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Jair Bolsonaro: Far-Right Firebrand and Cheerleader for Dictatorship

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BY SIMON P. WATMOUGH

ABSTRACT

Jair Bolsonaro has become notorious for his incendiary comments on women and minority rights, and his misogynistic and homophobic views are well-known. His caustic views and “macho swagger” have been amplified by his social media presence and distinctive approach to self-representation. He is without a doubt Brazil’s first “social media president,” echoing in many ways Trump in his use of such platforms. He is often compared to other strongmen — most famously as the “Tropical Trump” — however, his most obvious likeness is President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines.

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ECPS Leader Profile Series offer analyses of political leaders and prominent public figures with populist tendencies. Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed by the author are only attributable him and not to any institution with which they are associated.

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INTRODUCTION

On September 6, 2018, the then 64-year-old presidential contender Jair Bolsonaro was campaigning in the city of Juiz de Fora in Brazil's southern state of Minas Gerais, about 189 km from Rio de Janeiro. The city—a stronghold of the left-wing Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party, PT)—nevertheless drew a massive crowd of supporters for the right-wing populist Congressman ahead of the first round of Brazil's presidential election, set for October 7. According to some reports, some 30,000 supporters lined the streets (D. Phillips, 2019).

Videos—later shared widely on social media—captured the extraordinary scenes that followed. Dressed casually in his signature yellow and green t-shirt bearing the slogan “Meu Partido e Brasil” (“My party is Brazil”), the former army captain can be seen being carried aloft the shoulders of a mass of supporters moving along Juiz de Fora's central plaza. He is smiling and waving jubilantly to crowds of well-wishers. Suddenly Bolsonaro grimaces in agony, clutching his abdomen. An assailant in the crowd has plunged a knife deep into his stomach, seriously wounding the far-right firebrand.

By all accounts, the attack nearly killed Bolsonaro, who was rushed to a local hospital having lost as much as two liters of blood. Internal injuries meant he was fitted with a colostomy bag, which was only removed well into his first month in office, in January 2019. Indeed, his injuries and hospitalization kept him largely off the trail for the duration of the campaign. Despite this, Bolsonaro came in first place in the October 7 first round, taking 46 percent in a crowded field of 13 candidates. He went on to win the second round on October 28, taking 55 percent of the votes cast against the PT candidate Fernando Haddad (Londoño & Darlington, 2018).

The stabbing “unwittingly boosted his TV exposure, just as his social media campaign took off” (Chagas-Bastos, 2019: 95). Indeed, Bolsonaro drew adeptly on platforms like Facebook and Instagram to post images of himself in his hospital bed in surgical gowns receiving treatment to still-fresh wounds and in various stages of recovery. These bear a strong resemblance to Silvio Berlusconi's parading of his bloody face and head wounds after being struck with a blunt instrument by a man at a campaign rally in Milan in April 2009 (Winward, 2009).

In this way, the attack formed a crucial backdrop to Bolsonaro's campaign and eventual victory. Beyond the sympathy it garnered him, it seemed to reinforce two central aspects of his campaign. First, it made him a direct victim of the country's disorder (thus reinforcing his claim to be one with ordinary Brazilians fed up with violent crime). Second—in surviving the attack—he bolstered his “tough guy” credentials, proving his uncompromising manhood and the “legendary” status he claims as his mantle.

Entering office as Brazil's 38th president on January 1, 2019, Bolsonaro ushered in a new era in Brazilian politics, the contours of which are still falling into place. Before Bolsonaro's victory, "Brazilian presidential elections ... [were] marked by a virtual duopoly, with the left-leaning PT and the center-right Party of Brazilian Social Democracy (PSDB) as the predictable finalists" (Hunter & Power, 2019: 69). In presidential elections between 1994 and 2018, the two parties had consistently taken 70–90 percent of the vote between them. His victory thus marked a break in the relative stability of Brazil's party system and the so-called "Nova República" ("New Republic") that emerged when the army restored civilian rule in 1985 after 21 years of military rule (Chagas-Bastos, 2019: 93).

