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How Bolsonaro is breaking the divide between the state and church

Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro drew much resentment over his Presidency but one voter base remains fiercely loyal to him — the evangelicals

In mid-August, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro stands on a stage in the Sambódromo, the arena in the centre of Rio de Janeiro, through which the country's most famous carnival schools parade once a year. But on this day, there is no colourful parade. Instead, Bolsonaro is surrounded by a group – arms raised in the air, eyes closed. 'Praise be to the Lord', the evangelical pastors pray fervently. The event is the culmination of the annual 'March for Jesus', one of the most important events of the ultra-conservative free churches. It is no coincidence that Bolsonaro allows himself to be publicly blessed in front of thousands of believers: Brazil's elections are taking place on 2 October – and the right-wing radical is dependent on the votes of Bible-believing Christians.

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The world's largest Catholic country is undergoing what some scholars are calling a 'religious revolution'. Ever greater numbers of Brazilians are turning to the ultra-conservative Pentecostal churches. Whereas in 1990 more than 80 per cent of the population described themselves as Catholic, by 2020 it was only around 50 per cent. 32 per cent of the population now sees itself as evangelical – and the trend is rising. According to calculations, evangelicals are likely to make up the majority of the population in ten years.

An unlikely alliance

But what does 'evangelical' actually mean? Evangelicalism is a theological movement within Protestantism. As a rule, the congregations do not engage in critical Bible exegesis. For them, what is written in the Bible is to be understood literally, is considered God-given and is not questioned.

In Brazil there also exist traditional Protestant denominations such as Lutherans or Baptists. These have European origins and to an extent are more liberal. However, the ultra-conservative Pentecostal churches are the most popular. Many of them originally come from the US.

Evangelical churches today dominate the streets of Brazilian inner cities, slums, and remote villages in equal measure. Similar to the US, there are huge, prestigious, ultra-modern buildings. You can now find small 'garage temples' on almost every street corner, often with only a few plastic chairs and a set of amplifiers, microphones, and speakers. Since, unlike the Catholic Church, there is no supreme religious authority, it is easy to start a new church. Almost anyone can call themselves a pastor. What you need above all is charisma and a 'divine calling'.

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The charismatic pastors and promises of salvation are particularly popular with poor Brazilians. And the Pentecostal churches are present where the state is absent, especially in areas where there are no sports fields, libraries, or green spaces; places characterised by violence, impoverishment, and a lack of prospects. The evangelicals are often the only ones who listen, take the residents seriously, and understand their fears. In addition to emotional support, they offer something like recreational activities. Today many believers are women, often single parents, mostly black. Bolsonaro knew as much when he was planning his election campaign and strived to be close to the church elite. The strong influence of evangelicals in poor neighbourhoods explains why so many residents of the urban periphery voted for neoliberal racist Bolsonaro.

The incumbent president is actually Catholic. In the 2018 election campaign, however, he hardly missed an opportunity to cultivate close relations with the evangelical churches. He was an acclaimed star guest at church services, was baptised in the River Jordan to much media attention, and was married to his third wife by star pastor Silas Malafaia. The calculation worked: in the election, for the first time, all of the major evangelical churches supported one single candidate, namely Bolsonaro. In the runoff, 70 per cent of evangelical voters voted for the far-right candidate, who appropriately goes by the middle name of 'Messiah'.

The fact that the twice-divorced, gun-wielding bully Bolsonaro doesn't

quite spring from the sky-blue dream world of the Bible believers seems secondary. More important are the clear ideas that he shares with evangelicals: the rejection of homosexuality, fight against abortion, and demonisation of feminism. In 2018, the ultra-right populist cleverly used the conspiracy myth of a supposed 'gender ideology' to attack female political opponents. This ideology would purportedly incite children and young people to change their gender, become homosexuals, and take up premature sexual practices. Absurd fake news spread rapidly on social media: in short order, a programme to combat homophobia in schools was quickly turned into a project for the 'early sexualisation' of children. To this day, many Brazilians still believe that in day-care centres, the workers' party PT distributed baby bottles in the shape of penises. In conservative society, this rallied many worried Brazilians to back the right-wing candidate. When Bolsonaro then survived a knife attack, it was proof for many: This man has a sacred mission! He's sent from above!

In this election campaign as well, Bolsonaro is trying to establish close ties to the strictly religious clientele. While many forces in Brazilian society are now distancing themselves from Bolsonaro, the major churches remain loyal to him. This is also reflected in the polls for the October election: while Bolsonaro ranks second in virtually all groups compiled by researchers, he is only ahead in the evangelical constituency. Their loyalty can also be explained by the fact that in many respects the government pursuing policies precisely according to its reactionary principles.

