



10/2019

---

## What Is Happening in Brazil?

**Bernard Bret**<sup>1</sup>

### RÉSUMÉ

More serious than a political alternation to the detriment of the Workers' Party, the arrival of Jair Bolsonaro as President of the Republic constitutes a threat to democratic values. Elected fairly widely (majority everywhere, except in the Northeast region and the Para State in the Amazon), but under highly contested conditions, with the support of large landowners and evangelical churches, the far-right candidate denounces social progress and declares himself in favour of the strong way against the poor and against ethnic minorities, including Amerindian populations. Openly climatosceptical, he denies the environmental problems of the Amazon and worries foreign countries.

**Mots-clefs** : Bolsonaro, Brazil, corruption, Lula, populism, PT

1. Contact: [bernard.bret12@wanadoo.fr](mailto:bernard.bret12@wanadoo.fr). Bernard Bret, french geographer specialising in Latin America and Brazil was a professor at the University of Lyon III until 2010.



10/2019

Jair Bolsonaro's coming to power in Brazil came as a shock in the entire country and beyond. An expected shock, but a shock nevertheless, since just before the presidential election of October 2018, his candidacy had not really been taken seriously: voting intentions represented only 4% in December 2015. Then a Federal Deputy of the State of Rio de Janeiro, this former soldier who was excluded from the army in 1988, was less known for his legislative work than for his outrageous remarks in favour of the most extreme stances. Opinion polls admittedly indicated an increase that, it was felt, was too low to lead to an election. In early September 2018, i.e. one month before polling, the candidate was credited with 22% of voting intentions. Then his popularity ratings soared, to such an extent that some could see Bolsonaro being elected in the first round already. While this was not the case, the fact remains that he gathered 46,03% of the votes on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2018, well ahead of Fernando Haddad, the Labour Party (PT) candidate, who came second with 29,28% of the votes. From then on, the die was cast: Jair Bolsonaro won the election in the second round, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, with 55,13% of the votes. He took office on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2019.

The Planalto Palace was then to be the official workplace of a man who, during his entire electoral campaign, made racist remarks against the Blacks and Indians, insulted women, accused the poor of being lazy, spoke openly of his admiration for Pinochet and of his nostalgia for the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985 (criticizing only the fact that people were being tortured instead of killed), and who promised to either exile or imprison his opponents! That such a result creates concern is an understatement. That a majority of Brazilians have put their fate and that of their country in the hands of such an individual remains an enigma.

A fact is certain: Jair Bolsonaro's election is not a mere political changeover, as can normally happen at the end of elections in a democratic country. This is something different altogether: a threat to democracy itself. Apart from the serious suspicions underlying the process that led to the vote, one needs to consider questioning the values on which the democratic system is based.

### **What Happened?**

What happened has been denounced by many an observer as an institutional coup d'état.

Analysing the facts requires to put them into perspective. To this end, we need to go back to the dismissal of President Dilma Rousseff, who had succeeded Lula and had been re-

elected in 2014 for a second term of office.

This is when political competition took a new turn, when conservative forces undertook to make up for their electoral failure by means other than respecting election terms. This operation took place in two stages: on the one hand, preventing Lula's return – his popularity was then confirmed by the polls – and, on the other, destabilising the current President in office. Two themes quickly came up in the political debate: insecurity and corruption. Foreign observers insisted on corruption to explain the devastating effect it had on the credibility of the Labour Party (PT), without specifying that it was Dilma Rousseff herself who reinforced the means to fight against this scourge, by giving the public prosecutor's office the necessary means to act strongly, and by prohibiting the private funding of electoral campaigns in 2015. Yet, while this endemic evil affected all the parties, right-wing parties were as corrupted as the PT, if not more: right-wing forces then felt threatened and decided to attack the President, while pursuing an aggressive smear campaign against the PT. It was in the middle of 2014 that operation *lava-jato* or *express cleaning* started, when Justice Sergio Moro brought to light, in Curitiba (Parana), a case of bribery that gradually took on enormous proportions, implicating companies from the public buildings and works sector (building industry) and the oil sector, and questioning many political parties. No one denied the fact that the PT was involved in these cases. However, what is just as undeniable, is the fact that Justice Sergio Moro decided to start legal proceedings in a very selective way, speeding up all the procedures likely to implicate the PT and only conducting investigations against that Party, while other political formations benefitted from useful delays in the investigation of cases that concerned them. During the same period, the media, and TV Globo in particular, set themselves against the PT. As a result, in a wide section of the public opinion, the PT equated with corruption.