Hidden in Plain Sight

The thrice-married Bolsonaro was born in 1955 in Sao Paulo state to a large, lower-middle-class Catholic family. Neither strictly an insider nor a clear outsider, his rise was instead “hidden in plain sight” (Hunter & Power, 2019: 80). His backstory—a contentious but rather undistinguished military and congressional career—and controversial statements mark him out as distinctive. Yet, he is often compared to other strongmen — most famously as the “Tropical Trump” (Weizenmann, 2019) — or the earlier Latin American populists like Alberto Fujimori of Peru and Brazil’s own Fernando Collor de Mello. There is something to these comparisons, although arguably his most obvious likeness is President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines (Chagas-Bastos, 2019: 94).

Bolsonaro began his career as a military cadet, serving 15 years in the army, much of it as a paratrooper. His military experience and identity as a former soldier are central to his political style and his approach to government. It may be fair to say that his military identity is the most salient aspect of his political brand, the foundation on which all else is built. His authoritarian leanings were evident even during his time in the army. Toward the end of his career, at the dawn of the Nova República, he began to court controversy. In 1986, he landed his first blow against the new democratic regime, going public with a series of critiques that the new civilian leadership was undermining the military. In an article published in *Veja*, a popular Brazilian tabloid, he lambasted the inability of elected elites to ensure adequate pay and conditions for ordinary soldiers (Polimédio, 2018). In 1987, he was arrested and drummed out of the military when it became clear he had sketched plans to bomb military installations to bring attention to the poor pay and conditions (Mendonça & Caetano, 2020: 12). He was found guilty by a military tribunal but was released soon afterward on appeal.

Almost immediately after the *Veja* controversy, Bolsonaro entered politics. From 1989 to 1991, he was a city councilor in Rio de Janeiro. Then he entered national

politics in 1991. He won a seat representing Rio de Janeiro in the Chamber of Deputies, which he held for the next 27 years. During his time in Congress, he achieved little legislatively, and what moves he did make were concerned with improving the military pay and conditions (Polimédio, 2018). He was an inveterate party-switcher. Between his election to the National Congress in 1991 and his move to the presidential field in 2018, he changed parties seven times (Mendonça & Caetano, 2020: 10).

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In a 1993 speech in Congress, Bolsonaro bemoaned Brazil’s “responsible democracy,” claimed to be “in favor of dictatorship,” and argued that “Fujimorization” was “the way out for Brazil”. Six years later, he reiterated his desire to stage a coup and “shut down Congress if he ever became president ... Let’s go straight to dictatorship”

President Jair Bolsonaro takes part in the Brazilian Army Day celebration at the headquarters of the Brazilian Army Command in Sao Paulo, Brazil in April 18, 2019. Photo: BW Press.

“I am in favor of dictatorship”

Bolsonaro has become notorious for his incendiary comments on women and minority rights, and his misogynistic and homophobic views are well-known. He infamously harassed one female Congresswoman, saying she “was ‘too ugly’ to be raped, claimed some black people were not ‘even good for procreation,’ and said he would rather one of his four sons ‘die in an accident’ than be gay” (Child, 2019). He has also described the conception of his fifth child — a daughter — as “a moment of weakness” (Brum, 2018).

However, it is arguably his open support for military rule and his yearning for a return to the period of military dictatorship that have most alarmed Brazilians. In a 1993 speech in Congress, Bolsonaro bemoaned Brazil’s “responsible democracy,” claimed to be “in favor of dictatorship,” and argued that “Fujimorization” (using the army to prorogue Congress and the courts to rule by decree as Peru’s President Fujimori had done) was “the way out for Brazil” (Brooke, 1993). Six years later, he

reiterated his desire to stage a coup and “shut down Congress if he ever became president ... Let’s go straight to dictatorship” (Weizenmann, 2019). He is on record publicly stating that the military dictatorship “should have killed more people” and that “You can’t change anything in this country with voting and elections” (Polimédio, 2018). Bolsonaro has long taken the view that the 1964 coup that felled Brazil’s post-WWII democracy was righteous and that the period of military dictatorship that ensued (1964–1985) was “a glorious era” for Brazil, one “in which law and order prevailed” (Lichterbach, 2019).

