

Political Realignment in Brazil: Jair Bolsonaro and the Right Turn*

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ABSTRACT | One hundred days have passed since Bolsonaro took office, and there are two salient aspects of his presidency: first, it is clear that he was not tailored for the position he holds; second, the lack of preparation of his entourage and the absence of parliamentary support has led the country to a permanent state of crisis. In this article, I make an initial assessment of a presidency that was the direct outcome of a pivotal election that fractured the Brazilian political landscape and catapulted an unknown Congressman to the highest political office in the republic. The first part of the article covers the 2018 elections as the critical juncture of the *Nova República* [New Republic]. The second part delves into the main events Jair Bolsonaro's first three months in office.

KEYWORDS | Bolsonaro; Brazil; democracy; realigning elections

Realineamiento político en Brasil: Jair Bolsonaro y el giro a la derecha

RESUMEN | Han pasado cien días desde la posesión de Bolsonaro, y existen dos aspectos centrales de su mandato hasta la fecha: primero, queda claro que no está hecho a la medida del cargo que ocupa; segundo, la falta de preparación de su séquito y la ausencia de base parlamentaria han llevado al país a un estado permanente de crisis. En este artículo, hago una evaluación inicial de una presidencia que fue el resultado directo de unas elecciones decisivas que fracturaron el panorama político brasileño y catapultaron a un diputado desconocido al principal cargo público de la república. La primera parte del artículo abarca las elecciones de 2018 y la coyuntura crítica de la *Nova República*. La segunda analiza los principales eventos de los primeros tres meses de la presidencia de Jair Bolsonaro.

PALABRAS CLAVE | Bolsonaro; Brasil; democracia; realineamiento electoral

Realinhamento político no Brasil: Jair Bolsonaro e o giro à direita

RESUMO | Cem dias se passaram desde que Bolsonaro assumiu o cargo, e há dois aspectos importantes de sua presidência: primeiro, está claro que ele não foi talhado para a posição que ocupa; segundo, a falta de preparação de sua equipe e a ausência de uma base parlamentar levaram o país a um estado de crise permanente. Neste artigo, faço uma avaliação inicial de uma presidência que foi o resultado direto de uma eleição crítica que fracionou o cenário político brasileiro e catapultou um congressista desconhecido para o mais alto cargo político da república. A primeira parte do artigo trata das eleições de 2018 como um ponto crítico da Nova República. A segunda parte investiga os principais eventos dos três primeiros meses de Jair Bolsonaro na presidência da República.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Bolsonaro; Brasil; democracia; realinhamento eleitoral

* The paper is part of my ongoing reflections on Brazilian politics over the past few years, and focuses on the 2018 presidential elections.

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“Jabuti não sobe em árvore. Ou foi enchente ou foi mão de gente”¹

Brazilian saying

On 1 January 2019 Jair Messias Bolsonaro took office as the 38th President of Brazil. Elected with 57.8 million votes,¹ the former Army captain inherited a country with dismaying numbers. Upon his inauguration, 12.9 million people were unemployed, and 27.5 million were considered ‘underutilised labour force’ —while 37.3 million were in the informal market with no labour protection or social insurance (IBGE 2019). Brazil is the world leader in homicides with 63,380 per year. This means 30.8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (Ipea & FBSP 2018) —the world average is around 8 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. This is especially problematic when data show that 50.3% of deaths are young people between 15 and 19 years of age, and the rates for black people killed reached 40.2 per 100,000 —whereas for the non-black people the proportion was 16 per 100,000 inhabitants (Ipea & FBSP 2018). Those are just some of the figures besetting the country the new Planalto Palace tenant was elected to govern.

Since Roosevelt coined the term ‘first 100 days’ in 1933, it has become commonplace for the press, the Congress and the business community to scrutinize the first actions of the new president in office. It is not a perfect measure, but for some analysts it is a useful one for gauging presidential effectiveness. Walsh (2009) observes that presidents “tend to be most effective when they first take office, when their leadership style seems fresh and new, when the aura of victory is still powerful, and when their impact on Congress is usually at its height”.

One hundred days have passed since Bolsonaro took office, and there are two salient aspects of his presidency: first, it is clear that he was not tailored for the position he holds; second, the lack of preparation of his entourage and the absence of parliamentary support has led the country to a permanent state of crisis.

