

Back from the Depths: Brazil, the World and the EU after Lula's Electoral Victory

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Back from the Depths: Brazil, the World and the EU after Lula's Electoral Victory

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Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (known broadly as “Lula”) has defeated incumbent Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil’s presidential election. As the Global South giant emerges from the isolation and loss of influence imposed by Bolsonaro’s right-wing anti-globalist agenda, how can Germany and Europe best engage it with a view to resuming a key strategic partnership?

- Brazil’s relations with the EU and Germany are at a historical postwar low. Normative differences with a Bolsonaro government driven by extreme right-wing domestic constituencies have stalled trade and climate negotiations, led to clashes on human rights and deforestation, and caused what were once regular high-level contacts to ebb to a trickle.
- The election itself was decided by a razor-thin margin and marred by voter suppression, contestations of its legitimacy, and pervasive electoral violations by Bolsonaro. The incumbent has not formally conceded, and his supporters were still in the streets a week after the vote. Assistance in asserting the functioning of the country’s democratic institutions is urgently needed.
- Lula will realign the country with its multilateral diplomatic traditions and seek to reinstate social policies cancelled by Bolsonaro, such as poverty reduction, human rights, and safeguards for minorities, as well as environmental protection and sustainable development. This will align Brazil increasingly with Europe. But today’s scenario is different from Lula’s first two terms in office between 2003 and 2011: the National Congress is hostile to Lula’s agenda, there is no commodity boom, and a polarised and unequal international system has less room for the rise of an emerging power.

Policy Implications

Germany and Europe should actively and regularly engage Brazil and assist in its moves to consolidate its democracy, combat inequality, protect the rain-forest and safeguard minority rights. To do so, it should use trade policy as an incentive, reinforce civilian control over the armed forces, engage subnational partners, and assist in combatting fake news.

Brazil’s Foreign Relations after Bolsonaro

Jair Bolsonaro's realignment of Brazilian foreign policy with far-right and isolationist precepts was a profound rupture given the country's previous active and integrated role in international affairs. During Bolsonaro's term, the country's habile diplomats have laboured in unprecedented isolation and weathered a dizzying diminution of the country's diplomatic influence and international good will. A foreign policy aimed at actively destroying previous elements of multilateral consensus served to placate domestic constituencies engaged in culture wars, such as evangelical churches and a growing sector of alt-right extremists. Previously a renowned globally progressive bridge-builder, the country now aligned with the anti-democratic usual suspects to oppose gender equality, the human rights agenda, environmental protection, and other multilateral gains in global forums (Picanço and Prusa 2019). This approach was designed to balance the interests of the three main currents underpinning the Bolsonaro administration: evangelicals and cultural conservatives; neoliberal technocrats; and the security apparatus led by armed forces increasingly overstepping – often by invitation – their institutional bounds (Zilla 2022).

The clash of norms that ensued had predictably damaging effects on the country's relationships with the European Union and by extension Germany, which at the end of Bolsonaro's sojourn in power finds itself mired in perhaps its deepest crisis of the postwar period. The right-wing populist Bolsonaro is the first Brazilian leader since re-democratisation not to make a bilateral visit to an EU member state; he has instead engaged in personal slights against leaders such as French president Emmanuel Macron. Yearly cabinet meetings within the framework of a strategic partnership between Germany and Brazil have been suspended (Stuenkel 2022); in 2019 Germany and Norway voted to suspend their contributions to a fund tasked with preserving the Amazon rainforest (National Public Radio 2019). Distrust over Brazil's commitment to environmental and sustainable development goals has stalled a key EU–Mercosul trade agreement and the country's drive for membership of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Further, the Bolsonaro government has retained a formally noncommittal stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine due to the dependency of its agroindustry – a key sector of the economy and a stolid source of support for the incumbent president – on fertiliser from Moscow. Normative clashes have persisted with the EU over issues ranging from deforestation – which has reached historically high levels in 2022 (Freitas 2022) – to human rights, democracy, civil society participation, and poverty and inequality reduction.

As Lula seeks to return Brazil to its traditional participative and constructive role in multilateral politics and to restore relations with key partners such as the EU and its members, he faces a fundamentally different situation from his first terms in office (2003–2011). The country's economy will no longer benefit from the wind a commodities boom brought to its sails at the turn of the millennium, nor will the renewed competition between the United States and China allow as much space in the international system for the rise of emerging powers from the Global South. Major partners' attentions are elsewhere – such as Ukraine and Taiwan. Nevertheless, although Lula's foreign policy orientation evinces significant normative commonalities with European states, Brazil under his leadership is likely to return to its critical stance regarding global hierarchies as they stand today.