The ground was well prepared to launch the offensive against the former President, and against the current President. Against Lula, the objective was to prevent him from being a candidate once more. We know the rest, where his being condemned to several years in prison neutralised his political career, making any new candidacy impossible. Whether or not he was guilty – he always claimed his innocence – of having received a seaside apartment from a construction company in exchange for the preferential award of procurement contracts, does not fall within this analysis. What we know, on the other hand, is that the relentlessness of Justice Sergio Moro brings one to doubt the court's impartiality. Against Dilma Rousseff, whose integrity was impossible to question, the

opposition used the pretext of a public expenditure included in the budget with a gap in the schedule, making a presentation of the accounts looking more favourable for the government. Yet, as open to criticism as it might be, this practice has always existed in Brazil, without ever provoking the departure of a Head of State, for the simple reason that it does not lead to destitution as provided for by the Constitution. In fact, interim President Michel Temer, who succeeded Dilma Rousseff (he was until then Vice-President elected with Dilma Rousseff, but under the label of conservative party Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB)) also committed a budget fraud a few weeks after taking up his post. As such, to speak of an institutional coup d'état seems justified. The voting procedure gave rise to surprising scenes even. Invited to say a few words to explain their vote before casting it, deputies in favour of the destitution said that they were acting for Brazil, for the family, against insecurity, for the future of the country, without being able to go beyond these trite generalities, nor to question directly the honesty of the President. As to deputy Jair Bolsonaro, he dedicated his vote to the memory of Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, the very person who ran the detention centre where, during the dictatorship, Dilma Rousseff, who was then a young student, had been tortured...

With Lula and Dilma neutralised, the traditional right wing could have hoped to take over after the interim period of Michel Temer, who quickly ended up being discredited through his implication in cases of corruption. While neither Aécio Neves, the Senator of Minas Gerais, nor Geraldo Alckmin, both from the Social Democracy Party, managed to sway public opinion, the PT on the other hand did not manage to resurface at all. The Labour Party had kept Lula as its candidate for as long as possible, perhaps too long, which resulted in candidate Fernando Haddad starting his own campaign too late, without ever getting rid of his image of candidate by default. Jair Bolsonaro introduced himself as a new man, the only one able to bring back order to the country. Whatever the case, dynamics turned greatly in his favour. Economic circles, suspicious at first, were susceptible to his neoliberal options. Propaganda intensified through fake news on WhatsApp. Against all truths, Fernando Haddad was accused, when he was Minister of Education, of having distributed "a gay kit" in schools, to teach children the art and manner of becoming homosexual. In addition to the recurrent themes of insecurity and corruption, that of gender theory as supposedly promoted by the left wing to destroy the family, was also being propagated. Evangelist Churches then rallied round Bolsonaro who made himself out to be the defender of the most conservative ideas in societal matters. This rallying had heavy consequences on all the classes, and mainly on the working classes. It

---

was no longer a political debate, but a ground for insults and the rudest falsehoods... but it worked!

Finally, we can see in the assassination attempt against him, a turn in the candidate's campaign. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2018, in Juiz de Fora (Minas Gerais) where he was holding a meeting, Jair Bolsonaro was the victim of an attempt. Seriously wounded after being stabbed several times in the abdomen, he was hospitalised. Paradoxically, this serious personal ordeal was to become a great political opportunity. It made of him a victim and a hero, attracting the sympathy of many voters. Above all, it exempted him from having to face his opponent directly on economic issues which he did not master, a fact he admitted openly. Prevented for real medical reasons, he avoided debates that would have revealed his incompetence.