Within the first three months of his government, Bolsonaro has failed to show any real effectiveness, his leadership is virtually non-existent outside Twitter, the aura of victory faded away quickly and already seems stale, and his impact on Congress has never been very significant, and is still liable to drop further.

If the readers are interested in a full account of the first 100 days the Bolsonaro presidency, Gonzalez and Leme

(2019) can provide much greater detail than I cover in this article. In this article, I make an initial assessment of a presidency that was the direct outcome of a critical election that fractured the Brazilian political landscape and catapulted an unknown Congressman to the highest political office in the republic. The first part of the article covers the 2018 elections as the critical juncture of the *Nova República*² [New Republic]. The second part delves into the main events Jair Bolsonaro’s first three months in office.

I must warn the readers that due to the nature of the task and the ongoing political developments, the reflections recounted here are limited in scope, while they do follow the recent literature (Barros 2019; Nobre 2018; 2019; Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco 2018; Ramos & Gontijo in press; Singer 2012; 2018). The research uses primary sources found in the media and interviews³ conducted since October 2018, complemented by some theoretical reflections. It should be read more like a puzzle with missing pieces that will be parsimoniously added by history.

2018 Presidential Elections: Critical Juncture and Political Realignment

The political structure that has dominated the *Nova República* ended on 28 October 2018. Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right candidate, was elected as Brazil’s president, putting an end to the social-democratic pact established after the generals left power. The reasons for his ascension, however, are not surprising.

Since the military coup that led to the establishment of the Republic in 1889, Brazilian politics has been indulgently paternalistic. Any conflict of ideas has been avoided at all costs when it comes to leading and managing social interests (Souza 2009). Brazilian mass democracy was created in the 1930s, having the state as the mediator of conflicts between social interests —with labour unions and patrons kept under the strong arm of the state. This arrangement made it much easier for those in power to ensure the re-election of allies, and also became the leading cause of state inefficiency and corruption scandals in the country. Moreover, this practice was indulgently incorporated by both Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s Brazilian Social Democracy Party

1 The new president received support from only 1/3 of the country. Fernando Haddad, the runner-up, received 47.04 million votes —out of 104.83 million valid votes. 89.49 million casted a protest vote, abstained, or voted against Bolsonaro as follows: abstentions (31.37 million; 21.3%), null votes (8.60 million; 7.43%), blank votes (2.48 million; 2.14%) (TSE 2018).

2 *Nova República* [New Republic] denotes the period in the history of Brazil starting in 1985, when the civilian government was restored after a 21-year-long military regime.

3 Given the sensitive nature of the political content in these interviews, and the ongoing political process, the names of all sources were omitted, although all sources are referenced.

(PSDB; 1995–2002) and Lula da Silva’s Workers Party (PT; 2003–2016) as their *modus operandi*.

Over the past three decades, political power in Brazil has been shared between the centre-right led by Cardoso and Michel Temer⁴ and the centre-left led by Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff. Although both sides never admitted it publicly, the same social-democratic orientations drove many of their policies. Cardoso was responsible for the macroeconomic adjustment policy during the 1990s, and da Silva and Rousseff—riding on the international commodity boom—implemented and deepened social redistribution policies initially promoted by Cardoso. This means that during the 2000s, a time when everyone—from entrepreneurs to traditional politicians—was benefitting from significant economic growth, any threat to the turbid links between business and politics was easily neutralised by the system.

The Brazilian state had never been structured to be nurtured by the society, but rather to exert tutelage over the citizenry (Faoro 2001). This top-down profile, with very low representation and accountability, led to multiple obscure links between private and state-run businesses (see Lazzarini 2010), creating an environment in which the act of taking from the State—in short, corruption—was a widely accepted and worthwhile practice.

The 2018 presidential election showed how fragile the political system was. Pundits and analysts have portrayed the presidential race as the most unpredictable since 1989. The lead-up to the first-round vote was indeed volatile, but the particular features of the Brazilian political landscape offer us some clues to make sense of the country’s reality. In early August 2018, a few candidates appeared as potential winners of the presidential race. Among them were Lula da Silva (despite his 12-year prison sentence, which made him ineligible to stand for election); the former Army captain and federal deputy, Bolsonaro; the former PSDB governor of the state of São Paulo, Geraldo Alckmin; the former governor of the state of Ceará and Lula’s one-time minister, Ciro Gomes; and Temer’s finance minister (and former president of the Central Bank under Lula), Henrique Meirelles. The abundance of candidates reflected a political system that has thirty-five different political parties.

