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Bolsonarismo's erosion of democracy

Jair Bolsonaro again attacked Brazil's democratic institutions at a protest last week. Even though he rowed back since, democracy continues to erode

For weeks, Brazil's Independence Day demonstrations on 7 September were publicised on social media – and, above all, by President Jair Bolsonaro himself. In the end, just under 125,000 people assembled in São Paulo alone – lots of people, big pictures, but also a significantly smaller turnout than expected.

Contrary to initial fears, the demonstration as a whole was not violent, even if individual journalists were massively harassed. The demands of the protest, on the other hand, targeted the foundations of Brazilian democracy. Among other things, there were calls for the dissolution of the Supreme Court and for military intervention. Bolsonaro and his supporters repeatedly agitated against the electronic voting system to de-legitimise the electoral process as such in the run-up to the 2022 elections.

Bolsonaro was using the protests as a show of strength. Indeed, the number of protesters in São Paulo in particular was large, but considering the mobilisation effort – especially compared to previous demonstrations – it was by no means exceptional. All this has taken place at a time when Bolsonaro is polling low. The majority are dissatisfied with his work as president and opposed to his autocratic rhetoric. In fact, the country is looking exhausted: After a year and a half of pandemic, there have been over 580,000 fatalities from Covid-19, with a president who keeps the country permanently in crisis mode. Moreover, the recent developments in the country – and the prospects for Bolsonaro – are looking rather bleak.

Brazilians' real problems

In addition to the sad number of Covid-19 deaths and the ongoing environmental destruction, unemployment continues to exceed 14 per cent. The cost of living has already risen sharply, while inflation is around

9 per cent. 19 million Brazilians are now affected by hunger, a significant increase over 2018. This is currently exacerbated by the worst drought in over 90 years in a country where over 60 per cent of energy consumption is covered by hydropower. The persistent drought could also cause considerable economic damage and make life more expensive for the population because of higher energy costs.

At the same time, investigations are revealing salient details about the government's misconduct in the Covid-19 crisis and conducting inquiries against Bolsonaro and his sons. For businesses too, Bolsonaro and his neoliberal economics minister are by no means the support they had hoped for. He is creating uncertainty, which will ultimately also damage economic development. After the economy initially appeared to be recovering somewhat, GDP has recently declined by 0.1 per cent compared to the first third of the year. This scenario is unlikely to improve.

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Against this backdrop, Bolsonaro would lose hands down against his most promising opponent, former president Lula Inacio da Silva. Although the election is not until October 2022, Bolsonaro's chances of being re-elected are now extremely small. Lula addressed the people in his own video broadcast the day before. In a calm tone, he assured his audience that a better Brazil is possible. By doing so, he presented a clear alternative to Bolsonaro, even if the ex-president isn't popular amongst all sectors of society.

An attack on democracy

Given this situation, Bolsonaro is betting everything on confrontation, using a radical discourse against Brazil's democratic institutions. This discourse was ubiquitous last Tuesday as well, while Brazil's current challenges went unmentioned. As with the previous debate on the liberalisation of gun ownership or promoting chloroquine against Covid-19, he sent simple (and false) messages and painted images of his enemies. This is particularly true of Alexandre de Moraes, a Supreme Court judge whom Bolsonaro bad-mouthed, shouting that the limit had been reached. The peak of his speech: in future he will disregard the decisions of the Chief Justice.

These direct attacks are no coincidence. Alexandre de Moraes will chair the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) in 2022, which will oversee the

presidential elections. Moreover, he is now the main judge who has also targeted Bolsonaro and his sons, among other things, in investigations into fake news campaigns.

After a series of radical statements, Bolsonaro backed down somewhat in the days following the protest. Through the mediation of the conservative ex-president Temer, Bolsonaro even spoke to Moraes on the phone and later explained that his statements had been made in the heat of the situation. Moraes was justice minister under Temer who later nominated him for the position on the Supreme Court. Bolsonaro's retraction is also already a well-known stylistic device and should by no means be understood as a real atonement.