His abhorrent views were cast into sharp relief in 2016 during the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff (see below). A Congressman at the time, he voted to impeach Rousseff — who as a young leftist had been arrested and tortured by the military — and “dedicated his vote ‘to the memory of colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra’... one of the most sadistic torturers and murderers in the military dictatorship” (Brum, 2018). Many Bolsonaro supporters — including his own children — posted on social media wearing t-shirts bearing the slogan “Ustra lives!” (ibid.)

“Populism as Parody”: Visual Self-Representation and Political Style

Bolsonaro's caustic views and “macho swagger” have been amplified by his social media presence and distinctive approach to self-representation. He is without a doubt Brazil's first “social media president,” echoing in many ways Donald Trump in his use of such platforms—especially Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube—to reach the Brazilian people directly, unmediated by traditional channels (Araújo & Prior, 2020: 2). His campaign “relied heavily on political micro-targeting via social media—and focused especially on professionalising a ‘fake news’ industry. In a country in which 70 percent of the population is functionally illiterate... the effect of fake news disseminated via WhatsApp has been perverse” (Chagas-Bastos, 2019: 95).

As Evangelista and Bruno (2019: 17) note, this social media campaigning exacerbated “political feelings [already] present in the political debate.” Facebook/WhatsApp and YouTube especially allowed him to steadily expand his support over time as his message went viral: “Social media was essential ... to generate unexpected exposure to messages through viral and targeted dissemination of contents. Memes, emojis, and images were at the center of the discursive battle to build pro-Bolsonaro interpretive frameworks” (Mendonça & Caetano, 2020: 10).

Bolsonaro's distinctive mode of visual self-representation on social media stands out even among populist leaders worldwide. Mendonça and Caetano (2020) have argued persuasively that Bolsonaro deliberately curates his image on social media—especially Instagram—to emphasize simultaneous “eccentricity and ordinariness which makes his demeanor, his body, and his appropriation of institutional power function as a series of parodies” (Mendonça & Caetano, 2020: 3). This chimes as well with Brum's analysis of him

as an “anti-president” who uses caricature and disdainful mockery to simultaneously emulate and disarm his opposition (Chagas-Bastos, 2019: 97).

Mendonça and Caetano (2020: 12) note that Bolsonaro's “visual aesthetic combines a sense of being of the people while at the same time projecting an understanding of himself as a charismatic exceptionality.” In this way, the authors argue, Bolsonaro has sought to make a parody of the office to simultaneously appropriate its symbolic power while crafting an image of being an outsider and “close to the people” via ordinary—almost hokey—images, including an Instagram post of him preparing breakfast with “ordinary bread rolls with sweetened condensed milk, poured directly from the can” (Mendonça & Caetano, 2020: 14).

Bolsonaro's ubiquitous social media presence and campaigning proved wildly successful. He retains fanatical support across Brazil. His fan base, which refers to him as “O Mito” (“The Legend”), skews heavily male and young. Indeed, one enterprising Brazilian company sought to cash in on his notoriety and has named one of its energy drinks — “Bolsomito” —after him (D. Phillips, 2018). His largest single support base is Brazil's rapidly growing Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal community, which makes up around a quarter of the country. The rise of Brazil's Evangelicals has occurred against the backdrop of a much broader shift in social values over the last 30 years, especially around the question of law and order: “Today, more Brazilians are in favor of legalizing capital punishment, lowering the age at which juveniles can be tried as adults, and life without parole for individuals who commit heinous crimes” (Polimédio, 2018).

Bolsonaro was also supported during the campaign by a small — but highly vocal — coterie of popular social movements, whose demonstrations and protests were amplified by social media as well as the mainstream press. These groups include Movimento Brasil Livre (the Free Brazil Movement) and the Vem pra Rua (Come to the Street) movement (Araújo & Prior, 2020: 2). Eventually, Bolsonaro was able to unite the three strands

of the right in Brazil — “the nostalgia right, who yearn for the security of the military dictatorship,” the religious right, primarily Brazil’s large and vocal Evangelical community, and the “liberal right [that is] always railing about the hypertrophy of the Brazilian state” (Child, 2019).