The Immediate Post-Election Scenario: What Can the International Community Do to Strengthen Brazilian Democracy?

Throughout the 2022 electoral campaign, Bolsonaro took several pages out of the playbook used by Donald Trump in the United States in 2020/2021. He repeatedly cast doubt on the integrity of the electoral process and deliberately cultivated uncertainty as to whether he would accept an eventual electoral defeat or seek to override it by force using the ideologically aligned armed forces. An attempt to replace the country's highly secure electronic voting machines with a return to printed ballot papers – which can serve as proof of how citizens voted when they are being intimidated or their vote purchased – was defeated in the federal legislature in July 2021. The federal armed forces and numerous police forces – a traditional redoubt of anti-left sentiment and a strong source of support for Bolsonaro – equally failed to commit to respecting the outcome of the elections. Due to this deliberate institutional dereliction of democratic responsibility, the already polarised climate during the campaign period was tinged with the real possibility of violence and constitutional crisis.

Bolsonaro did not shy away from the unconstitutional use of government powers to influence the election, such as manipulating the price of gasoline and tailoring essential government programmes to electoral agendas (Carranço 2022). Thus, on the day of the direct runoff between Lula and Bolsonaro, 30 October, the Federal Highway Police (Polícia Rodoviária Federal, PRF), under the command of a Bolsonaro loyalist, instituted extensive roadblocks throughout regions known to support Lula, as a form of direct voter suppression (Camargo and Falcão 2022).

Lula eventually won both rounds of the presidential election, eking out a victory with 50.9 per cent of the vote in the second round (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral 2022). Bolsonaro remained silent for two days while his disappointed supporters, fuelled by the extensive circulation of fake news orchestrated by his own campaign, took to the streets to contest the legitimacy of the result, with many openly calling for a military coup. Pro-Bolsonaro long-haul truckers shut down highways across the country, immediately jeopardising fragile supply chains. When, unsurprisingly, the same PRF that had impeded the mobility of opposition voters showed little zeal in breaking up these pro-Bolsonaro rallies, it bizarrely fell in some cases to organised football fan clubs to restore the flow of traffic (and therefore the functioning of the decisive round of the country's top football league). The sitting president eventually called for the roadblocks to end and authorised the beginning of the transition in the executive branch, but never formally conceded victory nor congratulated his opponent. As of 4 November, Bolsonaro himself, as well as the armed forces, have made no formal moves to negate the election results; however, a large number of his supporters remain mobilised in the streets, prone to violence, calling for military intervention, and questioning the legitimacy of the result.

Within this context, the swift and unequivocal acceptance and legitimisation of the result by international leaders was of fundamental importance in signalling to the incumbent that any unconstitutional attempt to remain in power would come with diplomatic and economic consequences. It is important that European and

world leaders continue to firm up the election result by engaging with the elected leader and swiftly condemning institutional abuses – such as those committed by the PRF – and any extraconstitutional moves by organs of state violence such as the armed forces.

This should extend, if violations take place, to the suspension of cooperation and financing until the presidential transition takes place, as foreseen by the Constitution, on 1 January 2023. Increased vigilance of ongoing challenges to democratic practice will be necessary past this date as well, as this occasion marks the opportunity for a last stand in the face of a profound reorientation of policies and an extensive reshuffling of the federal bureaucracy. Combatting fake news and information blackouts is a key element in any meaningful engagement for Brazilian democracy. Similarly, strong support for Bolsonaro from the agricultural sector and other influential economic actors may place German and European policymakers before the dilemma of whether trade relations can serve as a tool in alignment with their commitment to norms in the areas of human rights, democracy, and minority rights.

Rebuilding a Progressive Policy Programme under Difficult Conditions

The president-elect's policy programme will be primarily directed towards rebuilding initiatives instituted by prior Workers' Party governments which the Bolsonaro government had taken as its core mission to deconstruct. Both the domestic and foreign policy spheres are eminently relevant to how this will affect Brazil's relations with European states. In both arenas, however, the former and future president faces significantly more challenging scenarios than accompanied his first terms in office.

Domestically, despite Lula's win in the executive branch, right-wing gains – in particular, radical right-wing and alt-right elements aligned with Bolsonaro, as well as representatives of evangelical churches – mean the new president will face an essentially hostile Congress. In Brazil's semi-presidential system, this will render re-establishing the policy programmes – especially in the social sphere – that marked the Workers' Party's previous terms in office considerably more difficult. Not counting the opportunistic parties comprising the Centrão (whose support can be effectively purchased by sitting governments through political horse-trading), the parties that would have formed Bolsonaro's base, had he won, will control 187 of 513 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, while those naturally aligned to Lula control just 108 (Lago 2022). Additionally, the outgoing government will leave behind a deficit of BRL 280 billion (EUR 55 billion) (Gerbelli 2022). This does not include the so-called "secret budget" (orçamento secreto), a form of institutionalised corruption created under Bolsonaro that has allowed for BRL 44 billion (EUR 9 billion) in parliamentary amendments without transparency or effective oversight that has also been used for electoral purposes (Neiva 2022).