Campaigning ahead of the first-round vote was marked by a heated debate between the PT and the judiciary

4 Temer (Brazilian Democratic Movement, MDB) was elected twice as vice-president on Dilma Rousseff’s ticket (2010 and 2014). By the end of 2015, when it became clear that the president had lost her political support in Congress, Temer overtly started to work to oust Rousseff from office. With more than two decades as a Congressman, the vice-president represented a guarantee that the political machinery would continue to run; Dilma was by then considered *persona non grata* by the majority of the Brazilian Congress.

over Lula’s right to run for president—with the former president, in the end, declared ineligible and replaced on the PT ticket by Fernando Haddad. The most striking moment of the campaign, however, came when Bolsonaro, who led all voter intention polls, was assaulted with a knife while campaigning in Minas Gerais state on 6 September. These two events clearly illustrate the degree of national polarisation during the campaign.

On the surface, the polls told a relatively clear story of a simple contest between the left and the right. One side righteously defending morality, the other advancing progressive social policies; both portraying their vision as irreconcilable with the other. This simplistic drama was reflected in the first-round presidential vote. Bolsonaro garnered 46.03% of the vote with an inflammatory alternative right-wing (alt-right) discourse against corruption under Lula and the PT. Haddad, the former mayor of the city of São Paulo, obtained 29.28%, which gathered together traditional left-wing voters and all those opposed to Bolsonaro. Gomes, the centre-left Democratic Labour Party (PDT)⁵ candidate, arrived in third place with 12.47% of the vote (TSE 2018).

A closer look at a different measurement of public opinion in Brazil shows the complexity of mainstream public opinion. Going beyond standard voting preference questions, the *Instituto Paraná Pesquisas* (2018, 5) asked people about which issues worry Brazilians the most for the country’s future. The biggest fears ahead of the election, in order, were: 1) violence, 2) economic growth, 3) unemployment, 4) the health system, 5) corruption, 6) inflation/taxes and 7) education. Concerns two through seven can be labelled as ‘social threats,’ and are generally seen as better addressed by the left. However, violence, the deepest worry for the Brazilian public, falls into the category of ‘disgust-related’ threats, which in general are seen as being better handled by the right (for a review see Laham & Corless 2016).

Bolsonaro was the embodiment of those who viewed the 13 year-long PT government as a travesty of abject corruption and kleptocracy. Some have called him ‘the Trump of the Tropics’, or a Latin American version of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Although correct in characterising him as a populist politician with an authoritarian flavour, the analyses were biased by Donald Trump’s electoral victory.

Different from the US president, Bolsonaro does not have the same negotiation skills and insertion in national mainstream politics and business. He is a captain who was forced into retirement from the Army in 1988 after he threatened to bomb army barracks to obtain salary increases and then turned into an

5 It is worth noting that Lula tried to isolate Gomes to keep the PT as the hegemonic voice on the left.

unsophisticated and mostly irrelevant federal deputy. In twenty-seven years in Congress, he religiously collected the substantial benefits paid to Brazilian Congressmen in exchange for producing absolutely *nothing* besides controversial and aggressive rhetoric. Over almost three decades, Bolsonaro presented 150 bills, with thirty-two favouring the military, only one in favour of educational matters, and other two about healthcare-related issues. Only one of these bills was eventually passed: PL 2.514/1996, for reducing taxes on industrial goods (see also Marini 2018).

Since 2013, Brazil's economy has been shrinking, 12.9 million people have become unemployed, and corruption scandals have achieved the banal status of daily news. Those problems, however, are very different from the sentiments of social disquiet and dislocation behind Trump's '*make America great again*' motto (see Mutz 2018). Indeed, Trump's logic and its appeal to those in the United States that feel excluded by globalisation cannot be applied to Brazil. Throughout the 2000s Brazil's economy grew as it fed the world's appetite for commodities. Millions were lifted out of poverty and elevated to the amorphous and ill-defined 'new middle class' (Neri 2011; Pochman 2012; Souza 2009 & 2010).