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A toxic partisan-political crisis that engulfed the administration of Lula’s hand-picked successor, Dilma Rousseff, and threatened to discredit and delegitimize the entire political system.

Millions of Brazilians took to the streets to protest against the government of Dilma Rousseff and ask for her impeachment in São Paulo, Brazil on March 13, 2016. Photo: Alf Ribeiro.

A Perfect Storm: The Four Winds of Crisis Ushering in Bolsonaro’s Rise

As is generally understood, populist leaders mobilize support “from the perception of crises, breakdown or threat” (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014: 391–392). Bolsona-

ro’s rise is no different and must be understood against the backdrop of a broad-based set of crises that began in 2013, which Uri Friedman of The Atlantic has referred to as “the slow implosion of Brazil” (Friedman, 2016). Hunter and Power (2019) describe this systemic collapse as a “perfect storm” of four distinct but overlapping crises: an economic crisis, a crisis of law and order, a corruption crisis, and a political legitimization crisis.

Brazil’s post-2013 economic woes underlie everything else. Between 2000 and 2012, Brazil was among the fastest-growing major economies on earth, growing at an average rate of 5 percent per annum. Moreover, under the government of Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva of the PT, which came to power in 2003, growth was widely dispersed—arguably for the first time in Brazilian history. Millions of Brazilians were lifted out of poverty as Lula’s administration diverted swelling government coffers into cash payments for low-income households, most notably via the Bolsa Família program, the world’s largest cash transfer program (Gazola Hellmann, 2015). But in 2014, the boom turned to bust as Brazil was plunged into the deepest recession in its history (Hunter & Power, 2019: 72)

At the same time, Brazil’s violent crime rate—always high—skyrocketed, driving citizens in the major cities to despair. Gun violence is a particular problem, and seven of the world’s top 20 most violent cities are in Brazil. With over 68,000 homicides per year, Brazil has a murder rate that is over four times the global average (Chagas-Bastos, 2019: 93; Child, 2019). Indeed, one public opinion study found that violence—a social problem typically seen as best-handled by right-wing parties—was the most salient concern for Brazilian voters ahead of the 2018 elections (Chagas-Bastos, 2019: 94).

Then, shortly after the economic crisis began to bite, Brazil was consumed by a corruption scandal on a scale that dwarfed anything before. Indeed, the “Lava Jato” (“Carwash”) investigations launched by federal prosecutors in early 2014 became the most extensive (and expensive) anti-corruption drive ever seen (Child, 2019) and seemed to capture

almost the entire political class in its net. As Hunter and Power (2019: 73) note, between 2014 and 2018, the Carwash investigations “produced nearly one-thousand arrest warrants and 125 ... guilty verdicts falling on politicians and private business-people alike. Although the investigation ensnared politicians from fourteen different political parties ... the most important names were linked to the PT.”

These several crises fueled a fourth strand—namely, a toxic partisan-political crisis that engulfed the administration of Lula’s hand-picked successor, Dilma Rousseff, and threatened to discredit and delegitimize the entire political system. The partisan crisis reflected the two emerging trends in Brazilian politics—namely, rising antipathy to the PT (known as “antipetismo”)—due to its perceived culpability in the country’s many crises—and growing nostalgia for the “order” and “clean government” of the military dictatorship (Hunter & Power, 2019: 72). As president, Rousseff was caught up in the corruption scandal, and in 2016 she was impeached and removed from office. Crucially, her predecessor and PT standard-bearer Lula—who had decided to again run as the PT candidate—was also implicated; in April 2018, he was imprisoned on corruption charges, making him ineligible for president (Iglesias, 2019).

The political environment, especially after Rousseff’s impeachment, grew toxic, leading to unprecedented declines in public support, not only for the PT government but for the system as a whole. A 2017 Ipsos survey found that 94 percent of Brazilians lack faith in the political elite (cited in Polimédio, 2018). Moreover, a 2018 Latinobarometer survey found that among 18 Latin American governments in 2017–18, Brazil’s recorded the lowest levels of public trust (cited in Hunter & Power, 2019: 74).

