

INTERROGATING THE BOLSONARO ERA

Claudio Katz

What does Bolsonaro's election signify for Brazil, Latin America and the world? Is it simply a bullish but welcome turn to the right as the Wall Street Journal insouciantly suggests to its business readers, or the dawn of a new fascism? Neither – yet, says Katz in an article published for the first time in English on this site.

Bolsonaro's election expresses a crisis of conservatism as much as a crisis of Latin America's 'Pink Tide' parties, of which Brazil's PT is among the best-known. To understand what's going on we need to study the impasse, both economic and political, facing both Latin America's business classes and its new left, in the context of Latin America's relation to a world being torn apart by Bolsonaro's North American counterpart, Donald Trump.

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By Claudio Katz

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It is clear that the new president of Brazil was a product of the institutional coup against Dilma. The large-scale electoral manipulation designed to prevent the victory of the PT also ended up overwhelming the old parties of the right: they silenced Lula, but they also demolished the traditional conservative formations. The arrival of an unexpected captain at the head of state gives rise to multiple unknowns.

How will he govern?

The three foundations of the coup are the army, the judiciary and the media. These are now being used to support the unusual character who will preside over the country. The armed forces have captured key positions in the state structure since the militarization of the favelas. Temer placed a new security agency under his command that brings together all the departments in the sector.

The protagonists of the military extend to 70 candidates who originated in it and entered the legislatures, and the governors of the same suit. The army's guardianship can be seen in the vice-presidency and in the quintet of generals that occupy the most strategic positions.

The gravitational centre of the second pillar – the judiciary – has become transparent with the superministry assigned to Moro. The person responsible for the banning of Lula was rewarded with a position of the highest rank. That designation undresses the farce that he mounted without proof, with the crude testimonies of informers and with charges forgiven to politicians of other stripes.

Finally, the media also increased their influence due to Bolsonaro's laundering work. The deputy who joined the most corrupt caucus of Parliament (PP) for 20 years was presented as an immaculate individual. This also put paid to the penalties incurred by their campaign manager. The traditional media (O Globo) and the evangelist chain (Récord) competed with the networks, creating the fears and spreading the lies that underpinned the right's victory.

Brazil's regression will be incalculable if its president complies with any of his announcements. He postulated a war against the Reds, institutional homophobia, contempt for the Indians, the denigration of the blacks, the mistreatment of women and the criminalization of sexual diversity. Will the government implement that retrograde agenda or will it simply become a figure on the conventional right?

Who will benefit?

Bolsonaro was not the first choice of the ruling class, but business power surrounded him to provide for the continuity of abuses already under way. The aim is to complete the subjugation of labour law with the introduction of the Chilean model of pension privatization. Ultra-neoliberal minister Guedes prioritizes these attacks, but they could also lead to severe conflicts in the higher ranks.

The primacy granted to financiers secures advantages that affect productive activity. That obstruction persists in a tenuous reactivation in response to the historical fall of GDP in recent years.

The rural block is emerging as another clear winner. Its parliamentary bloc will demand the unrestricted use of weapons to consolidate land appropriation. It aims to increase state investments in export infrastructure and demand the opening of new markets. This demand undermines international agreements concluded by the São Paulo industrialists.

This sector has likewise submitted to the Bolsonaro surge in order to weaken unions and cutwages. But it will not surrender the regional agreements it forged in past decades. The ongoing dispute especially threatens the future of Mercosur. The initial suggestion to dissolve the agreement was relativized by the new ruling party under the pressure of the industrialists. The business community needs to keep Argentina as a preferential client.

Privatizations will constitute another sphere of dispute. Auctioning-off of companies to reduce public debt generates resistance, which already imposed scrapping of the plan to sell Petrobras. But since Bolsonaro adopted the neoliberal creed (2017) very recently, he must validate his conversion with strong measures.

