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Bolsonaro's honeymoon cancelled

A divided cabinet, youth protests and corruption scandals: Brazil's right-wing government comes under pressure

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Violent rhetoric alone is not enough to keep political momentum going – that's what Brazil's president Jair Bolsanaro is now finding out. Since moving into the Palácio do Planalto early this year, the right-wing populist's understanding of democracy hasn't changed: he still despises consensus and has a deep distaste for diversity. As far as he is concerned, the majority rules the day and minorities can either get with the mainstream or get lost. Special protections for the few? In Bolsonaro's world, it's the many who decide.

And yet, since the return of democracy to Latin America's biggest nation, no Brazilian head of state to date has been so unpopular only five months into their first term. His approval ratings just keep sinking while, on the street, his opponents are far more numerous. As protest movements mobilise demonstrators, the different factions in the cabinet are quarrelling and, in Congress, the executive has not been able to pass one single major piece of legislation.

In a survey carried out by Datafolha in April, around two thirds of respondents said that they had expected a better performance from Bolsonaro once elected. Only just over half of those who voted for him are satisfied with his government. As ever, the former officer is more popular among white men who tend to be better qualified, to earn more, and to be more protestant than the average.

Bolsonaro's education offensive

Bolsonaro also seems to be losing the fight on the streets as tens of thousands of primarily young protesters speak out against his government's education policy. In mid-May, enormous demonstrations in the country's largest cities brought students, teachers, and university administrators together to protest the government's plan to cut grants to

federal universities by 30 per cent and to remove funding for around 3,000 research stipends. According to Minister for Education Abraham Weintraub, this savings initiative targets first and foremost 'those institutions which produce anarchy rather than academic performance.'

Bolsonaro himself, meanwhile, produced no small degree of indignation in academic circles when he argued that the youth of today should concentrate more on their studies than on politics. He added that humanities such as sociology and philosophy were, from a tax-payer value point of view, unproductive courses of study. While the demonstrations against Bolsonaro have been countered by pro-government gatherings, the latter have remained considerably smaller.

More broadly, there was discord around the overall positioning of Brazil in the emerging superpower rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

Even internal cabinet conflicts are now being carried out in the open, with every week seeming to drive its different groupings further apart rather than bringing them together to work as a team: a technocratic wing is coalescing around minister for the economy, Paulo Guedes, and a militaristic one is centred on vice-president and reservist general Hamilton Mourão. Foreign Minister Ernest Araújo leads an ideological wing.

The latter also includes Bolsonaro's sons Eduardo (who represents São Paulo in the Chamber of Deputies), Flávio (who sits for Rio de Janeiro in the Federal Senate), and Carlos (Rio de Janeiro city council). Although they do not have executive roles, the Bolsonaro sons offer on-message comment on daily politics, primarily using their social media channels. Observers consider the 'guru' of sorts behind the ideological wing to be arch-conservative Olavo de Carvalho, resident in the United States and prone to tirades in the form of interviews, tweets, and self-filmed videos, primarily against the militaristic wing of the government.

Foreign policies at odds

The plurality of voices (or, depending on your viewpoint, open conflicts) in the cabinet became ever more apparent in questions of foreign policy such as whether to allow the construction of a US military base in Brazil, whether to intervene in Venezuela, and whether to move the Brazilian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. More broadly, there was discord around the overall positioning of Brazil in the emerging superpower rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

While the hardliners in the ideological wing advocate strong ties with the

US, generals are against an American military presence on Brazilian soil and against intervening in the Venezuelan crisis. They are also wary of worsening trade relations with Arab countries and China – a potential consequence of closer political ties to Washington. Vice-President Mourão presents himself as a mediator in this dispute, but doesn't have any qualms about taking uncompromising positions and, in some cases, directly contradicting the president. After all, he's the only member of cabinet, alongside Bolsonaro, who was voted in with democratic legitimation. As such, he's not dependent on the good will of the president – and knows it.

The lack of government coordination is aggravated by the absence of clear parliamentary majorities. There are 23 different parties in the Federal Senate and 30 groupings in the Chamber of Deputies, with the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT) as the strongest parliamentary faction at 10 per cent. This makes it difficult for Bolsonaro to get any legislation passed that makes good on his key election promises. The case of the law against corruption and organised crime (*Projeto de Lei Anticrime*), proposed by Minister for Justice and Security Sérgio Moro is illustrative. Minister Guedes' legislation to reduce the state deficit and secure investment, as well as the urgently needed pension reform (*Nova Previdência*) are also caught up in the logjam.

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What's more, cooperation between the executive and the legislature is rocky at best, as a long exchange of media blows between Bolsonaro and Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Rodrigo Maia made clear. Maia is a member of the *Democratas*, one of the few political parties with cabinet positions. While the government's legislation creeps through the parliamentary machinery at snail's pace, he held a successful vote in the lower chamber in March about a constitutional amendment (*Proposta de Emenda à Constituição*) which limited the executive's power over the governmental budget in favour of Congress. The Federal Senate, however, only voted through the proposal on the condition that several changes were enacted, referring it back down to the deputies to amend.

More scandals

The Bolsonaro government's only visible successes to date are a limited reduction in bureaucracy, some institutional restructuring, and political

actions taken by presidential decree – most of which must be turned into law by Congress if they are to remain in force after 120 days. This is true of a number of decrees which endanger the environment, indigenous populations, and LGBTQ communities, as well as the work of NGOs in these areas.

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Yet even here, the lack of parliamentary support takes its toll: after taking power in January, Bolsonaro immediately decreed that the National Indian Foundation (*Fundação Nacional do Índio*, FUNAI) would be transferred from the Ministry for Women, Families, and Human Rights to the Justice Ministry and be stripped of the right to demarcate areas for indigenous people. But then, in late May, Congress passed a motion reversing the decision. The Parliament and the judiciary also criticised Bolsonaro's decrees to make it easier to buy and keep weapons; even Minister for Justice Moro tried to distance himself from the president.

Moreover, the Bolsonaro family finds itself caught up in corruption scandals and alleged connections to militia forces. That's a particularly damaging state of affairs for a man who, in his electoral campaign, promised to be free of corruption and to take a strong stance against violence.

In a speech in April, Bolsonaro admitted that he considers himself 'born to be a military man, not president.' Yet the head of state's weakness as a leader of a chaotic government contradicts many Brazilians' expectations, in particular considering he's former general and often characterised as authoritarian.

At the moment, there's no clear pathway to a more results-orientated *modus operandi*, either in a cabinet which looks set to remain split, or between an executive and a legislature at loggerheads. And it's precisely this fact that may well guarantee continued political pluralism in Brazil.



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