The 2018 Elections

As Weizenmann (2019) argues, “Any one of these... crises could have produced extremist demagoguery on their own. Taken together, dire economic circumstances,

rising violence, and political delegitimization” opened up the perfect opportunity for a candidate like Bolsonaro. His campaign—announced in June 2018—very skillfully navigated the collapse in the established system. In so doing, Bolsonaro pushed a message perfectly crafted for the moment—a focus on “law and order,” strong leadership,” and being an “outsider” driving a total restructuring of the system.

Bolsonaro’s campaign slogan was “Brazil first, God above all” — a clear nod to the Evangelical section of his base. He enjoyed several high-profile endorsements, including from the world-famous former Brazilian footballer Ronaldinho, now retired (Savarese, 2018). It came despite his controversial campaign tactics, such as when he vowed to end the so-called “concessions” to native Brazilians and former slaves, known in Brazil as “Quilombolas” (The Independent, 2019).

A crucial turning point in the campaign came at the end of August 2018 when Lula was jailed and disqualified from the race, which essentially cleared Bolsonaro’s path. Lula had been “the front-runner in the polls until being disqualified” (Hunter & Power, 2019: 69). The PT hastily put Fernando Haddad up as an alternative candidate. While he remains beloved in Brazil and his personal brand went some way to overcoming the antipetismo sweeping the country after 2014, Lula’s continued sway failed to translate into support for Haddad. The October 7 first round indicated just how successful Bolsonaro would be with Lula out of the picture; he took 46 percent of the vote and moved decisively into the second round (Cowie & Child, 2018).

Simultaneously, elections were held for Brazil’s Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Brazil’s National Congress. Support for Bolsonaro’s Social Liberal Party (SLP) surged — the party won 52 seats in the 513-seat chamber, up from just one in 2014 (Hunter & Power, 2019; Weizenmann, 2019). In a highly fragmented party system, this gave the SLP the plurality of the popular vote. Crucially, the 2018 congressional elections also saw a sharp increase in support for parties within the so-called “Bancada da bala” (“Bullet faction”), the

loose congressional caucus committed to the arms industry, and a more militarist approach to law and order and public security. Their share rose from 35 to 61 seats in Brazil's lower house, with 15 Senators in the caucus elected, including Flavio Bolsonaro from Rio de Janeiro state: "Members want to legalize the arming of citizens and make the shooting down of bandits by the military and police exempt from punishment," (Milz, 2018).

Overall, Bolsonaro benefited from the coalescing of the so-called "triple B" coalition, made up of "bulls" (i.e., agribusiness), "bullets" (the gun lobby), and "bibles" (Pentecostals). Underpinning all was a focus on Bolsonaro's military credentials, his willingness to "shake up the system" and his fanning of the center-right obsession with the apparent spread of "cultural Marxism"—an amorphous ideology supposedly endorsing political correctness, multiculturalism, and feminism—throughout Brazilian society (Savarese, 2020).

Finally, against a backdrop of antipetismo and Bolsonaro's promises to reform "the country's broken pension system, reductions to the size of government, limits on social benefits, and a restructuring of the country's taxation system" (Weizenmann, 2019), corporate Brazil came on board. In the end, "Brazil's business community—at first dubious about the candidate's purported free-market conversion... swung behind him when faced with the binary choice between Bolsonaro and the return of the statist PT" (Hunter & Power, 2019: 70).

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The most alarming is Bolsonaro's penchant for stocking his administration with military men. Indeed, his cabinet has the largest share of former (and even serving) military appointees since the end of the dictatorship. His running mate and now vice president, Hamilton Mourão, is a retired four-star general.

President of Brazil Jair Messias Bolsonaro with ministers, governor and senator as well as authorities at the Military Police Soldiers Graduation in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on December 18, 2020. Photo: Jorge Hely Veiga.

