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The Brazilian Trump

How Jair Messias Bolsonaro is preparing a grab for power with support from business, evangelicals and the military

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On 7 October 2018, 147 million Brazilians will be called upon to vote in presidential, congressional and gubernatorial elections. The vote is taking place in turbulent times - the country is only slowly recovering from a severe economic crisis, meanwhile facing a growing security crisis. Instead of president Dilma Rousseff, elected in 2014 and two years ago removed from office on a spurious pretext, her former Vice President Michel Temer has been governing with the lowest approval rate in Brazilian history of just three percent. The hugely popular former president Lula da Silva was recently convicted of corruption in a controversial trial and has been in custody since April.

The public's confidence in democracy has been severely shaken from the impact of this traumatic shake-up in Brazilian politics. Only 43 per cent still prefer democracy as a form of government. Only seven percent of the population has confidence in the political parties, compared to 50 per cent who have faith in the armed forces. Equally alarming are the results of a survey in May of this year, showing that a majority of Brazilians consider a military coup justifiable in response to corruption or crime.

As a consequence, the outcome of the elections is more uncertain than ever before. The rampant disenchantment with politics has created a strong 'anti-establishment' mood. Many are hoping for political renewal, especially with a new set of players. 'To change the system, we have to change people,' is the widespread motto. Today only those who present themselves as 'new' and are perceived as such have any prospects for electoral success, according to political scientist Sergio Abranches.

An anti-establishment populist

This 'anti-establishment' sentiment, however, perfectly serves a long-overlooked backbencher, former paratrooper Jair Messias Bolsonaro. So

far, he has not attracted attention through any parliamentary activity, but by his offensive statements - in particular by glorifying Brazil's past military dictatorship. His vote in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff caused a furor when he dedicated it to one of the most notorious torturers of that period. Almost two years earlier, Bolsonaro sparked outrage when he declared that he would not rape deputy Maria do Rosário Nunes because she was not worth it.

At the same time Bolsonaro rants against corrupt and incompetent politicians and, following his role model Donald Trump, presents himself as a negation of traditional 'corrupt' politics which, according to him, requires a 'general purge'. He also sees the values of the Brazilian nation and its Christian foundations as being threatened by a so-called 'cultural Marxism'. Bolsonaro views the latter as responsible for ideologically infiltrating schools, the subsidising of non-productivity and immaturity through publicly funded social programs, and a human rights policy that protects only the rights of criminals. True to his middle name 'Messiah', he thinks of himself as the savior of the Brazilian nation. And in this mission, he relies on the support of the military.

If Bolsonaro wins the election, he intends to assemble a cabinet with many officials from the military. His logic: if former presidents nominated 'guerrillas and terrorists' as ministers, then he wants to turn generals into ministers. Such a freely elected military government is, according to Bolsonaro, 'God's wish'. Not surprisingly then that he has nominated another retired military official, General Hamilton Mourão, as his vice-presidential candidate – he is likewise an apologist for the military dictatorship.

In all of this, the self-proclaimed outsider has managed to conceal the fact that he is not that new to politics. Currently, Bolsonaro is exercising his seventh political mandate and, by now, he is looking back on 27 years in parliament. He has repeatedly changed political parties and at times belonged to those that are particularly mired in corruption scandals. The journal ISTOÉ ironically and rightly calls him an 'anti-system candidate who comes from the system'.

Despite all this, Bolsonaro managed the transition from backbencher to one of the best-known politicians in Brazil in a short amount of time, mainly through social media and his 'anti-system' discourse. For months he has led in the polls - at least when former President Lula da Silva, convicted of corruption and now incarcerated, is shut out of the surveys. But even when Lula's candidacy is not excluded, Bolsonaro performs surprisingly well: he would get around one-fifth of the vote, and this figure has remained relatively constant over the past few months.

The decline of the 'establishment'

By contrast, the establishment's candidates, such as Geraldo Alckmin from the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) and former finance minister Henrique Meirelles, are currently lagging far behind. Thus there is a strong possibility that Bolsonaro can break through the traditional polarisation between the conservative 'social democratic' party of Brazil (PSDB) and the progressive workers' party (PT) to at least move into the second round of voting. 'Brazil, we have a problem,' proclaims *The Economist*, and in doing so, certainly speaks for Brazil's political and economic establishment. It had long been insisting that Bolsonaro's appeal would diminish as the economy recovers. Except that a noticeable economic recovery has so far failed, with the economy stagnating and unemployment stuck at 13 per cent.

On the one hand, Bolsonaro presents himself as a rebel; on the other hand, by choosing liberal economist Paulo Guedes as his advisor, he attempted to signal to the establishment that he was - at least politically - not so anti-systemic. The financial elites were also relieved and pleased by the nomination of a recognised expert with a liberal vision. Also, Bolsonaro's party, the Social Liberal Party (PSL), is one of the Congress's most loyal supporters of President Temer's liberal economic agenda.

