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Why the Far-Right Will Continue to Radicalise in Brazil

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Why the Far-Right Will Continue to Radicalise in Brazil

“Brazil is back on the world stage”—this was the main message Lula delivered as honorary guest at the UN Climate Summit in Egypt, less than a month after beating Bolsonaro in the runoff of Brazil’s presidential elections with a narrow margin of 50.9% against 49.1%. Lula’s high-strung victory in a divided country has attracted global media and political attention, reflecting not only concerns about the fate of Brazilian democracy after a long cycle of authoritarianism (2016–2022),² but of how the election could point to a change in the correlation of forces in a number of consequential themes that resonate on the international agenda: the urgency of environmental protection and regulation, the resumption of the South American integration process, the possibility of a more assertive BRICS coalition pushing for a transition in economic development policies, the attention to social inclusion, the need to reverse neoliberal reforms related to labour market and public spending mechanisms, the hopes of re-organising international left-wing solidarity, among others.

Whether these themes will find resonance and how they will be tackled in Lula’s third mandate as president from 2023 onwards is open to speculation, but following recent developments before and after the elections—ranging from politically motivated violence to demonstrations calling for military intervention to police forces attempting to block the electoral process—it has become clear that Bolsonaro’s defeat will not represent the demise of Bolsonarismo or the far-right more generally. This is significant because Lula’s success or failure in dealing with pressing issues at home and abroad will be to some degree conditioned by how the far-right is able to organise mass opposition and attempt to undermine his government in Congress. This was the case with Dilma Rousseff’s political paralysis leading to her ousting in 2016, when far-right narratives began to hold sway in mainstream discourse.

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² The cycle includes Michel Temer’s government (2016–2018), but was nurtured even earlier with the rise of anti-democratic opposition groups who rejected the results of the 2014 elections when President Dilma Rousseff was re-elected.

Factoring in the starkly negative economic scenario combined with a largely de-mobilised base of supporters and a Transition Government increasingly colonised by the right, it seems highly unlikely that Lula will be able to govern with the same widespread consensus that marked his second term in office, when approval rates peaked as high as 80%. Thus, the new faces of Lulismo, a social force aptly characterised by Singer (2012) as ‘weak reformism’, can be expected to be shaped by its vulnerability to anti-PT sentiments and far-right opposition forces. Based on my ongoing doctoral research, below I outline three interconnected reasons as to why the far-right will continue to radicalise Brazilian politics in the coming years.

The far-right in the *longue durée* of Brazilian capitalism

The first reason is that the far-right is not a new phenomenon in Brazil. The novelty in the current cycle of far-right mainstreaming lies in the ways by which far-right movements and ideas have been able to re-organise under a relatively coherent agenda and find mass support and leadership in a democratic setting. The far-right is part of a much longer tradition and history, achieving quasi-hegemonic status throughout various junctures of crisis to offset democratic pressures from society (Deutsch, 1999; Gonçalves and Neto, 2020). This aligns with recent scholarship on the international historical sociology of the far-right developed by Rick Saul, Alexander Anievas, Neil Davidson and Adam Fabry (2015), where the far-right is considered as an enduring feature of capitalist development and crisis, and as being implicated in liberal politics instead of an anomaly to it.

Ever since the beginning of the Republican period in 1889, influential Catholic reactionaries and pro-monarchist movements campaigned against modernisation tendencies and what was perceived as the erosion of traditional forms of authority. Under the umbrella of Integritism, an ideology influenced by European Restorationism, the far-right pushed for a totalising project where the Church should be present in all spheres of state and society. In the interwar period, the Brazilian Integralist Action (AIB) became the largest fascist party outside Europe, and its ideas had long-lasting influence in state policies throughout the 20th century, especially during the military dictatorship era (1964-1985). Bolsonaro’s slogan *Deus, Pátria e Família* (God, Nation, and Family) originates from the AIB’s fascist manifestos.

Further, the far-right is inseparable from Brazilian militarism. In fact, it can be argued that militarism is a *far-right project*. The political re-activation of the military under Bolsonaro is a testament not only to vestiges of the military regime during the democratic period, but of a much older tradition of militarisation of political life that dates to the colonial period. In the transition from Empire to Republic, the military constituted itself as a ‘moderating force’,

periodically intervening in politics to uphold the dominant order when it was challenged either by revolts or attempts to democratise institutions and incorporate the popular sectors through redistributive social policies. Where domestic and international pressures did force the country to modernise its productive structures, such as with the late industrialisation cycles in the 1930s and 1970s, this was a conservative modernisation heavily dictated by military affairs.

Historically, then, Brazil's development as a dependent capitalist country has been inseparable from the construction of a centralising, militarised state anchored in structures of war and violence directed against marginalised populations, with the imperative to protect and reproduce a racialised, hierarchical, and authoritarian social order. Militarism continues to guide the material and ideological fabric of social relations and institutions in the country, and this is likely to persist given it is socially legitimised by the right-to-far-right political spectrum. The PT did very little to challenge this during its years in power. In fact, militarisation grew exponentially in Lula's and Rousseff's governments, as seen during the infamous military interventions in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro between 2008-2014, tellingly titled 'pacification operations'.