Brazil's far-right overtly used the spread of misinformation and 'fake news' through social media to advance its discourse. For instance, the disgust mobilised and weaponised by Bolsonaro is not limited to the figure of the 'criminal'; it is applied just as vigorously to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community, blacks, indigenous people, and feminists. These fake threats to society have nothing to do with crime or corruption but are powerful emotional drivers—as are the memes circulating on Brazilian WhatsApp groups associating the PT involving child abuse, female nudity, and the like.

Social media was a major player in the 2018 elections. Up until then, TV political advertising was the primary means to reach out to Brazil's electorate. Bolsonaro's tight-budgeted campaign committee, however, relied heavily on political microtargeting via social media—and focused especially on professionalising a 'fake news' industry. In a country in which 70% of the population is functionally illiterate (Ação Educativa & Instituto Paulo Montenegro 2018), the effect of fake news disseminated via WhatsApp has been perverse.

While other candidates were unable to respond to the misinformation campaign launched through WhatsApp, Twitter, or Facebook, Bolsonaro's campaign remained on the offensive, and he never came under pressure to defend his ideas while consolidating his lead in opinion polls. In the end, the assault on Bolsonaro in September unwittingly boosted his TV exposure, just as his social media campaign took off.

The alt-right message was multi-pronged, spreading social-status fears among those who felt (or could feel) their living standards dropping: the newly prosperous, the middle-class and those in the upper classes. Their appeal relies upon the anger and disquiet felt by those who benefited from the economic boom during the 2000s, but who have subsequently seen these gains evaporate. A recent survey conducted by Mutz (2018) found that those who changed their minds and voted for Trump were not guided by concerns for their economic status, but instead followed their underlying racist and misogynistic thoughts. That is precisely the psychological mindset that Bolsonaro and his allies consistently tapped during the electoral campaign—and kept using as a mobilisation strategy during his first 100 days in office.

The connection is straight-forward: creating an environment of fear and segregation leads to a competition between social and disgust-related threats. In this context, the first-round majority for the conservative candidate was ensured, while other options in the ranking of fears seem to be blurred. Social psychologists have shown over the decades that tension and violence between social groups can enhance the tendency to make judgments based on group stereotypes, promoting nationalistic attachment and support for nationalistic leaders. Bolsonaro's whole campaign was built upon exploiting a political behaviour tied into a sense of fear—fear of being shot, of crime, of unemployment—that ends up creating space for the acceptance of authoritarian feelings latent in society. Research shows that, in a social environment in which structural and symbolic violence—among other threats—produce acute social constraints, left-wing political orientations are less likely to take root (Sibley, Osborne & Duckitt 2012). In the same context, research shows that individuals tend to rationally respond aggressively to threats, which would lead to conservative shifts (Jost *et al.* 2003; Jost, Federico & Napier 2009).

The alt-right vote in Brazil can be seen as a muted protest by those who cannot understand the drastic changes in the country over the past two decades, and do not have emotional and cognitive skills to accept that they do not know why their reality has changed. The cognitive dissonance levels between what such voters have in their minds and the real world have become extremely high, and an authoritarian discourse offers security and comfort, providing the illusion of immediate economic rewards, reducing their anxiety.

The First 100 Days: The Art of Improvising or 'the Worse, the Better'

On 2 November 2018 Bolsonaro delivered his first press conference as a newly elected president from his home in Rio de Janeiro. At that time, speaking to the national

and international press in an informal and improvised manner, he showed what was to come next in his government: a succession of incompetent improvisations to deal with the *res publica*, and his utter lack of preparation.

The plan for the first 100 days seemed clear: have Congress pass an urgent pension reform bill. The government set out thirty-five goals for the period and bragged that “95% of them were accomplished” —although most of them were irrelevant, such as removing the wording ‘Mercosur’ from Brazilian passport covers (Ernesto & Soares 2019).

This should also come as no surprise. In early April, Bolsonaro said that “he was not born to be president, but a military man” and reaffirmed that “he does not understand economics” (Carvalho 2019) —the latter statement occurred after a disastrous intervention in diesel prices that made Petrobras stocks plummet while the company lost BRL 32 billion in a single day.

Brazilians had elected a sincere president after all. In his campaign, he was crystal clear when he said that he did not understand anything about economics, agriculture, or public health, among other topics. The country democratically chose someone who did not understand about politics, public administration, or statecraft. What has since happened, and will continue to happen, is precisely what was envisaged during the election campaign: Bolsonaro’s government has no concrete political or economic proposals, and no macro agenda for the country.

