LATIN AMERICA 26.10.2018 | Pablo Stefanoni

Bible, Beef and Bullets

What a victory of Jair Messias Bolsonaro would mean for democracy in Brazil and the whole of Latin America

Read this article in German.

Yes, it's true: in early October, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, an authoritarian, racist, macho, homophobic politician, won the first round of the presidential elections in Brazil. A person who embodies the most reactionary values is about to take over the Brazilian Presidency. Essentially, Brazil and Latin America are facing a completely new scenario, one which is not limited to the end of the so-called 'decade of the left' and a democratic change of government. In fact, a candidate may win in this weekend's run-off election who openly defends the dictatorship and stands for the glorification of violence as well as the disregard of all democratic values.

Bolsonaro is not just 'a guy like Trump'. He's a candidate with fascist traits in a country whose institutions are far less consolidated than those of the United States. As if that's not enough, Brazil is already suffering from strong political violence.

The results of the first ballot in early October strengthened the parliamentary BBB caucus on an unprecedented scale. BBB stands for 'Bíblia, Boi e Bala', meaning Bible, Beef and Bullets (referring to the agribusiness and weapons lobby). In the words of El País, Bolsonaro's 'B' united them all – and brought them to the threshold of power. The rejection of progressive politics, however, is not limited to Brazil. It is taking hold throughout the entire region, threatening the democratic accomplishments of recent decades.

According to historian Maud Chirio, Bolsonaro's growing clout is based on 'building hostility towards the Workers' Party (PT) and the left in general. This image of the enemy evokes memories of Cold War anti-communism: conspiracy theories, demonisation, and equating moral lapses with a political project that must be rejected. Bolsonaro has adopted the symbolic power of this rejection. Added to this was the PT's entanglement in corruption cases. This is not just a matter of

conservatives shifting to the extreme right, but of supporting a project that aims for a radical break.' According to the historian Zeev Sternhell, fascism was more than a reaction. Rather, it was also perceived as an expression of a revolution, a will to change in the face of a crisis-ridden status quo.

The rise of the new right

The progressive forces of Latin America cannot shirk their responsibility for the years of 'pink tide' governments. Why so many people are ready to vote for Bolsonaro in order to prevent the return of the PT is a question that must be addressed. This is all the more true since the PT was the party that managed to win over all of Latin America, but has been losing support for years. The fact that, contrary to all pre-election surveys, ex-President Dilma Rousseff failed to capture the Senate seat for her home state of Minas Gerais more than symbolises this rejection. And the PT has done a lot to lose its original aura, moral integrity, and project for the future. However, this alone cannot account for its rejection.

The PT's class struggle *light*, which improved the situation of the lower classes without taking anything away from those at the top, was not acceptable anymore for the Brazilian elites. Brazil once again is confirming that the ruling classes tolerate reforms only when faced with a looming 'revolution'. The takeover by the PT was by no means accompanied by a societal radicalisation. However, in a socially unequal country it pursued a policy that helped 'those down there'.

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The current rejection of progressive parties in Latin America has a two-fold dimension. All across the region a new right is emerging that stands for the rejection of social achievements. Their racism opposes the viewpoint that highlights the race-specific nature of poverty. Meanwhile, conservatism is taking a stand against advances by feminism and sexual minorities. The growing influence of evangelical politics and the popularity of politicians and commentators who have declared war on 'gender ideology' are just some other aspects that point to an ever more violent opposition to progressivism.

The extreme right is also attracting a portion of the youth vote and is building up opinion leaders who have a strong presence in social networks. Such movements portray themselves as directed against the

elite – despite, as in the case of Bolsonaro, their ultra-liberal economic policy, which has been enthusiastically supported by the markets. Martin Bergel has pointed out that a narrative has proven quite effective in linking the left to the 'privileges' of particular groups, including poorer sections of the population who receive social assistance, as opposed to the people who 'actually work and get nothing'.

A major setback for democracy worldwide

The progressive camp in Latin America is facing a serious political, intellectual and moral crisis. The catastrophic situation in Venezuela, as well as the repression by paramilitary groups in Nicaragua, are proving very convenient for the right-wing on the continent. The recent call by Bernie Sanders to build a new Progressive International, which should focus on fighting against increasing global authoritarianism and inequality, is certainly appropriate. In Latin America, however, this is hard to imagine. To a large extent the local left is enthusiastic for figures such as Vladimir Putin, Bashar al-Assad and Xi Jinping as would-be counterweights to the 'Empire'.

The last gathering of the São Paulo Forum, which has traditionally united the leftist forces in the region, was marked by calls for 'resistance' and perseverance. Its venue in Havana and the presence of conservative representatives of the Cuban government reinforced the ideological retreat to an anti-imperialist discourse full of nostalgia for the figure of the late commander Fidel Castro. There was no room for a thorough analysis of the experiences and setbacks of recent years. The logical outcome was the unreserved defense of Nicolás Maduro and Daniel Ortega. In order to expand again, the left and progressive forces of Latin America will need to leave the ideological comfort zones and refrain from self-victimisation.

Bolsonaro has succeeded in 'freeing himself from demonisation'. If he wins the runoff, he will not be alone in the world. Moreover, given the weakness of the regional integration forums, no one in the region will be in a position to keep him in his place. A victory of the former military captain would be one of the most serious setbacks for democracy since the military dictatorships of the 1970s – with incalculable consequences. The image of a voter who filmed himself while pushing the buttons of an electronic voting machine with a revolver – obviously choosing Bolsonaro – was highly significant in a day that bodes ill for Brazil and Latin America.

This article was first published in Nueva Sociedad.



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