A Government of Soldiers and Culture Warriors

Brazil's cabinet picks reflected all the campaign themes and the “triple B” coalition that underpinned it. His ministerial appointments fall into three main categories—namely, technocrats, culture warriors, and military men (Chagas-Bastos, 2019: 96). On the first, Bolsonaro was compelled to overcome a sense that he was ill-prepared for office, especially to handle Brazil's fractured economy. He had assuaged much of this on the trail by promising to appoint specialists and technocrats where needed (Chagas-Bastos, 2019: 96; Polimédio, 2018). His two key picks as “super ministers” — Paulo Guedes as economy minister and Sergio Moro as justice minister — reflected this drive.

Bolsonaro's appointment of Moro—the lead judge in the Operation Carwash investigations— as his justice minister surprised many and seemed to cement the connection between Brazil's corruption crisis and Bolsonaro's win. However, this

was shattered in mid-2019 when claims arose that Moro had shown a clear bias in the case against Lula. The investigative journalism newsmagazine, *The Intercept*, leaked messages purporting to show that Moro had collaborated with the prosecutors (a claim he denies) to ensure Lula's conviction and disqualification from the 2018 campaign (Araújo & Prior, 2020: 3; Fishman et al., 2019).

Within a year, Moro had resigned his post, accusing Bolsonaro of political interference in police investigations at both federal and state levels. He left office in late April 2020 (McGeever, 2020). Moro's allegations indicated the president had fired several police chiefs to head off investigations into his son's alleged corruption. The Attorney-General then opened an investigation (Brito & Paraguassu, 2020). Indeed, for a politician supposedly a paragon of anti-corruption, Bolsonaro has himself become increasingly tarred with the corruption brush. His son, Flavio, has proved problematic (to say the least) dogged by allegations of misappropriating funds (and worse) from the beginning (Milz, 2019a).

Bolsonaro has also appointed prominent

religious figures to his cabinet, notably Damares Alves (Women's Affairs) and Milton Ribeiro (Education), both Evangelical pastors. Alves, who has been in the cabinet since the beginning, has courted controversy for her remarks about gender norms, women's rights, and Brazil's annual carnival season. On her election, she made headlines with the slogan, "it's a new era in Brazil —boys wear blue, and girls wear pink" (Deutsche Welle, 2019a).

Ribeiro—who was appointed in July 2020 after the previous education ministers were forced to resign on account of scandal and corruption—has also caused issues with his focus on religion in schools and continuing Bolsonaro's strategy of stripping the education system of leftists and "cultural Marxism." Religious groups welcomed the move, saying, "the education ministry is key to boosting Christian values in Brazil," and casting aside what they contend is leftist influence in the schools (Savarese, 2020).

Arguably most alarming is Bolsonaro's penchant for stocking his administration with military men. Indeed, his cabinet has the largest share of former (and even serving) military appointees since the end of the dictatorship. His running mate and now vice president, Hamilton Mourão, is a retired four-star general. By September 2019, Bolsonaro had appointed seven serving or former military officers to the government (Hunter & Power, 2019: 82), excluding Mourão. In early 2020, he capped off a cabinet of soldiers by appointing four-star army general and current army chief of staff Walter Souza Braga Netto as his presidential chief of staff. Braga's appointment took the total number serving, including Mourão, to ten (Deutsche Welle, 2020a). While warnings of a potential coup have been repeatedly swatted back, the fact that military figures so dominate the government has alarmed many (Romero et al., 2020).

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Bolsonaro ended the first 100 days in office the least popular president since the return to democracy in the 1980s. In his first weeks in office, some 64 percent of Brazilians told pollsters they trusted him to “perform well or very well,” but by April 2019, this had fallen to just 35 percent.

Thousands of activists unite in protest for democracy and racial equality and against the Bolsonaro government in São Paulo, Brazil on June 07, 2020. Photo: Alf Ribeiro

The First Year: Protests, Paralysis, and Pensions

On the campaign trail, Bolsonaro had promised “a conservative revolution.” Central to this was his promise to liberalize gun laws, which in Brazil are quite restrictive. Despite this, the country is plagued by terrible gun violence, arguably the most visible aspect of rampant criminality. In his first week in office, Bolsonaro moved on the gun issue—a presidential decree on January 14, 2019, expanded the number of firearms Brazilians could legally own and promised to remove “open carry” restrictions further on in the term (Marcello & Stargardt, 2019). Many of his early moves had the ring of empty symbolism — for example, in the first week, the new administration purged the federal government of so-called “leftist” public servants, who were simply legitimate appointees from previous administrations (The Independent, 2019).