Fuelled by Resentment

When asked about matters related to public administration during the campaign, besides reaffirming his lack of knowledge, Bolsonaro promised he would name technocrats to his cabinet. After all, although he did not understand anything about governing, he surrounded himself with qualified people who would help him to do so. The problem is that the supposed ‘best and brightest,’ that were to fill his cabinet turned out to be far from public service’s cream of the crop.

Bolsonaro’s ministerial appointments fell under three categories. The first are the ‘anti-globalists’, in line with polemicist Olavo de Carvalho —an eccentric YouTuber who became the ideological beacon for Bolsonaro and his sons— such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ernesto Araújo. In the second group are the military men who were early supporters of the president and who provided him with his ticket partner (and now vice-president) —the retired four-star general Hamilton Mourão. In the third group are the technocrats invited by Bolsonaro to legitimise his ignorance towards the markets (Scrivano & Ribeiro 2018), the Congress, and public opinion —this category includes

the two almost-super Ministers Sergio Moro (Justice and Public Order), and Paulo Guedes (Economy).

Officials working in the *Esplanada*⁶ share a prevailing feeling of resentment with the political and economic establishment. During the campaign, deep-seated fears of a return to military rule resurfaced across the Brazilian left. Diniz argues that there is a politicisation of those in the Armed Forces who resent the social progress seen since 1985, including Jair Bolsonaro and many of his generation. They entered the military academies during the military rule, expecting to participate in it and enjoy its benefits, but it came to an end before their chance to govern came around (Oliveto 2018). This means that some of those men had to live thirty years of resentment for not taking part in the privileges of military power. Diniz aptly observes that this is why “these soldiers were eager to seize power, democratic power” (Oliveto 2018) —in short, the opportunity to return to power under Bolsonaro seemed irresistible.

This is also the case with Paulo Guedes and Sergio Moro, who were at some point known as ‘super-ministers’, with enough power to make any reforms they deemed necessary for the country, and who were soon deauthorised by the president. Guedes holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Chicago but could never find an academic position in Brazilian university or a position in the government (see Gaspar 2018). He moved then to Chile and returned to Brazil where he made a series of investments and became a successful businessman. His resentment, however, never disappeared. In a detailed profile, Gaspar (2018) shows how Guedes gave up his ‘pure’ Chicago Liberalism to accommodate his interest in power —manifested by an urge to drastically open the Brazilian economy to show his academic and business peers that his ideas had been correct all along, despite their long-standing disdain. Moro was the federal judge heading the Lava Jato Operation from 2014 to November 2018. This was the task force that revealed how structural corruption was the primary means of doing politics in Brazil (and somewhat, in other Latin American countries, such as Colombia, Peru and Venezuela). When invited by Bolsonaro in the aftermath of the elections, Moro stated that he had accepted the offer to “consolidate the anti-corruption gains” he had started as a judge —in a clear signal to those in the political world who tried to hinder his advancement or that of his colleagues (“Moro aceita convite” 2018). Critical of the strategies used by politicians to escape the justice, Moro gave up his judicial career to become Bolsonaro’s minister (Neves 2018) —something he emphatically denied he would do over the past four years.

6 The area of Brasília where the ministerial buildings are located is called *Esplanada dos Ministérios*.

Last but not least, the case of the Minister of Foreign Affairs (FA) is peculiar. Ernesto Araújo's appointment was a surprise to the Brazilian diplomatic corps. Recently promoted to a position that would allow him to eventually be appointed as Ambassador, he did not have the stature or the experience needed to lead the Ministry at Itamaraty; and it is precisely his lack of experience that led to his appointment. Araújo saw the opportunity to take on Itamaraty's rigid hierarchical structure and play a new role in the Ministry—becoming a political shield to the new president domestically and abroad (Brazilian Diplomat B 2018). Burges and Chagas-Bastos (2017) have shown that foreign policy is unattractive for those seeking to share in the political pork. Araújo understood that by refraining from playing the political game he would not receive much attention or power, and transformed himself into Bolsonaro's echo abroad. For example, when the president travelled to Israel, Araújo came up with the bizarre claim that Nazism was a left-wing ideology—following a similar statement Bolsonaro made during the 2018 campaign (see Diegues 2019). On the bureaucratic side, Araújo understood that he could climb up the ranks at lightspeed if he aligned himself with the zeitgeist—even if this meant sacrificing some coherence, given that he had been a long-standing PT supporter, and enthusiastic of Celso Amorim's foreign policy (Brazilian Diplomat A 2019).