Bolsonaro is openly courting a business community critical of regulation and considering entrepreneur Flavio Rocha as a possible Minister of Economic Affairs. It is clear that he wants not only the military in his government, but also business people. Targeting them, Bolsonaro announces that it is time for entrepreneurs in Brazil to take matters into their own hands. So the self-image of a rebel against the establishment also belies the fact that in polls he enjoys more support from the segment of the richest and most educated than his competitors. 30 per cent of the population whose income is over ten times the minimum wage are flirting with electing this alleged bête noire of the establishment.

Religious support

With his discourse, Bolsonaro is however deliberately courting another voter segment: the supporters of the evangelical churches, who by now make up 30 per cent of the electorate in what was once a purely Catholic country. In light of this tendency, some observers speak of a *voto evangélico*, as Bolsonaro's campaign events often resemble evangelical church services. The cultivated moralising discourse gets especially caught up in the evangelical belief system in which the one single Good takes up the fight against evil on behalf of the good citizenry.

Amongst the supporters of his candidacy are thus the Senator and evangelical pastor Magno Malta and the influential head of the church 'Vitoria em Cristo', Silas Malafaia. Malafeia hopes that 70 to 80 per cent of evangelicals will vote for Bolsonaro. Nevertheless, opinion polls see his share of votes in this segment at only 17 per cent. Although Bolsonaro's 'defense of the family between husband and wife,' rejection of abortion, and criticism of the 'gender ideology' meet with a positive response among Evangelicals, he also encounters rejection with his often aggressive and radical statements. Bolsonaro's commitment to gun ownership rights is also not shared by many pacifist Evangelicals.

On the other hand, in his speeches Bolsonaro addresses the value of meritocracy, a view which is widespread in Evangelical circles. Personal effort and individual labor, and not public social programs, are the way out of poverty and social misery. And while many of the Evangelicals are quite supportive of women-specific issues, such as the legalisation of abortion, feminism is rejected as aggressive rhetoric. Thus, Bolsonaro's attacks on feminism and gender ideology resonate with his audience, while not necessarily entailing the rejection of policies tailored to women's needs.

Bolsonaro's appeal to younger voters

Moreover, what makes Bolsonaro attractive is that he, like almost no other politician, is going after the precarious state of public safety. In recent years much of the population, especially in the lower middle classes, has become a veritable target. Current figures speak of over 60,000 murders in 2017, equivalent to 175 incidents per day. Many people who experience this insecurity and violence as an everyday threat feel abandoned by traditional politics. Their concerns resonate with Bolsonaro's 'hard-hitting' talk against crime - calling for a lowering of the penitentiary age, for police officers with a licence to kill, and for easier access to weapons. So far, the progressive parties are left without convincing answers.

Finally, Bolsonaro can also rely on support from the younger sections of the electorate. This support is twice as high in the 16 to 34 age group as it is among those over 55, and the younger demographic will account for about one third of the total vote in the elections. In part, Bolsonaro's popularity results from his strong presence on social media. With five million followers on Facebook, he is far more present than his fellow campaigners.

Furthermore, as a study by the social scientist Esther Solano prepared for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation shows, his self-portrayal, underpinned by

a non-conformist discourse, resonates as ‘anti-mainstream’ particularly among the younger generation. They see him as rebelling against the establishment. They consider breaking the rules of political correctness as refreshing, with the intolerance and aggressiveness in his utterances not being a misstep, but instead ‘pop’ and authentic.

With a little help from Steve Bannon

These factors give Bolsonaro a solid position in the presidential race. But there are also factors complicating his campaign. Complementary to the frighteningly high approval rating, he is also encountering the highest rejection rate among all the candidates. In addition, he has so far failed to break through the isolation by the political establishment and form a broader electoral alliance. Ultimately, his electoral alliance has been limited to two small parties: his own PSL with eight MPs, and the non-Congressional Brazilian Labour Renewal Party (PRTB), the party of his vice-presidential candidate.

This small electoral alliance also means a significant disadvantage in the availability of public campaign funds and free access to airtime on television and radio. He is entitled to only about one per cent of the free advertising time, while establishment representative Alckmin gets almost 50 per cent. Bolsonaro is attempting to compensate for this disadvantage through intensive advertising on WhatsApp and Facebook. But unlike Donald Trump, he will have to wage a campaign without a strong funding base.

Ultimately, the most important question, however, remains this: what could be expected of Bolsonaro if he were to actually become president? Without a majority in Congress, the ‘anti-system’ candidate would likely look for space to maneuver - in the form of alliances with conservative forces of the system. He would soon prove to be the guardian of the interests of the business establishment.

He sees his presidential role in de-regulation and de-bureaucratisation. The result would be reforms ‘that the economy needs’, privatisations, and continuing the social-political clear-cutting. At the centre of his governance, however, are not economic and social policies, but an iron-hand security policy and the fight against ‘cultural Marxism’. For this fight, he has recently found further backup in the form of a well-known campaign strategist: Donald Trump's former henchman Steve Bannon.



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