On the internal front, Lula's primary concern will be to rebuild programmes designed to combat inequality, poverty, and hunger. Due to targeted cuts to these types of programmes under Bolsonaro, food security in one of the world's largest food-exporting countries has returned to crisis levels (Iwasawa 2022),

with roughly one-fourth of the population (a number that increased by 10 million under Bolsonaro) being classified as living in abject poverty (Madeiro 2022). Together with combatting poverty, safeguarding human rights, particularly of minorities, women, and Indigenous and LGBTQ+ communities, will return to priority status after 1 January 2023 (Fundação Perseu Abramo 2022). These groups had experienced severe challenges to their rights under Bolsonaro, who had been elected on a wave of backlash against the identity politics that characterised the Workers' Party's approach to development and social policy. This approach reflected the interlinked nature of societal cleavages, violence, and socio-economic status in Brazil, which have been significantly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two further issues, both related to the quality of democracy in Brazil, present particular avenues for potential support from foreign partners. The first is the re-establishment of the hundreds of consultative bodies for civil society participation in policymaking that have been extinguished or hollowed out by the Bolsonaro government. These bodies represent a crucial connection between the government, affected groups, and the general population, as well as constituting a critical element of democratic accountability. The information blackouts that have accompanied this shutdown of participation, characterised by inaccessible government websites, funding cuts for statistical agencies, and other passive measures, will be remedied. Additionally, the incoming government has pledged to put a halt to the creeping process of militarisation by invitation practised by its predecessor, limiting the armed forces strictly to roles foreseen in the Constitution and lowering the number of uniformed officers in discretionary posts in the federal executive, which under Bolsonaro, an ex-Army captain, grew to an astonishing 6,175 (Canário 2022).

In terms of its relationship with Germany and the European Union, this normative realignment sets the stage for the reawakening of extensive political and diplomatic ties with Brazil, as well as a more facilitative atmosphere for trade relations. The country's recommitment to human rights should immediately be reflected in a rejuvenated protagonist role in multilateral bodies at the global and regional levels, particularly in the United Nations Human Rights Council and bodies and processes related to sustainable development. The Lula government has committed to reversing destructively permissive policies regarding deforestation in the Amazon and has recommitted to aligning the country with the goals outlined in global climate change negotiations.

These developments will align Brazil more strongly with the norms and principles that orient international institutions, as well as EU foreign policy, but the country will not be a blind follower of the Western lead – this may be particularly true with regard to the Ukraine conflict, which involves its BRICS ally Russia. Although it faces a much more challenging outlook without a strong commodities market and finds itself in a more unequal and polarised world, Brazil will seek to regain its previous international presence, particularly in multilateral forums, and to restore its relations with international counterparts now again seen as partners.

Supporting Brazil's Return as a Responsible Actor on the International Stage

As Brazil seeks to recoup its international position, Germany and its European partners can best engage with the country by assisting concretely with Brazilian democratic and economic consolidation. As mentioned, rapid recognition of the election result and its legitimacy was crucial, and constructive engagement means continuing in this vein. Support for democratic consolidation against threats from right-wing extremism and ambitious armed forces is not synonymous with domestic party-political positioning. Support for the restoration of civil society participation should be accorded priority, as should combatting fake news and the erosion of the population's ability to distinguish truth from manipulation, which must find its basis in a strong education system.

A return to the fold for Brazil also means the resumption of regular diplomatic and political contacts, through the mechanisms of state visits and the yearly cabinet meetings between Brazil and Germany that underscored the bilateral strategic partnership. This would serve to bring about not only greater normative and policy synergies, but also ultimately a greater understanding in Brazil of the impact of EU and NATO membership in individual countries' policymaking in bilateral situations. Financial support, such as the resumption of contributions to the Amazon Fund, and increasingly to subnational governmental entities that have carried on important work in key shared areas of concern in the absence of commitments from the federal arena over the past four years, is crucial. This is particularly true of food security and poverty reduction, as well as climate change, deforestation, and social inequality. As Brazil returns to the global stage as a constructive actor, there is ample opportunity to make up for lost time in the bilateral friendship.

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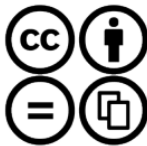
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