The far-right as a top-down elite project and a bottom-up mass movement

The second reason why the far-right will outlive Bolsonaro relates to developments at the margins of urban social life in Brazil, which provides new sources of power and legitimacy to the far-right. Historically it has been the (white) urban middle classes that have provided acceptability for top-down authoritarian solutions in junctures of crisis, as seen mass in demonstrations such as the 'March with God for Family and Freedom' just before the military coup in 1964, and the countless 'green and yellow' rallies of recent years begging Bolsonaro to shut down democratic institutions and invoke a new military intervention.

Like in previous historical cycles, middle-class far-right support is grounded in providing solutions to political and economic elites seeking a short-term fix to distributive conflicts following a fall in the rate of profits. This was seen in the backlash against the inclusive social policies implemented during the PT administrations (2003–2016) which lifted millions from extreme poverty, increased the minimum wage above inflationary levels, and expanded worker's rights. What followed was a concerted persecution against the PT and Lula from state actors ranging from the Judiciary, the Armed Forces, and powerful parliamentary coalitions (most notably the Agribusiness, Security, and

Evangelical caucuses in Congress, also known as ‘Beef, Bullet, and Bible’) who orchestrated a coup against President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, with the intent to implement a radical neoliberal agenda, dismantle social welfare policies, and privatise public goods.

However, full elite support to Bolsonaro’s candidacy came in relatively late, when traditional opposition parties crumbled in corruption scandals and were unable to form a consensus around the ‘distributive fix’. Long before that, however, Bolsonarismo had already become a phenomenon anchored in, and embedded with, powerful social groups that flourished in the peripheries with the process of neoliberal urbanisation, such as militias and Evangelical churches. Militias are self-appointed, off-duty or retired police officers who take law-and-order into their own hands (Cavalcanti, 2020). They originate from dictatorship-era death squads that began expanding their economic activities onto territorial control, charging locals and businesses with security taxes, extorting money for parallel service provision such as water, electricity, pay-tv, and gas, and often entangling their activities with those of drug gangs (Alvez, 2020).

In the case of Evangelicals, whose demographics is largely composed of precarious black workers, they grew from 9% of the population in 1991 to 22.1% in 2010 (González et al., 2021), a growth rate that corresponds to the informalisation of the world of labour among subaltern layers, alongside the rise of a consumer culture as affirmation of social identity, marked by individualised values of competition and self-success (Alves, 2014; Singer, 2010). In this period, traditional grassroot work and unionism led by the PT in marginalised areas is progressively abandoned (Fernandes, 2019), and with the retrenchment of social policies promoted by the state, the space was filled by Evangelical social activism. This is established through networks of solidarity and social assistance programmes that highlight religion and family as the main mechanisms of social aggregation (Lacerda, 2019).

These social forces have created their own informal networks that range from markets of protection, violence regulation, and micro-states of precarious welfare provision. They were at the epicentre of the paradigmatic shift in Brazilian politics where the discourse on social inclusion, citizenship rights extended to minorities, and consolidation of democracy was taken over by what anthropologist Gabriel Feltran has called the elementary forms of the exercise of power:

Instead of party mediation, a mass movement; instead of the law, male honour; instead of representation, identity; instead of pluralism, the brotherhood; instead of the Constitution, the Gospel; and, finally, in the place of communicative reason, raw violence (Feltran, 2020: 97).

This way of framing the normative foundations of social relations has of course been exacerbated by a heightened sense of insecurity, precarity of public services, and downward social mobility, which these actors were able to capitalise on and offer redemptive solutions through enacting worldviews and practices related to punitivism, Christian family moralism, and entrepreneurial neoliberal ethos. And of course, Bolsonaro was the leadership who embodied this worldview.

The main take here is that the far-right has become a more consolidated social force both in its articulation in the state and in society. Despite Bolsonaro's electoral defeat, the far-right political platform remains strong: not only did Bolsonaro receive 58,2 million votes, but his Liberal Party (PL) made the most seats in the Lower Chamber of Congress (99 against 68 from the PT, in second place), and more governors were elected "bandwagoning" with him than with Lula (15 against 13). On the other hand, the powerful groups that mediate social relations at the edge of existence in the urban margins continue to make their way towards the centre of political life. If political and economic elites push for yet another backlash or 'distributive fix' against any future government, the far-right can once again provide ideological legitimacy and a supporting mass movement.

The far-right is engaged in base-building with the police forces

The third reason relates to less perceptive social dynamics which my research attempts to address empirically. Often, more elaborate structural arguments explain far-right politics at the level of macro determinants from political economy or meso-level party dislocations and institutional shifts. While these frameworks help to understand the conditions for the rise and fall of far-right movements and ideas, its relationship to contextual variables such as economic crisis and restructuring, they run the risk of conceiving far-right actors as fulfilling mere instrumental or functional roles, such as saving capitalist elites from crises of political representation in liberal democracies or neutralising class conflict. What these accounts usually dismiss are the micro-sociological foundations of far-right agency, the affective networks far-right actors build and sustain, the political projects they are attempting to construct (successfully or not), and the unintended consequences their actions may have in the broader political scenario.