Fake Battles

These groups often sabotaged and collided against each other. The disharmony among them made Bolsonaro hesitate several times during his early days, and forced him to fire his Chief of Staff, and the first appointee to lead the Ministry of Education—among other second-tier appointees who were also fired. Those battles, however, are not entirely genuine—as Nobre (2019) points out, “there is method in the chaos”.

In this regard, some commentators stress that Bolsonaro and his sons have choreographed certain movements. All the political confusion portrayed since the beginning by the president and his sons shows a pattern of rehearsed sketches to demonstrate cohesion around the conservative values they defend (Freitas 2019). Bolsonaro makes his best efforts to maintain the public debate around beliefs, given that this is his only strategy—an imaginary crusade where Bolsonarism uses inappropriate comments as his weapons. For instance, in late January 2019 Bolsonaro accused his former Chief of Staff, Gustavo Bebbiano, of lying about talking to him about the political crisis enveloping his party—the Social Liberal Party (PSL)—during his convalescence at the hospital. As leaked audios proved weeks later, both men indeed exchanged WhatsApp audio messages (“Entenda a crise” 2019). Moreover, during Carnival in February, Bolsonaro shockingly tweeted an explicit short video showing of one man

urinating on another during a street carnival parade, and then asked what such sexual practice was (“Brazilian President Jair” 2019).

Those false political battles fulfil multiple functions. First, they mobilise an electorate that sees few concrete advances, and no political agenda to tackle the rampant unemployment and the stagnant economy. Second, they keep Bolsonaro's anti-system and transgressive character alive, much as he ran his campaign on a political liturgy filled with unbelievable nonsense. Finally, they disguise the government's administrative incapacity and help to cover up its setbacks (Boghossian 2019).

The crises caused by the president and his sons (in particular, Carlos Bolsonaro), however, hijack the public debate. Brum (2019) in a brilliant analysis argues that Bolsonaro is an anti-president, which means he emulates (and neutralises) his opposition. Moreover, when Bolsonaro and his sons issue controversial statements (mostly on social media), they occupy the national debate instantly—as the question on Twitter about “what's a golden shower” in mid-February—, blocking any possibility of serious debate around the country's needs. In doing so, the Bolsonarism occupies all roles: it simulates opposition and criticism—destroying the nature of politics and the democratic essence. Brum notes that “by dictating the rhythm and content of the days, he turned an entire country into a hostage” (Brum 2019). All of this would not be possible without the massive presence of the president and his aides on social media—as if they were still on the campaign.

Brazil does not escape from the zeitgeist: ‘society’ has been confused with ‘social media’. Such overexposure has come at a high cost: after three months, the government is already ‘old’.

The Habit of Wasting Political Capital to Gain People's Support

From what academics and pundits predicted during the campaign leading up to the runoff polls, Brazil is destined to some dark years ahead. Putting the backward rhetoric aside, the president elect will face more critical constraints than trying to make his verbiage real. For 2019, there is little budgetary leeway: less than R\$ 120 billion (or US 32 billion) are available to manage the country, invest in public services, and most importantly, negotiate with the Congress to see his campaign promises take off (Ministério da Economia 2019). The bitter measures needed to restructure the economy would be severe enough already in a scenario of institutional normality, and become even harsher in an environment of ideological polarisation. Bolsonaro's government started with and still is under a non-negligible risk of short-term collapse.

As described by Brazilian economists, over the past thirty years (1988-2018) Brazil's economy "flew like a chicken", i.e. expanded and contracted in short bursts that, on average, made the economy grow by 2,2% per year—in comparison, from 1958-1987 the Brazilian economy grew 6,6% per year on average (World Bank 2019). Bolsonaro and Guedes bet on pension reform to succeed during their first year, which would provide some budgetary leeway, attract foreign investment, and in consequence, make the economy grow. As of the writing of this article, pension reform (or any other reform) hasn't yet passed the first stages within the legislative process—and Congress hasn't shown any goodwill toward the president and his Minister of Economics.