The president and his inner circle stand accused of playing up divisions in the

government and society as a kind of “symbolic politics” to bolster their political support: “In this regard, some commentators stress that Bolsonaro and his sons have choreographed certain movements. All the political confusion portrayed since the beginning... shows a pattern of rehearsed sketches to demonstrate cohesion around the conservative values they defend” (Chagas-Bastos, 2019: 97). The purpose here is three-fold: to mobilize the base, bolster the Bolsonaro’s “anti-system and transgressive credentials,” and distract commentators from the behind-the-scenes maneuvering of the government (ibid.).

Bolsonaro ended the first 100 days in office the least popular president since the return to democracy in the 1980s. In his first weeks in office, some 64 percent of Brazilians told pollsters they trusted him to “perform well or very well,” but by April 2019, this had fallen to just 35 percent, with the numbers saying they distrusted him outright, rising from 30 percent to 44 percent (Chagas-Bastos, 2019: 98). These numbers reflect the key points of social resistance to Bolsonaro’s new administration, which erupted in widespread protest in his first few months in office. Indeed,

they began in the campaign, with the nationwide #EleNao (“Not Him”) demonstrations dogging his campaign in 2018. Protests highlighted his anti-LGBT and anti-women attacks and his treatment of indigenous people. Brazil’s April 2019 Carnival seasons saw a slew of floats and parade groups mocking and protesting the president. In particular, there was a pointed response to Alves’ gender assertions, with female carnival-goers dressed in blue and men in pink (Deutsche Welle, 2019a). In the Rio Carnival of 2020, Evangelical Christians hit back with promises to “bring Jesus” to revelers (D. Phillips, 2020).

While he had promised “a conservative revolution,” Bolsonaro’s progress was plodding. He refused to play by the traditional political rules, shunning the country’s long-standing political culture of horse-trading for policy wins. Ironically, a similar approach brought down the country’s last populist leader Fernando Collor de Mello, in the mid-1990s (Panizza, 2000). Like Trump, Bolsonaro appears to believe that he can achieve policy wins by dint of sheer personality and his diffuse and vocal support among his support base.

The 2019 Amazon wildfires drew the world’s attention and calls for concerted international action, most notably from French President Emmanuel Macron. Bolsonaro burned a vast swathe of his political capital attacking foreign leaders’ attempts to address the issue, with France’s president and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany coming in for intense criticism. In August 2019, after a G7 meeting that promised a “rescue fund” for the Amazon forest, Bolsonaro lashed out, asserting sovereigntist claims, accusing Macron and the G7 of neo-imperialism (T. Phillips, 2019).

Toward the end of 2019, Bolsonaro scored a victory with the passing of pension reform. Brazil’s pension system had been driven to the brink of bankruptcy, and without some changes, it threatened to blow up the federal deficit. Fixing the problem had been a central plank of Bolsonaro’s campaign. After much wrangling in Congress and a June 2019 general strike opposing Bolsonaro’s plans to right-size the pension system, reform passed in October 2019. The win did not appear,

however, to staunch his bleeding popular support. By late 2019, his approval ratings had fallen to 31 percent—down from 49 percent when he was elected in October 2018 (Milz, 2019b).

The experience of dealing with an uncompromising Congress has clearly affected the maverick politician, by all accounts has been infuriated by the congressional argy-bargy involved in prosecuting his agenda. At the end of the year, the notorious party-switcher announced he was forming a new party, the Aliança pelo Brasil (Alliance for Brazil). It was also announced that his son Flavio—a senator from Rio de Janeiro who ran on the SLP ticket—would take a senior leadership role in the new party. “The party platform ‘recognizes God’s place in the life, history and soul of the Brazilian people,’ is anti-abortion, rejects ‘socialism and communism,’ and supports the right to possess firearms” (Deutsche Welle, 2019b).