These attacks aren't just directed against one individual, however, but against Brazil's democratic institutions as a whole. They are a real threat to democracy now and in the next few years, because at least so far Bolsonaro has been able to act with virtually no consequences. Despite his obvious threats – and obvious failures, for example in the Covid-19 crisis –, Bolsonaro has never had to seriously fear impeachment. In the Chamber of Deputies in particular, until now Bolsonaro has been protected by his pact with the Centrão, a group of opportunist parties that have been greatly benefitting from his presidency. So far, it was mainly the left-wing parties that have pushed for impeachment and are debating joint steps.

Bolsonaro may continue to be protected

After Bolsonaro's repeated anti-democratic outbursts, some conservative parties are also openly positioning themselves against Bolsonaro, even those that have so far held back on criticism. On Sunday, demonstrations against Bolsonaro took place – organised by those conservative movements that also demonstrated against Dilma Rousseff. Therefore, progressive forces were mostly reluctant to participate. This had a decisive impact on mobilisation and participation. Despite a few well-known speakers, the demonstrations were rather sobering and only a few people came together – compared to those demonstrations on 7 September or previous ones organised by the Left earlier this year.

A constitutional crisis thus becomes a likely scenario, fuelled by Bolsonaro and supported by opportunistic forces in other democratic

So far, it is still a long way to a united front of left-wing and conservative forces – if this is even possible at all. This is has to do with old resentments ('Antipetismo') but especially with a possible 'third way' candidate who is neither Bolsonaro nor Lula – even if this way has little chance of electoral success today.

institutions as well.

Even if the conservatives have started to move, initial indications suggest that Bolsonaro will continue to be protected. There are already almost 130 motions for impeachment, most of them from opposition parties. So far, however, these have not been discussed, because the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Arthur Lira, has to approve one of the motions. Lira is the Centrão's leading figure.

Although the Supreme Court condemned the attacks, the Attorney General, for example, saw the protests of 7 September as the peaceful expression of a pluralistic society and Lira refrained from direct criticism of Bolsonaro. For a long time now, Bolsonaro has not adhered to the democratic rules of the game; on the contrary, he deliberately opposes them. Bolsonaro will therefore continue his confrontation with the Supreme Court and his radical attacks. Thus, the crisis between the court and the president continues to escalate – without a realistic prospect that one will give way. A constitutional crisis thus becomes a likely scenario, fuelled by Bolsonaro and supported by opportunistic forces in other democratic institutions as well.

A coup attempt?

Will Bolsonaro attempt a coup? This question was also loudly discussed in the run-up to 7 September. A real military coup is unlikely, because since the democratisation, the military has never had more power than under Bolsonaro. Rather, the more significant elements will be the normalisation of chaos, the undermining of democratic institutions, and the trivialisation of a coup. In other words, by the time that Bolsonaro took office at the latest, there has been a steady erosion of democracy in which he is deliberately seeking direct confrontation with democratic institutions.

Seen through this anti-system logic, 7 September was a success.

Bolsonaro has the majority of the population against him; he will hardly win an election this way. He himself knows this, which explains his radical attacks. As he did at the beginning of his term in office, he communicates directly with his supporters. This discourse is in turn shared by large parts of his supporters, who account for around 20–2 25 per cent of the population. Often isolated in filter bubbles, they use narratives such as the restoration of democracy, freedom or the establishment of constitutional order, while at the same time openly calling for military intervention and the removal of the

chief judges of the Supreme Court of Justice.

This reversal and emptying-out of democratic terminology is also part of the strategy and auto-legitimation. Bolsonaro's goal is to radicalise and serve his followers, and his movement, Bolsonarismo. And with the mobilisation of 7 September, he actually succeeded in giving this movement a feeling of strength again – a feeling of 'us' against the illegitimate representatives of the state institutions.

Seen through this anti-system logic, 7 September was a success. Bolsonarismo does not stand alone in this effort, as he has long maintained contacts at the international level – for example with the AfD and especially with Trump. A Trump confidante, Jason Miller, was also in the country – at the invitation of Eduardo Bolsonaro – and the large number of posters in English on the Avenida Paulista and in Brasilia was conspicuous.

The defence of democracy against autocratic attacks by Bolsonaro has long been an ongoing issue that ties up resources and distracts attention from deep structural problems and the urgent need for crisis management. Fuelled by the Bolsonarismo movement and the lack of consequences against its highest-ranking representative, the danger of a further erosion of Brazil's democratic culture and a permanent constitutional crisis remains great.



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