The captain lacks a significant group of his own and will have to negotiate each measure with the lobbies of Brasilia. The bulky budget recently approved by judges and senators – in contradiction to the official austerity message – anticipates conflicts on the doorstep. Bolsonaro first needs to secure the subordination of the military complex, in order to develop Bonapartist power over Congress. If he fails, he will be at the mercy of the parliamentary game that he so denigrated in the electoral campaign.

What limits will resistance impose?

The great contrast between discourse and reality could quickly be tested in the complex sphere of security. Bolsonaro promised to eradicate crime in a society terrified by crime. The country hosts the third largest prison population on the planet: it suffered 63,880 murders last year. The simplified illusion of solving this nightmare with greater violence encouraged the apologists of assassination, who swelled the "bullet camp" in Parliament.

This punitive demagoguery will lose effectiveness in the exercise of government. The criminalization of the excluded only increases the seriousness of a problem derived

from inequality and social regression. It is not the first time that the favelas have been militarized without any results and with the sole purpose of harassing the impoverished black population.

What happened in Mexico offers a dramatic portrait of the consequences of involving the army in a war against crime. Mafiosi associated themselves with the uniformed to dissolve state authority giving rise to a Dantesque bloodletting (200 000 dead, 30,000 missing).

Bolsonaro sets the poor against the poor to inculcate the most vulnerable. He magnifies the downward resentment of the middle segments, disgusted with the subtle improvements obtained by those directly underneath. But the captain will not be able to meet his followers' expectations. On the contrary, his adjustment program will accentuate all the adversities faced by the middle class.

It is no secret that he will try to demolish democratic rights. Under Temer these attacks began covering up the assassination of Mireille, the shootings at Lula's caravans and threats against 141 journalists. But Bolsonaro's victory encouraged more brutal actions. A Bahian exponent of the anti-racist struggle was killed, fires broke out in MST camps and there were several attacks on PT premises. The calls to ban books critical of the dictatorship and establish creationism in schools and encouraged the entry of armed into the colleges.

Resistance to these aggressions will be the primary battle of the next months. It will base itself on the mobilizations that developed against Bolsonaro. These did not prevent his triumph, but gathered great crowds with a major participation by women ("Ele nao"). These answers will define the main limits of the reactionary project.

What will China and Venezuela face?

Bolsonaro is willing to test an explicit international alignment with Trump. He will travel to the United States and Israel and suggested the transfer of his country's embassy to Jerusalem. He is promoting a submission to the Department of State far greater than a simple voiding of the BRICS. He will recompose the big contracts that the Pentagon lost with its competitors in France and Sweden and try to grant a military base to the Marines.

But his riskiest move is his trip to Taiwan to cool relations with China. Temer already accepted the pressures of Washington and suspended several bioceanic projects financed by Beijing. This however allowed exporters to capture the soybean quotas which the USA lost in its disputes with its eastern rival.

The State Department is shocked by the impressive progress of its contender in Latin America. China has increased its trade with the region by a factor of 22 over the last 15 years and contributes more investment loans than the IDB and the World Bank.

Trump's tariff confrontation has not tempered this expansion. Imports from the United States continue to lag behind to its Asian equivalents. China has warned Bolsonaro the consequences of any bravado. If it ends up restricting the purchases of primary products, the fascination of the agro-exporters with their president-gendarme will be very damaged.

The aggressive stance towards Venezuela entails risks of greater scope.

Bolsonaro's entourage has suggested raising the tone of the threats in tune with the hawks of the OAS. Under the pretext of a humanitarian chaos, they are promoting operations of military intimidation. The Colombian government plays the same card to bury the peace agreements.

But the last two coup attempts against Maduro (the May conspiracy and the attack drones) failed and the rightist opposition maintains its proven impotence. For this reason, negotiations have been resumed to explore new forms of coexistence.

A military adventure against Venezuela would be alien to the strategic traditions of Itamaraty. Before imposing that course Bolsonaro would have to drastically alter the prevailing geopolitical logic. That course would nullify the uniqueness of a region that has remained alien to the bloodshed of the Middle East and Africa. In a war scenario, the caravan of Central American migrants approaching the US border would become a flood of refugees.