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Like Trump, Bolsonaro has politicized the pandemic crisis and used it as an opportunity to burnish his populist credentials. The mismanagement of the virus and the response to the economic circumstances have also taken a toll.

People wait in a big line to receive food donations for lunch in a downtown street during a severe economic crisis caused by COVID-19 pandemic in Sao Paulo, Brazil on June 2, 2020. Photo: Nelson Antoinet

The Second Year: COVID-19, Policy Failure, and an Electoral Rebuke

After the October 2019 pension reform victory, Bolsonaro's fortunes might have looked up. However, in early 2020 the COVID-19 crisis hit, dominating Bolsonaro's second year in office. The crisis has struck Brazil particularly hard and has only been exacerbated by the Bolsonaro administration's failure to adequately address the public health emergency and coordinate a response among Brazil's state and municipal governments. Like Trump, Bolsonaro has politicized the crisis and used it as an opportunity to burnish his populist credentials. He even emulated Trump's dosing with hydroxychloroquine, which he has called "a miracle cure" (Eisele, 2020). Furthermore, just as Trump did, Bolsonaro self-represented his own infection with COVID-19—which occurred after months downplaying its virology and impact—as part of his "real man" macho image. In so doing, in March of 2019, he

referenced his September 2018 stabbing, telling his large social media following that if I am "able to survive being stabbed, then a "little flu" was unlikely to kill [me]" (Eisele, 2020).

Brazil, a federation of 26 states and one federal territory, has devolved responsibility for health and public health. This has played into Bolsonaro's hands, allowing him to play up "local elites" who stand in the way: "The 65-year-old has repeatedly and harshly criticized the virus-related restrictions to everyday life — some of which have since been relaxed — imposed by states and municipal governments... [In July 2020], he vetoed a law passed by Congress on nationwide regulations concerning the wearing of face masks in public" (Eisele, 2020).

The mismanagement of the virus and the response to the economic circumstances have also taken a toll. In local elections held across the country in November 2020, Bolsonaro-backed parties lost ground, as did the main opposition PT. Moreover, in a "direct rebuke to Bolsonaro, voters in Belo Horizonte, the sixth-largest city, re-elected mayor Alexandre Kalil, who took tough quarantine and social distanc-

ing steps that were criticized directly by the president” (Deutsche Welle, 2020b). The established center-right and conservative parties saw a return to electoral fortune after their poor showing in the 2018 congressional elections. Bolsonaro’s former party, the SLP, failed to take top place in a single election (Deutsche Welle, 2020b). His Aliança pelo Brasil did not stand candidates, as the party had formed too late to gather the necessary signatures to register as an official electoral party (Ying, 2020).

CONCLUSION

After just over two years in power, the very worst predictions about Bolsonaro's presidency have not materialized. Certainly, the military has so far remained firmly in the barracks and has swatted back calls for intervention in politics (Romero et al., 2020). None of this should be taken as a call to celebrate. Indeed, it is really down to a fortuitous mix of incompetence on the part of the administration — most evident in the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic — and the checks and balances in Brazil's federal system. Bolsonaro's own stubborn refusal to play by established rules and establish a governing congressional coalition is also a key factor, meaning his agenda has largely stalled in the legislature. Thus, like Trump in his first term in office, institutional inertia has managed to blunt and slow the worst effects of Bolsonaro's radical agenda.

Nevertheless, much damage is being done to the fabric of Brazilian society. As The New York Times recently noted: "The upheaval in Brazil is leading investors to rush for the exits. Capital flight is reaching levels unseen since the 1990s. The World Bank expects the economy to contract 8 percent this year. Car production, a once-thriving pillar of the economy, has plummeted to its lowest level since the 1950s" (Romero et al., 2020). However, Bolsonaro continues to enjoy widespread — if minority — support in the electorate, as this brief has detailed at length. Moreover, his new party, Aliança pelo Brasil, is an as-yet untested legislative vehicle and could well do very well at the next general election scheduled for October 2022. Much depends, of course, on Brazil's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the trajectory of further reform efforts.

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