if turned into a motto for public policies, obviously stands in antagonism with the duty of religious neutrality (or impartiality) that a secular state should live up to.

Brazil is a country where the historical dominance of Christianity has left a heritage of cultural manifestations, festive dates and sites of historical value. This context alone makes maintaining constitutional secularism a technically challenging and politically delicate practice. In Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazil, however, an additional factor

must be considered: religious identity has become a badge of political exclusion. In his populist discourse, the dichotomy between „people“ and „elite“ is not ethnic, geographical, or racial, but mainly ideological-religious.¹⁾ Bolsonaro emphasizes at every moment how his values are identical with what he calls „good citizens,“ understood as the portion of the people who share the values defended by the most conservative Christian denominations.

The Role of the Federal Supreme Court

Many of these conflicts regarding the fine lines of secularism will end up in the Federal Supreme Court (STF). The court can and should strike down any laws or public policies that favor christian religions to the detriment of others. There are, in fact, important pending cases on this issue, such as the one asking that state buildings be prohibited from displaying symbols of specific religions in rooms where the public is serviced. But the very configuration of the Supreme Federal Court shows how delicate this issue is in Brazil: in the main [trial room](#) of the building, even today there is a large crucifix hanging higher than the coat of arms of the Republic. The court will have to decide, in short, whether its own decoration violates the Constitution.

The politically organized evangelical community has made the STF one of its main opponents, since deciding progressively on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriages makes the STF an antagonist to the Evangelical agenda. Bolsonaro is of course their preferred president, but the political importance of the group makes it likely that even a progressive government will have to bargain nominations to the court with the (growing) evangelical share of Congress. No matter how popular a politician is in general, carrying the fame of being an “anti-christian” politician (or political party) is a very heavy burden in Brazil, and evangelical leaders will be eager to pin that label on any president that nominates any supreme court justice who will challenge them on their dearest moral issues.

Considering that the STF has been one of the main targets of Bolsonaro’s illiberal discourse, the court may very well choose not to hear cases that will further harm its relations with the evangelical segment. In other words, Brazil’s constitutional court, having to pick its battles, may not be a safe bet for protecting citizens against growing religious sectarianism by the State. And if Bolsonaro wins, of course, the outlook is even worse: not only will he have more nominations due to mandatory retirements of current progressive justices, he will most likely try to pack to court in any way he can (probably by raising the number of justices from 11 to 15). The future does not look promising for religious freedom and secularism in Brazil.

References

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