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Bolsonaro: the end of Brazilian democracy?

Brazil now has the most extremist president of any democratic nation. What this means for the country

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Under normal circumstances, an elected president emphasising he will respect the constitution and democracy would not be particularly noteworthy. But in the Brazil we have now, it's big news.

Last Sunday the extreme-right ex-military Jair Messias Bolsonaro prevailed with 55 per cent of valid votes in the runoff presidential election against Fernando Haddad, the candidate of the left-wing Workers' Party (PT). In the past, Bolsonaro has made no secret of his admiration for the military dictatorship, his contempt for democratic institutions and his hatred of political opponents. His election was also possible because, despite compulsory voting, well over 31 million Brazilians – 21.3 per cent of eligible voters – stayed away from the election.

In any case, the result confirms the powerful effect of anti-political discourse, favouring candidates who present themselves as 'non-politicians' or 'political outsiders'. Bolsonaro succeeded in breaking through the dominance of the two major parties - the centrist Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) and the PT - with his call to 'cleanse' politics. Since 1994, those two parties had decided presidential elections amongst themselves.

The new congress, in contrast, will have many inexperienced MPs, will be somewhat younger and have more women – but it will also be markedly more conservative. The cross-party factions of agri-business, the evangelicals and the supporters of a hard-line security policy are now strengthened.

Can Bolsonaro be tamed?

Bolsonaro's party, the hitherto insignificant Social Liberal Party (PSL), had already risen to become the second-strongest faction in the Chamber of Deputies in the congressional elections three weeks ago. The second ballot now consolidated the supremacy of the Bolsonaro camp.

Bolsonaro received a majority vote in 16 out of 27 states. His allies will rule in the three largest states of the country: São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro. And two states – Roraima, which borders Venezuela, and Santa Catarina in the affluent south – went to military officers who were candidates from Bolsonaro's party.

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The important question is: are we to trust Bolsonaro's more conciliatory tones after the election – or is Brazil's democracy actually in danger? Many of those who abstained or cast invalid votes are certainly betting that the President-elect's policy will not turn out to be as radical as his discourse.

The liberal camp in particular hopes that the state's institutions are strong enough to contain Bolsonaro within the rule of law. It's with this reasoning, at least, that the mainstream media, 'liberal intellectuals' and Ciro Gomes, who received third-most votes in the the first ballot, justified their 'neutral' position. But, for some time already, the institutions who are expected to tame Bolsonaro have been showing clear signs of degeneration.

The electoral justice system's shortcomings

Brazil's electoral justice system was not up to its task as impartial judge and supervisor of the electoral process. On the one hand, it forbade the news outlets *Folha de São Paulo* and *El Pais* from interviewing Lula before the elections, arguing that he could manipulate the voters. It also prohibited the PT from using an election video that allowed the victims of torturer Carlos Alberto Ustra, revered by Bolsonaro, to have their say, arguing that it might disturb the voters.

On the other hand, the justice system felt no need for action when *Folha de São Paulo* revealed that private companies were spending millions to bring fake news about the PT and its candidate to millions of voters. The chair of the Superior Electoral Court commented that fake news has

always existed.

Regarding the lawsuits filed against Bolsonaro's illegal and defamatory campaign, it claimed that the judiciary needed time – in this case until at least mid-2019. The head of the OAS Election Observation Mission, former Costa Rica President Laura Chinchilla, disagreed. She said the massive use of WhatsApp to duplicate fake news has been unprecedented. It certainly had an impact on the election result: 120 million people in Brazil use WhatsApp, and they were bombarded with false reports and lies for weeks.

How could this happen?

By the end of the election campaign, Bolsonaro had once again stepped up his aggressive pronouncements on contempt for democracy, glorification of violence, on misogyny and racism. He threatened with 'cleansing' the country as never seen before. He called on his political opponents to choose between prison and exile. He claimed he would treat social movements as terrorist organisations, go after them and put an end to civic activism. On top of that, the incoming president also threatened the independent press. The weeks before the runoff election had already seen physical violence against Bolsonaro's opponents. How could this all happen?

Bolsonaro's electoral victory is carried by an authoritarian, anti-democratic wave in the population. A survey by polling institute Datafolha at the beginning of October showed that 41 per cent of respondents favoured intervention in the trade unions; 33 per cent consider the ban on parties justified, and 23 per cent approve of government censorship of the media. In any case, 16 per cent have no reservations about the use of torture to obtain confessions or information. Brazil's 'neutrals' in this fateful election may soon have to deal with the accusation of being irresponsible accessories on Brazil's path to authoritarianism.

To lead Brazil out of its political and economic crisis, democratic dialogue is needed. It's reasonable to doubt whether President-elect Bolsonaro is willing and able to do this.

The election result amounts to a painful defeat for the Workers' Party, ending its streak of four consecutive electoral victories. However, even more difficult than the defeat of its candidate Haddad is the fact that the election result shows a very widespread and violent opposition to the PT. Bolsonaro won the election not least because he proved to be the strongest hater of Lula and the PT.

This ‘anti-Petism’ to a large extent feeds on the allegations of corruption against the PT. Some of them are quite justified, but they were blown out of proportion by the media to such a degree that, to many, the PT appeared to be Brazil’s ‘most corrupt party’. The aversion to the PT also comes from hysterical caricatures of the party as a ‘communist danger’ with anti-religious positions or even promoter of non-heterosexual practices, a ‘gender ideology’ that destroys the traditional image of the family. All of these caricatures were disseminated massively over social media. Unfortunately, the lack of critical distance to Maduro’s Venezuela or Ortega’s Nicaragua in many parts of the PT (but not its candidate Haddad) also made it easy for opponents to place the PT in the corner of an undemocratic left.

Some good news

But despite this strong anti-Petism, the PT has been able to assert itself as a political force. Not only has its candidate managed to make the runoff, but the PT is also the party that won most of the votes in the different elections (Chamber of Deputies, Senate, governorships). In the Chamber it will be the strongest political group. Moreover, the PT also consolidated its stronghold in the northeast of the country, where it won the governors’ posts in four states.

In short, the election result is the reflection of a divided country. However, in now way is this the polarisation between right and left populism that the mainstream media are so fond of insinuating. It’s not about two sides of the same anti-democratic coin. Bolsonaro has a clear margin of popularity, especially in the rich and predominantly White cities and regions in the centre and the south. By contrast, Haddad’s constituency is concentrated in cities of below-average income levels and predominantly non-White populations.

Importantly, the incoming president’s voting lead is due to his strong support among the male population. This is where the political projects show diverging expectations: in Bolsonaro’s case, the questioning of social programs, workers’ rights and policies of positive discrimination; with Haddad, the continuation of a policy of social inclusion and the expansion of rights.

The elections have brought about the majority vote customary in democracies. To lead Brazil out of its political and economic crisis, democratic dialogue is needed. It’s reasonable to doubt whether President-elect Bolsonaro is willing and able to do this. Brazil now has the most extremist president of any democratic nation. And as journalist

Celso Rocha de Barros writes, we must hope that it will stay that way, because soon Brazil may no longer be one of the democratic nations.



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