For any regional project Bolsonaro needs to consolidate a common axis with his right-wing colleagues. The dissolution of UNASUR, the electoral victories of Duque (Colombia) and Piñera (Chile) or the permanence of Macri (Argentina) provide the foundations of that convergence. But conservative restoration has not stabilized its primacy.

For that reason, any analogies with the reactionary regional period that inaugurated the coup of 64 are very premature. Such a stage would require the prior extinction of all the aftermath of the progressive cycle, which persist in the strong social relations of many countries. The two radical pillars of progressive dynamics (Venezuela and Bolivia) and its strategic rearguard (Cuba) have not been removed.

In addition, the emergence of new centre-left forces counter-balance the advance of the right. The triumph of Bolsonaro overshadowed but did not annul the victory of López Obrador (Mexico), which dispelled fraud and resurrected a popular presence. Trends of the same sign were observed in the results achieved by the opposition in Colombia and Chile. The Latin American scenario continues open.

Will Bolsonaro imitate his world peers?

Bolsonaro is part of a worldwide rise of the ultra-right, which has captured governments (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic) and growing influence in several countries (Italy, Finland, Sweden, France, Germany, Holland, Israel). His irruption inaugurates the arrival of that wave in Latin America. The conservative restoration anticipated that tide, but without the reactionary radicalism of its captain.

Like its counterparts in Europe and the United States, the Brazilian right channels discontent generated by an economic – social degradation, which the political system does not temper. Frustration with governments perceived as progressive (whether real or imagined) feeds the reaction.

All these regressive forces resort to the same device: to help big capital with diatribes against the most unprotected fringes. The immigrants are the main victims of this denigration in Europe. The same powers that cause the drama of refugees militarize the Mediterranean, to prevent the entry of the dispossessed to the Old Continent.

In the United States, white supremacy assaults Latinos and Afro-descendants with the same forcefulness. It diffuses the fiction of “making America great again” by simply restoring conservative values. To convey similar fantasies of recreation of well-being and lost security, Bolsonaro uses the scapegoat of crime.

All the variants of the global ultra-right share the same combination of neoliberalism with xenophobia. That is why they reject immigration but accept the continued global circulation of capital and goods. They are chauvinists fascinated by the market who reject the protectionism of their predecessors.

With his mixture of military and ultra-liberal economics, Bolsonaro embodies an extreme modality of that combination. He concentrates all the characteristics of the wayward right, which replaces the civilized exponents of the same stripe. The stage of sweetened modernization of reactionary forces is being diluted to facilitate the installation of more brutal configurations. Traditional mediations dissolve into a new era of cynicism, post-truth and the naturalization of lies.

Is it fascist?

Bolsonaro’s statements and attitudes transgress the boundaries of authoritarianism, populism and Bonapartism. But they include only potentially fascist features, which have no immediate viability. A long stretch separates the danger from its realization. Fascistization is a process that goes through several stages. Although the captain advocates such degradation, society does not currently communicate with such an involution.

Fascism requires conditions absent in Brazil. It supposes the deification of a leadership by fanatical followers and the substitution of the institutional system by a totalitarian power. It demands press censorship, prohibition of parties and complete crushing of the opposition. Bolsonaro moves for the time being in another orbit. He is a newcomer to the larger politics that acts within an institutional fabric. His reactionary social base Little is poorly disposed to confront organized workers physically.

The new president promotes greater repression, but under the command of regular and non-paramilitary forces. Fascism implies a degree of violence far superior to those of current parameters and needs more top-down organizations than those prevailing in the evangelical universe.

This sector will agitate against abortion and equal marriage, defending the submissive, servile and procreative role of women. But these regressive longings are located far from the mad craze that encourages the fascist Christian. Before sweeping away Brazil’s impressive cultural diversity, Bolsonaro must crush an immense democratic resistance.

Fascism is a generic term that includes many varieties. The reproduction of the classic model of Hitler and Mussolini is not even in discussion. It corresponded to international inter-war context, with powers involved in battles for global primacy and the eradication of communism. Brazil is far away from that scenario.