Members of Congress have defined Bolsonaro and his sons' attitudes in social media as "mediocre", "infantile", and "basic" (Brazilian Federal Deputy B 2019; Brazilian public official, A 2019). Political actors in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate fear that the rapid deterioration of the president's image might lead to a significant loss of respect—by the Congress and public opinion—and make even more difficult the already complicated negotiations around the structural reforms Brazil urgently needs (Brazilian Federal Deputy A 2019).

This only adds to the absence of a parliamentary basis in Congress. Bolsonaro's PSL, elected 55 deputies and 4 senators in 2018, which is insufficient to pass any bill. Nonetheless, the president refuses to negotiate the formation of a government coalition, calling it "politics as usual"—or "old politics" in Bolsonaro's terms. As I noted above, Bolsonaro rejects politics, associating it with corruption, clientelism and gerrymandering—which is precisely what he has been doing since taking office, but calling it 'new politics' or 'non-ideological politics.' This is only possible thanks to the fragile state Brazilian institutions have reached since the never-ending political crisis set in motion by Rousseff's impeachment process in 2015.

One of the main reasons for Bolsonaro's accession to power is Brazil's current institutional fragility. This was not a result of supposed authoritarians, but of self-proclaimed democrats. Brazil lives now in the aftermath of four years of political turmoil: a combination of a muscled Judiciary strong-arming a flawed Legislature, and a fragile Executive. This has led to a reproduction of the pattern by which laws are obeyed and enforced selectively,—i.e. everyone is in some sense an outlaw, and it is essential that everyone exercises power outside the law because the rules only apply to one's 'enemies'.

The president does not seem to understand politics, i.e. the art of peaceful conflict resolution and interest accommodation that guarantees the rational and solidary division of the limited resources available. He despises debate, dissent, and those who think

differently from him—which makes sense given his irrelevant record after three decades in Congress, where he specialised in promoting division and spreading resentment. The ideal scenario for him is one in which the Executive, the Legislative and the Judiciary are in a constant tug-of-war, in a sequence of crises that weaken institutions, while himself and his aides remain intact as the defenders of ethics and 'moral values'.

Final Remarks

The South American giant wound up electing a captain who was expelled from the army, a deputy who did nothing useful while in Congress, and an opportunist with a talent for repeating common-sense prejudices. Bolsonaro ended his first 100 days as the least popular president since democracy came back to Brazil in 1988. In early January, 64% of Brazilians said they trusted the new president would perform well or very well. One hundred days later, only 35% continue to believe in the former army captain. The number of those who distrust him grew from 30% to 44% (CNI 2019).

All in all, Bolsonaro's tenure might be as dark as the sibyls foretold, or, in the best-case scenario, just an unfortunate episode of a sad comedy. After these first three months, it leans more to the dark side than the comic. To be noted is that the left has a special degree of guilt in Bolsonaro's quick rise. Its response to the alt-right is reminiscent of the reaction by the Latin American left to Trump. All doom and gloom, but not engaging with the root causes that led to Bolsonaro's victory and instead of doubling down on apocalyptic rhetoric.

Bolsonaro's push to the right has deep roots in Brazilian history, and it has not happened overnight. Democracy and citizenship were achieved for the wealthy and white; while the black and the poor have never been integrated to receive its benefits. Brazil—like many of its South American neighbours—remains a veiled authoritarian and racist country.

Within a short time, Bolsonaro proved to be unfit for the position he occupies. There is a feeble understanding of a long-standing and central issue in Brazilian politics: rampant inequalities. It will not take long until it comes back to the centre of the public debate—whether Bolsonaro likes it or not. The tight budget for social investment and the depletion of the 'new middle class' and the upward social mobility (based on rising income, formal jobs, more schools, better employment opportunities etc.) experienced during the 2000s, will bring political consequences to this right-leaning electoral realignment. He ignores the role of income, and the proper understanding of the composition of the Brazilian economic pyramid—and the position of the poor and the middle class within it (see Chagas-Bastos 2015).

The president and his cabinet's erratic movements indicate improvisation and lack of planning. The only solid plan Bolsonaro shows is a crusade against the left, communism and the destruction of the Christian values — a bad adaptation of the Cervantine quest. People want to know from their president how he will reduce the 64 thousand annual violent deaths, create formal jobs for the 13 million unemployed, guarantee the payment of pensions and minimum wage, and build sewage to half of the schools that do not yet have any — to mention some of the most pressing problems.

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