One question remains though: why, between the two rounds, was there not a sort of Republican Front to cross his path? Things did not look good, admittedly, with a difference of 16 points between the two finalists and with limited reserves of votes, but it was worth trying. However, neither Ciro Gomes who came third with 12% of the votes, nor Geraldo Alckmin who came fourth with almost 5% of the votes, nor former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso or others (such as the ecologist candidate Marina Silva) said anything. Supporting during a second round a candidate that was criticised in the first round, because the other finalist constitutes a danger, would have been part of a logic based on double ballot. But this was a different scenario. Perhaps Fernando Haddad's stance was too left-wing to become a unifier in the space of a few days. It is also possible that his party's discredit dragged him down altogether.

## **Deeper Causes**

Such events do not take place only when following a specific political situation. For them to happen, they also need the right conditions. In this regard, it is appropriate to stand back from current events and to place political change in the long term and in the social structures inherited.

As early as 2013, demonstrations in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro revealed that public opinion grew tired. The idea was, initially, to denounce the tariffs and bad quality of the public transports, at a time when considerable sums of money were given over to prepare for the World Cup of Football (2014), and for the Olympics (2016). However, opponents

quickly saw in this an opportunity to target the government directly, and to ascribe the responsibility for all evils to the PT. The operation to destabilise the government was launched.

The privileged classes criticised social measures in favour of the poor. This was not immediate. the *bolsa familia*, it must be recalled, raised around 40 million people out of poverty. In fact, this allowance which is paid to the most destitute families, has had very positive consequences for literacy and public health, because it is dependent on children being schooled and vaccinated: the very type of intelligent measure that does not see poverty only as a monetary phenomenon and that, because it is paid directly to mothers, contributes to promoting women in the couple. Another flagship programme called *Minha casa, minha vida*, made it possible for many among the poor to have access to decent housing. We can imagine that opposing such measures was shocking. Be that as it may, part of the public opinion felt that the Labour government was doing a lot for the poor... at the expense of those who, less poor, deserved through their labour to be looked after even more. Of course, this feeling did not correspond to the reality evidenced by the emergence of a larger middle class. But the redistribution of wealth towards the poorest was accepted by the middle and well-off classes, as long as they themselves benefited from a growing economy, as much as wealth redistribution became less tolerated when the slowdown in the economic situation made it impossible to help everyone. Lula showed considerable political skill when he helped the poor without immediately alienating the rich, but this balance only worked once and, under the terms of office of Dilma Rousseff and with budget restrictions, maintaining it had become complicated politically.

These events have emphasised the return of a right wing that, in the end, had never recognised the legitimacy of the PT in power. Although it sometimes appears warm, Brazilian society has always been highly violent. We must not forget that slavery was only abolished in 1888, and that many people still perceive the idea of inequality as being natural among humans. As such, it appears normal that, in this country supposedly free from racism, the Blacks, because their grandparents were slaves, occupy the most modest social situations. Significantly, when, in São Paulo, a piece of legislation gave domestic employees (mostly black females) the same rights as those granted to other workers, the smart districts were filled with indignation in the face of what was experienced as a private life intrusion from the government. Is seeing this behaviour as a legacy of the proslavery society an exaggeration when, for their part, black female employees were celebrating this new law as a new Abolition?

This example is significant. It is corroborated by many others, from small everyday facts to important governmental measures. In this regard, the creation of quotas for admission in public universities has been highly criticised. It is obvious that such a system can nurture resentment when it turns down a candidate because his/her quota is full, in favour of another for whom places are still available. The reasoning behind this procedure is to take into account the inequality of opportunity before higher education, and not aim only at academic excellence, but also at social mixing. At first sight, the debate around this difficult issue is not unjustified, because this way of fighting against a generalised injustice can generate injustice at the level of individuals. The fortunate social categories, however, formulate the problem more abruptly: what are the poor doing in institutions that have always been attended by the rich? The same emotion shows through as regards public spaces that used to be claimed only by those who could afford it. It is striking to see the rapid expansion of air transport linked to an increase in purchasing power, combined with the drop in tariffs. The result being that planes are full! Many Brazilians who used to catch long distance buses, today can make the same trip by plane at affordable prices, potentially paid on credit. A consequence which the elites complain about: far from the places of distinction favourable to the social enclaves they used to be, airports today look like bus stations where one mixes with common people... a reaction reminiscent of that of the privileged who, in 1936 in France, were afraid of seeing their holiday places invaded by the riff-raff on holiday!