Neither do other more limited fascist models (Franco in Spain, Salazar in Portugal) conform to the Bolsonaro context. The most relevant antecedent is Pinochetism. In Chile there was totalitarianism, anti-communist virulence and an anti-worker social base. But those characteristics only completed the profile of a classic dictatorial regime.

Uribismo contains those same elements at present, with the aggravating of paramilitaries in action and the long-standing social support of the oligarchy. However, neither in Colombia does a fascist political system rule.

The Latin American ultra-right is conditioned by the peripheral status of the region. It cultivates a dependent fascism that shares the fragility of all political formations in the area. By virtue of that limitation Bolsonaro can never imitate Trump in his divergences with China. Brazil will have to continue submitting to the demands of both colossi.

The frequent use of prefixes to characterize contemporary fascism (proto, neo) confirms the differences with the classical model. These singularities are not restricted to the Brazilian case. All strands of the ultra-right who are currently assaulting the poorest groups advocate varieties of social neofascismo, whilst their defence of the primacy of the market brings them closer to a new neoliberal fascism.

These combinations determine the limits of those configurations. In the European laboratory rightist tend to divide between extreme wings that lose gravitation and dominant sectors which conform to traditional conservatism. Le Pen first distanced himself from her father and now questions Bolsonaro's rhetorical deliriums.

The widespread adherence to neoliberalism obstructs the reproduction of the old fascism. Its successors join the European Parliament, contradicting the nationalist pillars of that tradition. None advocates the effective dissolution of the euro or the community union.

The most forceful limit to a fascist ascendancy is verified in the United States. Trump never validated the most extreme trends in his coalition and now faces a more adverse scenario. With a revived economy and without wars to convulse public opinion he has lost the House of Representatives and his re-election It in doubt.

Most striking was the success of candidates with socialist ideals and of African-American, indigenous, Muslim, Latina or Palestinian and Somali women. Instead of the typical punishment casting channelled by the democratic establishment, a generation of progressive leaders with great militant commitment burst forth. Does this antecedent anticipate the profile of rejection of rightists around the world? Is it a mirror for Bolsonaro?

Will there be an impact on Argentina?

The hegemonic media of the Southern Cone identify the Brazilian election with the "repudiation of populism." They produce a domino effect that will "accelerate reforms" which can rival the main partner country 's pro-market orientation. This biased interpretation aims to promote a common sense favourable to adjustment.

The government complements this use with greater repressive gambles. It interprets the Bolsonaro wave as a validation of beating demonstrators. It has free reign to invent terrorists, create provocations and disseminate infiltrators.

The judicial power also accelerates the assembly of fraudulent causes, aiming to repeat with Cristina the operation of imprisoning Lula. Bonadío knows that he will receive the same prize as Moro for that racket and checks the books for some excuse to put CFK's relatives or colleagues behind bars.

But Macri occupies the uncomfortable place that a relative of Oderbrecht would have in the presidency of Brazil. Any investigation of corruption immediately spills over into one of his own scams to the state. All demands to “return the stolen” come back to haunt.

The rise of Bolsonaro has been more used by amicable justicialismo than by oficialismo. Pichetto has headed a wave of xenophobia and anti-communism, along with the governors who flirt with the strong hand. Their complicity in the adjustment is explicit. They approved the budget designed by the IMF, to issue a message of continuity of the adjustment if it is up to them to replace Macri in 2019.

Any more explicit identification with Bolsonaro has displaced solitary politicians (Olmedo) and their communicators (Feinman) and ultra-liberal companions (Espert). For now they are as marginal as the former captain in his debut, but aspire to repeat his career if the political system emerges.

No one knows how long Bolsonaro will serve as the right-wing flag in the country. The freezing of Mercosur and the privilege of the partnership with Chile will affect its rating as a figure to be imitated. His discomfort will be all the greater if Trump chooses him as chief accomplice to the detriment of his Argentine vassal.

