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A failed attack on Brazil's democracy

The riots on 8 January in Brazil have failed, but the danger remains. Fighting anti-democratic networks is becoming Lula's most important task

Brazil has experienced the most severe attack on its democracy since the end of the country's military dictatorship. Less than two weeks after Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva took office, there is now a trail of destruction left behind. On 8 January, thousands of *Bolsonaristas* stormed the iconic *Praça dos Três Poderes* (Three Powers' Plaza) in the nation's capital, Brasilia, where they invaded the Congress, the *Palacio do Planalto* (presidential residence) and the Supreme Court, unleashing their devastating rage. It was a planned attack on the heart of Brazilian democracy, fuelled by claims of electoral fraud. The rioting by Bolsonaro supporters was not a spontaneous expression of protest, but rather an attempted coup – announced long ago and supported by factions of the police, politicians and entrepreneurs close to the former president.

What was striking was the police's reluctance to counter the coup. Given the tense situation, the new Minister of Justice, Flavio Dino, had authorised the increased deployment of security forces. Yet the danger came as no surprise; the Brazilian Intelligence Agency, ABIN, had already explicitly warned multiple institutions on what would happen in the run-up to the events. The attack was planned through messaging apps, and arrangements were made to bring *Bolsonaristas* to Brasilia in dozens of buses. Despite that, security had not been reinforced. Quite the opposite: police even escorted the 'demonstrators' to the square, where pictures show them relaxed and in conversation with the rioters.

Who is responsible?

The capital's chief security official, Anderson Torres, is being seen as responsible for the lax security measures, having been in the United States at the time of the riots. Torres was previously a government minister under Bolsonaro but has since been sacked. The Attorney General is now demanding his arrest. The capital's governor was also suspended from his duties for 90 days by a court order. But the

responsibility for these events goes beyond these two people. These 'criminal acts' could only have occurred with the consent of the competent authorities, thinks Supreme Court judge Alexandre de Moraes. He ordered a 'protest camp' in front of the army barracks in Brasilia to be vacated and multiple social media accounts to be blocked. Efforts are now being made to identify the extremists and financiers. Demonstrations have also been in banned in Brasilia until 31 January.

In recent months, Moraes has become Bolsonaro's top target due to his role as president of the Supreme Electoral Court and his reports on fake news. This, too, can explain the hatred towards the Supreme Court. The rule of law now seems to be in full force. President Lula ordered a federal intervention on Sunday, thus revoking state autonomy until the end of the month. This effectively means that the governor's powers have been rescinded, in this case, to restore security and order. Also, more than 1,500 people have been arrested so far, and the situation now seems to be under control.

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Politicians in Brazil have largely condemned the attack on the country's democratic institutions. In a joint brief statement, President Lula, together with the presidents of the Chamber of Deputies, the Senate and the Supreme Court, described the events as 'terrorist acts and coup-mongering vandalism'. Only the far right and those close to Bolsonaro have expressed an agreement with the unrest and initially talked of legitimate 'protests by the people'. Bolsonaro, meanwhile, has distanced himself from the vandalism. He, however, laid the breeding ground for these events and repeatedly rallied against democratic structures and figureheads during his term. After the election, he neither congratulated the victor nor took part in the transfer of power, choosing to travel to the US instead.

Anti-democratic networks in Brazil continue to operate extensively, even after Bolsonaro was voted out. Until the very end, there were demonstrators in front of army barracks calling for the armed forces to step in. The camps where many of the rioters were based were supposed to be cleared out by 6 January but, instead, the military let them remain. Not only is the more radical part of Bolsonaro's support base still very much alive, but there are also sympathisers and active supporters of

Bolsonaro in business circles, especially, and not least, amongst security authorities. This isn't new information, at least not since it came to light that the Federal Highway Police was trying to prevent groups from voting in north-eastern Brazil, a stronghold of Lula's Workers' Party. By then, everyone should have realised that there were radical forces in the police ranks, even in the higher echelons.

Working with opposing forces

The new Lula government has taken power to bring the country together but faces immense challenges, such as empty coffers and enormous political, social and economic problems. Even if the events in Brasilia have been condemned by the country's democratic forces, Brazil is by no means united behind the new government. Lula won the presidential election by a tight margin. A radical part of society does not recognise him as a legitimate president. Moreover, he has no majority in Congress and has no choice but to make alliances. The difficult negotiation processes for the new government have resulted in 37 ministries, which are intended to reflect a broad coalition.

On top of that, many states are ruled by political opponents, including the government district of Brasilia. To tackle the anti-democratic networks, the government must work with political figures, some of whom were elected on the Bolsonaro ticket or are ideologically not far away from him. In Brazil, governors are crucial to controlling the police bodies. On 9 January, Lula sought direct dialogue with all governors and representatives of the three democratic powers in a joint meeting. The symbolic images send out an important message of unity behind democracy. How long this unity will last remains to be seen.

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There are bound to be comparisons with the United States, and in fact, the parallels are no coincidence. Protesters in Brazil, too, spoke of a stolen election. However, one crucial difference from the assault on the Capitol in Washington is that, in Brazil, it did not disrupt the handover and transition. Lula was peacefully sworn in as president on 1 January. In addition, there were no members present while the Congress in Brasilia was stormed, and Lula was in São Paulo at the time. However, in the US, the military unequivocally sided with democracy. The images from Brasilia and the prior conduct of the Brazilian security authorities, on the other hand, cast a shadow of doubt on their allegiance

to democracy: there is no immediate threat of a coup, but the politicisation of parts of the military and police institutions in recent years has become all but evident.

So, what now? The rioters and extremists produced some powerful images. They often live in a parallel world that is difficult to penetrate. There must be firm efforts to monitor anti-democratic networks, which have been able to multiply virtually uncontrolled in recent years and have felt empowered by these developments. Identifying and dismantling these networks is vital for the new government.

Democratic institutions responded swiftly, cohesively and unequivocally to the unrest. But the events of 8 January show how active the anti-democracy movement is, how strong its network is and how much support it continues to receive from the institutions. To prevent democracy from being eroded, democratic forces need to unite, and Brazil must take action against the enemies of democracy while seeking channels of dialogue with those parts of the population who feel frustrated with democratic figures and discourses. The international community's rapid expression of solidarity with the new government and condemnation of the attack on democratic institutions were also essential displays of unity. But these events and developments in Brazil, not only over this one weekend but over the few years leading up to them, should serve as a warning to democracy worldwide.



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