The restructuring of the state to ultra-conservative ideas

Fundamentalist forces had a firm place in Brazilian politics even before Bolsonaro's rise to power. It is not uncommon for pastors to be elected to parliament. They preach on Sundays, and vote on Mondays. In Congress there is a bipartisan association of evangelical MPs. The so-called Bible Caucus has long sought to help shape politics according to its reactionary principles. Every Wednesday morning, the 'brothers in faith' gather in a hall to pray together.

However, when Bolsonaro took office, a real restructuring of the state according to ultra-conservative ideas began. Fundamentalist groups have deliberately infiltrated the government. Entire departments have been replaced, and religious hardliners have taken the place of female experts. For example, virtually the entire women's health team at the Ministry of Health, many of whom were renowned experts and had worked there for decades, was replaced. The government also took the axe to other areas. It

withdrew funding from progressive projects. It abolished other departments altogether, such as the diversity unit in the Ministry of Education. And evangelicals, as well as some ultra-conservative Catholics, are trying to fill all the committees that deal with issues that interest them: abortion, LGBTQI, drugs. They are also trying to influence the granting of radio and television licenses, which are reallocated every five years, so that they are not changed to the detriment of evangelical networks.

With Bolsonaro, the dividing line between state and church is increasingly disappearing.

As Minister for Women, Family, and Human Rights, Bolsonaro appointed a particularly active person: Damares Alves. Before her nomination, the evangelical pastor preached to packed megachurches, toured the country as an anti-abortion activist, and was an adviser to gospel-singing MP Magno Malta. In the first speech after her nomination, Alves explained in precisely which direction policy should go: the moment had come when the church was to rule, and when boys wore blue and girls wore pink again. Alves is no longer a minister, but other members of the government also are also driving Brazil's fundamentalist transformation.

Bolsonaro delivered on other points as well: tax exemptions for churches, benefits for their media networks, and debt forgiveness worth billions. His Coronavirus policy can also be partly explained by pressure from the churches: anti-scientific conspiracy myths are part of the DNA of many congregations. For example, Edir Macedo, founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, said Corona was a 'strategy of Satan and the media' to create panic among people. President Bolsonaro asked for a nationwide fast day to fight the virus with the power of faith. And he issued a decree classifying churches as 'necessary services' to prevent their temporary closure during the pandemic.

Bolsonaro's homophobic and transphobic outbursts go down well with the Bible-believing Christians, as do his attempts to tighten the already strict abortion laws even further. And when Bolsonaro – much like his great idol Donald Trump – announced that he was moving the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, champagne corks popped in many churches. For evangelicals, Israel is central, the site of Armageddon. After pressure from the powerful meat industry – which feared a drop in sales in the Arab world – the change of embassy was called off. But the direction became clear: with Bolsonaro, the dividing line between state and church is increasingly disappearing.

Religion as an unavoidable subject

Bolsonaro is trying to turn the upcoming election into a final battle between good and evil. This fits in with the discourse of evangelicals, who see themselves in a constant state of war against all of the evil inherent in modern society – they call it 'spiritual warfare'. Many pastors are not only openly calling for the election of Bolsonaro, but are also firing with all guns ablaze at Bolsonaro's opponent, who has been demonised as the 'Antichrist' and 'Communists': Luiz Inácio da Silva, better known as 'Lula'.

The social democrat with the scratchy voice, who has already governed for two terms, is trying to avoid the issue of religion as much as possible. Behind closed doors, advisers have been heard to say that in this field, against the right wing you can only lose. The explosive power of certain topics was shown when Lula tentatively criticised the rigid abortion laws at an event, and thus triggered a storm of indignation. After all, 75 per cent of the population categorically reject abortions. Due to the political volatility, many leftists are also avoiding 'sensitive issues' such as abortion, decriminalisation of drugs, and police reforms, as this could cost them important votes.

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But Lula cannot do without religion entirely. At an election campaign event, he said that Bolsonaro was 'possessed by the devil'. And he has met with progressive evangelicals. Even if most members of the Free Church are staunchly conservative, with many even fundamentalist, there is a scene apart from the charlatan pastors and hate preachers who praise Bolsonaro. But in any case, the progressive forces are clearly in the minority.

This election campaign is likely to focus on other issues, first and foremost the country's economic woes. Bolsonaro has drawn much resentment over the past three and a half years. And right now it actually looks as if it might be possible to defeat him in the election. But he is defending himself against this prospect with all his might, while he tries to delegitimise the democratic process. He is spreading lies about the electronic voting system and stirring up animosity against women judges. Quite a few expect violence, some even an attempted coup. What nobody doubts is that turbulent weeks are coming to Brazil, especially since Bolsonaro has already announced that he will not simply resign. 'Only God,' he said, 'removes me from the presidency.'



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