The behaviour of those who refuse to see others as equal, shows the fragility of democratic culture, and therefore the permeability of public opinion in the face of any ideology advocating people's hierarchy, whether it is based on wealth, origin, skin colour, gender or culture. Sociologist Roberto da Matta noted the increasingly frequent use, in Brazil, of the expression "Do you know who you are talking to?" As physical distance between individuals of different stations decreases, he sees in it the will to convey to interlocutors the fact that proximity must not make them forget the social distance that separates them from others, and must remind them that even in spaces open to all, they must know their place.

### **And Now?**

Elected by the three Bs, the Bible, the Beef and the Bullet, i.e. the evangelists, the large cattle breeders linked to agribusiness, and the supporters of strong-arm methods and

weapons, Jair Bolsonaro was quick to show that his outrageous remarks cannot hide his incompetence and contradictions.

The government's formation constituted a first test. As if it was not already enough to give the post of Vice-President to General Hamilton Mourão who had reminded everyone during the campaign that the army remained vigilant and available in case, the new government team also includes eight militaries and fourteen civilians: no real danger of a coup d'état in the strict sense of the word, since the army is already in the State. In front of the group representing nationalism, there is Paulo Guedes at the head of a super-Ministry of Economy. This Chicago-boy is the most confirmed neo-liberalist, open to globalisation and extremely suspicious of an exceedingly heavy State regulation. He is the voice of large companies. Another striking figure is Minister of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply Teresa Cristina, the very politician who used to lead, in the Chamber of Deputies, the intergroup defending the interests of large landowners and agribusiness owners. One might as well say that agribusiness has a bright future and that landless farmers are directly threatened, especially when we see Bolsonaro liberalising the carrying of firearms... As to the Ministry of Justice which has been entrusted to Justice Sergio Moro, it cannot be seen in any other way as an award in recognition of his services. Moreover, the jurisdiction of this ministerial portfolio includes law and order: bringing together under one authority what concerns justice as well as law and order, certainly makes one wonder. Ernesto Araujo, in charge of external relations, must as to him reorient the foreign policy and bring Brazil into alignment with Trump's positions, which has already provoked serious reservations from the diplomats of the Itamaraty Palace. Without reviewing the entire government, it would be a pity not to mention Damares Alves, Minister of Human Rights, Family and Women, a fervent evangelical pastor who likes to see boys dressed in blue and girls in pink, and who claims to draw her inspiration from what Jesus-Christ said to her in person during an apparition...

This being said, several of the measures already taken are of concern. As far as the environment is concerned, the new President considers global warming as a communist invention intended to run Brazil down. Under these conditions, it will be difficult to expect him to make a policy based on anything but fantasies and obsessions devoid of scientific basis. In actual fact, limiting as far as possible the action of the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama), is currently a priority of his policy in this domain. At a time when the environment prevails as a global issue, this cannot fail to cut Brazil off from much needed international co-operation. While, since the Rio

Conference of 1992 and considering the Amazon rainforest, Brazil held a major place in the negotiations on climate change, the reservations Brasilia has today on the Paris Agreement are raising serious doubt as to its intentions. This issue is of course not unrelated to the land issue and the right of Indian populations. There again, orientations raise concern. One of the first decisions taken by Bolsonaro, was to transfer the competence dealing with the delimitation of indigenous reservations from the National Indian Foundation (Funai) to the Ministry of Agriculture (this decision was quashed on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2019 by the Supreme Federal Court). Where the future President declared during his campaign that he will not give away another cm<sup>2</sup> of land to Indians, we can fear for the latter's future. On remembering his will also to ensure that Indians become Brazilians like the others, i.e. in his mind, that they abandon their identity to be integrated into the rest of the population, we can appreciate the risks weighing on minority groups whose rights are yet recognised by the Constitution.