The many differences which distinguish Brazil from its neighbour Argentina also diminish the prospects of a Creole Bolsonaro. The Brazilian dictatorship coincided with a prolonged period of developmentalist growth and its perpetrators were never prosecuted. On the other hand Videla and Galtieri accentuated an economic regression that culminated in the Malvinas adventure. All attempts to revisit these genocides will unleash a massive repudiation.

Nor does the social base that sustained Bolsonaro have correlatives in the fringes of Argentina’s well-off sectors. While the political system here collapsed, the institutional framework prevailed. That is why Macri resorts to traditional demagogy without rehearsing the brutal frontality of his colleague.

The anti-political sentiment that currently nurtures the advance of the Brazilian extreme right presents a very different content to that in Argentina during the rebellion of 2001. In addition, the popular demobilization and demoralization of progressivism predominated in Brazil in recent years. Macri on the contrary was unable to crush his actions.

These dissonances recreate the historical differences between a country marked by convulsion and another characterized by the continuity of order. Brazil did not experience revolutionary processes, slavery was abolished with unprecedented delay and independence was proclaimed by a Portuguese prince. No Argentine Bolsonaro is emerging in the short term, but the economic trauma that is approaching opens possibilities of all kinds.

What are the lessons for the left?

Bolsonaro resorted to a virulent campaign against the PT based on infamies orchestrated by the media. But those insults were absorbed by a broad popular sector at odds with the management of the last decade. Those workers listened to, tolerated and finally accepted the propaganda of the right about PT fraud. That disappointment explains the withering ascent of the troglodyte.

The disenchantment began with the government of Lula and generalized with the subsequent neoliberal turn. Dilma maintained the partnership with Temer, strengthened ties with the evangelists, validated inequality and reaffirmed the privileges of the capitalist elite. She also strengthened the shady deals with the whole caste of salaried politicians. The PT administration preserved the power structure and traditional media concentration. They had many opportunities to break that conditioning and always chose to maintain the status quo.

Because of that conservatism, the PT first lost the support of the middle class and then the support of the workers. Lula's recent resurgence was not enough to restore that previous distancing. The owners of the country took advantage of the orphanage to regain direct control of power.

The game began to be defined during the protests of 2013. Instead of assuming the social demands of the youth, the PT was located in the opposite lane. Its terror of popular action strengthened an institutionalist blindness cultivated for decades. That attitude led to the Dilma's resignation without a struggle and Lula's subsequent weakness of in the face of his imprisonment.

The PT vacated the streets that were occupied the right. It was defeated in that arena much earlier than at the polls. The outcome of the 2014-2016 demonstrations defined the subsequent result of the votes.

As always in Latin America, the relation of forces is established on the ground and projected onto the electoral terrain. Venezuela provides a counter-example to what happened in Brazil. In the midst of an indescribable economic crisis, with sabotage, conspiracies and attacks of all kinds, Maduro defeated the right in the elections, because he previously broke the guarimbas in the street.

Many, in their evaluations of Bolsonaro's triumph, omit this balance or present the PT as a simple victim of right-wing machinations. This obscures their political responsibility in the final result. It is true that the battles of the left are very complex in a society marked by centuries of exclusion. But this difficulty is accentuated with the validation of the privileges of the powerful.

Instead of facing the popular empowerment and the political-ideological formation of the workers, the PT opted for passive support derived from the improvement of consumption. It was at the mercy of the vicissitudes of the economy and left the masses at the disposal of the right. Bolsonaro took advantage of this gap and succeeded in that the beneficiaries of the improvements of PT-ismo were ungrateful to their sponsors.

What happened in Brazil also illustrates how ultra-right can capitalize on failures of the right itself. In the stage of decline of the old conservatives, Temer's shipwreck opened the floodgates to a greater hell. We have to learn from that experience. If the left shows firmness and courage in the fight, the Bolsonaros of Latin America will be defeated.

An economist and researcher with CONICET, Claudio Katz is a professor of the University of Buenos Aires and member of EDI. His web page is at: www.lahaine.org/katz