One area that has been widely covered in the media is the politicisation and radicalisation of police forces in support of Bolsonaro. Given the structurally violent nature of policing in Brazil and targeted brutality against poor black demographics, Bolsonarisation of police forces may appear natural. Explanations have tended to focus on the level of institutional culture: continuity of

authoritarian legacy of the dictatorship over police mandates, with war-oriented policing prevailing through to the war on drugs; the socio-educational profile of police officers, highly punitive and militarised; and resistance to change of control mechanisms (such as procedures of police inquiry, standards of conduct, and design of the public security policy) (Costa, 2011; Salem and Bertelsen, 2020).

But how exactly have police forces radicalised? And how do far-right actors capitalise on this agenda? One of the ways I have been exploring this issue is through the lens of the entanglement of religious activism with state militarism, more specifically the fusion between police/military power with Evangelical power and its impact in political mobilisation. In the elite level of politics, Evangelicals have been widely engaged in punitive security projects. In Congress, for instance, studies found that there is “association between being a police or military officer and participating in the evangelical caucus”, and “in being protagonist in public security-related commissions and being a member of the Evangelical Front” (Lacerda, 2019: 201). In the bottom-up perspective of social relations, this fusion has translated into base-building projects.

My research has mapped a series of nation-wide Evangelical base-building projects with the police forces. These operate through voluntary chaplaincy networks whose activities range from providing spiritual assistance (prayer, mental health counselling, Bible studies, funerary rituals), social assistance (charity, donations to families of police officers, financial loans), and career valorisation (events celebrating police officers as heroes of society, concession of physical infrastructure for official police meetings, conferences and ceremonies, targeted campaigns during national holidays and for health awareness). These activities are marketed ‘humanising police labour’ with the potential to ‘solve malaises’ associated with police violence and corruption.

From interviewing project coordinators, pastors, and chaplains (many of them police officers themselves); visiting project headquarters; as well as observing their activities in social media, it is possible to distinguish three different forms of base-building articulations impacting policing: at the individual level, prayer interventions focused in displacing tensions and contradictions associated with police activity, and reinterpretation of the social purposes of policing through theological arguments; at the level of police operations, chaplains have been widely used as para-legal ‘backups’ to solve local conflicts, with cases raging from mediating community relations to some more bizarre instances of crime scenes being addressed by chaplains as issues of exorcism ; and at a more strategic level, police have used chaplains as means of building enduring community interactions in marginalised urban areas where tensions between local communities and police have been historically high.

By tracing these base-building projects and social activities, it is possible to contend that an Evangelical police culture (Griffith, 2021) has been consolidated in Brazil in recent years. There are many implications of this in terms of its political impact and the wider issues related to the police mandates over state-sanctioned collective violence. Although I do not have the space here to develop on these issues, it is important to state that all projects analysed have demonstrated unconstrained support to Bolsonaro, with some representatives being more openly radical than others during the electoral process. The dangers of the spill-over effects this may have in society is varied. Two weeks after the elections, when many far-right protests were still taking place across the country, a police officer in Recife was recorded agitating the crowds with the following testimony:

In the Bible, Samuel says that God ordered him to anoint Saul as king. And he told Saul: attack the Amalekites. Kill everyone, including pregnant women, pierce the sword in [their] womb, because what is in there is the son of the Devil. We need to understand that these people from the PT [...] are sons of the Devil. I am a pastor, chaplain, captain, I am pro-guns. I am going to arm myself, because I am going to kill all of these devils.

This event was unrelated to the base-building projects, but it is a clear manifestation of the rise of Christian militarism and the directions this fusion can take if left unchecked.

Conclusion

Lula's victory has certainly brought an element of hope to millions of Brazilians who have witnessed in the last years the exacerbation of politically motivated violence, religious intolerance, hate speech, and the dismantling of social policies. The stakes had never been as high as in the recent electoral process, in terms of the threat Bolsonaro's re-election would represent to the fragile democratic consensus that still holds the country from pivoting to fascism. In a way, the elections consolidated Lula not only as an international reference to the left but as one of the most genius politicians of this century: from overcoming extreme poverty in his childhood to becoming the largest unionist leader of the country during the dictatorship to becoming the most popular president in the history of Brazil to then being arrested in a fraudulent judicial process to finally being re-elected president once again. As he put it back in 2016 when the persecution against the PT gained traction: "If I get arrested, I'll become a hero; if I die, I'll become a martyr; and if I am free, I'll become President again".

However, Lula's election is not a sign of a radical challenge against the political establishment that produced Bolsonaro, nor to the reign of financial markets that dictates the economic policies of the country. It is a sign of modest social gains and extension of political recognition to minority groups, but not of tackling the structural reforms necessary to modernise the social relations of production in the country. The only social force that has radicalised in Brazil in recent years has been the far-right—deepening inequalities, militarisation, and extermination policies targeted against blacks. Absent any political alternatives, the far-right will continue to radicalise in Brazil

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