Finally, despite all the concerns provoked by the declarations of the new power on social matters (e.g. what will become of the *bolsa familia* blamed for having created millions of idlers?), of greater concern are the threats on the freedom of thought. The problem concerns the supervision of ideas. At the level of the school, fundamental for the future, the Brazilian government adopted as its own the ideas of the Non-Partisan School movement (Escola Sem Partido), which are meant to protect children from being supposedly indoctrinated by communist teachers. This obsession in seeing Marxist influence everywhere, at a time when this ideology has lost the dominant place it occupied for a time, is a sign of great ignorance. It shows an inability to think differently than through slogans, or even a strategy aimed at discrediting the opponent. Furthermore, when democratic values are regarded as being inspired by Marxism, there is ground for concern. In order to consolidate its electoral victory in the long term, the new power might be applying Gramsci's principle, unknowingly, which consists in first prevailing on the register of ideas so as to, subsequently, gain ground in politics. As early as June 2019, public universities have seen their budgets seriously cut, particularly in disciplines perceived as *chattering*: Philosophy and Sociology.

Will this political orientation dominate without clashes or, on the contrary, are we to expect renewed opposition? It is too early to say. This is rather a time for examining the balance of power currently at play... and it is evolving. When Bolsonaro came into office, a strong proportion of the opinion professed to be satisfied with the change, but the President's popularity rating dropped very fast afterwards. Moreover, when – confirming

suspicious – disclosures established that Sergio Moro committed procedural irregularities against Lula and exploited justice to political ends, a serious blow was dealt to the government and, through it, against the Head of State.

How far will this defiance against the Power go? It is hard to say in a country that came out deeply divided after the electoral confrontation. It is divided politically, sociologically and geographically. In the second round of the presidential election, the result was 55% against 45%. But, at the level of the federated States, it is important to note that the country is divided into two sections. Bolsonaro held the majority of votes in the Southeast, South, Centre-West and part of the Amazon regions, i.e. when considering large voter numbers, by the Brazil of the rich. He obtained 68% of the votes in the States of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Parana, and up to 76% in that of Santa Catarina. On the other hand, the Northeast region remains a bastion of the left-wing opposition: all Northeast States, in addition to the State of Para in the Amazon, gave the Labour Party the majority of votes. Fernando Haddad's votes even reached 66% in the Pernambouc, 71% in the Ceara, 72% in the Bahia, 74% in the Maranhão and 77% in the Piauí. Voters in the poorest region did not falter. This is where Lula kept his fiercest support, because this is where his social policy had the greatest effect. Should one expect the necessary jump to come from there? It would be imprudent to be too hasty, in that percentages must not lead one to forget absolute values. In the State of São Paulo, where Fernando Haddad only obtained 32% of the votes, his voters represent 7,2 million people, a figure far above the 5,5 million people from the State of Bahia who also voted for him. The geographic divide of the votes raises the issue of the country's territorial cohesion, but it is probably in the Southeast and South regions that the country's political future will be played out. The fact remains that, although the PT obtained declining results in the presidential election, results in the legislative elections that took place on the same day were encouraging: with 54 seats in the Chamber of Deputies out of 513, it remains the first party, before that of President, the Social Liberal Party (PSL) which only has 52 seats.

## Conclusion

The weight of Brazil in Latin America and among the so-called emerging countries, gives Brazilian events a very specific socio-political landscape. Yet, not only is the tropical Trump drawing closer to the real Trump, he also has an affinity with the reactionary forces (for it is more about reactionism than conservatism) in power in Italy, Hungary and Poland, or

---

blossoming in other European countries. It is an upsurge of populism, nationalism, xenophobia, racism and anti-intellectualism. This global phenomenon must be opposed by means of a resistance movement that goes beyond the Brazilian case, a movement conceived on an international scale.

**To quote this article: Bernard BRET**, "What is Happening in Brazil?", [« Que se passe-t-il au Brésil ? »], *Justice spatiale/Spatial Justice*, 13, octobre 2019 (<http://www.jssj.org>).

## References

**CHIRIO** Maud, « L'ascension de l'extrême-droite au Brésil », in *La Vie des idées*, 8 janvier 2019 (<https://laviedesidees.fr/L-ascension-de-l-extreme-droite-au-Bresil.html>).

**COMPAGNON** Olivier, **FLÉCHET** Anaïs, « Brésil : la vague réactionnaire. Entretien avec João Sette Whitaker Ferreira », in *La Vie des idées*, 18 janvier 2019 (<https://laviedesidees.fr/Bresil-la-vague-reactionnaire.html>).