DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 22.09.2022 | Oliver Stuenkel

'Prison, death or victory'

It is predicted that Bolsonaro will not be re-elected in the upcoming elections. To hold on to power, he has militarised the Brazilian government

For the first time since Brazil's democratisation in the late 1980s, the presidential elections in October are not just about who gets the most votes. Less than a month before the first round, the biggest question is what will happen if the current president Jair Bolsonaro loses and refuses to acknowledge the result? As things stand, anything *else* would be a surprise: For months Bolsonaro has been clearly trailing behind Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, better known as 'Lula', who led Brazil from 2003 to 2010. There are very few undecided voters in this deeply polarised society, and with every passing day it becomes more and more unlikely that the President will be able to catch up.

But Bolsonaro will not acknowledge his defeat and simply hand Lula the presidential sash on 1 January 2023. Bolsonaro has been claiming for years that Brazil's electronic voting machines can be manipulated – without providing any evidence. He also maintains that the official 2018 election results were tampered with because *he should have won* the first round! At a recent campaign event, Bolsonaro said that there are only three possible outcomes to the election: 'Prison, death or victory'.

Lessons from 6 January

Should Lula win (polls indicate that in the 30 October runoff he will) and Bolsonaro not accept the result, there are, indeed, three possible scenarios. In the best case, the president would refuse to congratulate Lula but not attend his inauguration on 1 January – and not trigger a political crisis. The second scenario is a Brazilian '6 January' with armed Bolsonaro supporters trying to storm Brazil's Supreme Court or Superior Electoral Court – but not preventing the transfer of power. In the third and most dreaded case, Brazil's generals would show they are in favour of Bolsonaro challenging the results and conduct their own parallel, unofficial, count.

More than 6,000 military personnel hold ministerial positions, and many decision-makers – including his vice president and several ministers – are generals.

In recent weeks, Brazil's Defence Minister General Paulo Sérgio Nogueira has repeatedly suggested – with no legal basis – that the military is a supervisory electoral authority and that the votes will have to be counted separately. The military long since abandoned their political neutrality and more than any other president since Brazil became a democracy, Bolsonaro, who enjoys referring to 'my forces', has militarised the government. More than 6,000 military personnel hold ministerial positions, and many decision-makers – including his vice president and several ministers – are generals. That has led Supreme Court judge Luiz Roberto Barroso to draw a parallel with Venezuela, where military officials also have key political positions, soberly noting that the Brazilian government is being 'Chávezised'.

It is no surprise that the Brazilian president is trying to get the armed forces on his side. After supporters of US President Trump – who lost the 2020 elections – stormed the American capitol on 6 January 2021 but were unable to prevent the transfer of power, Bolsonaro's son Eduardo, then chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Chamber of Deputies, shockingly commented that, had Trump supporters 'been better organised, they could have taken the Capitol and make concrete demands' – and that, 'With more firepower,' the rioters 'could have killed all the police and congresspeople they hate'.

Defending the dictator over the constitution

Bolsonaro sees clear lessons from the events on 6 January 2021 in Washington, DC: Trump couldn't hang on because he wasn't supported by the US military. The video of Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley stating soon after the November election that the armed forces 'take an oath to defend the Constitution' and not an oath '[...] to a dictator' was viewed and shared thousands of times on Brazilian social media channels. Unfortunately, as was commented, many in Brazil's military continue to whitewash the military coup of 1964 and do not share that understanding of democracy.

It is difficult to predict how Brazil's military would react to the president

challenging the election results. Bolsonaro could use his supporters' post-election protests and clashes with Lula supporters as a pretext to invoke the 'guarantee of law and order' and compel the army to intervene. But not all members of the armed forces support Bolsonaro, and those who make public statements do not necessarily represent most of the generals. Back in March 2021, for example, the heads of Brazil's army, navy and air force all resigned to protest Bolsonaro abruptly firing of his Defence Minister General Fernando Azevedo e Silva – a move seen as the President attempting to surround himself with yeasayers.

Not even the fact that the Workers' Party governments passed the largest military budgets ever prevents lots of army personnel from enthusiastically supporting Bolsonaro's radical anti-Lula stance.

Bolsonaro's defeat would mean a loss of political power and many financial benefits for the armed forces: Countless military personnel hold political positions in government, run state enterprises, and are paid for both active-duty military roles *and* civilian jobs. The Federal Comptroller General's Office recently revealed that more than 2,300 military personnel hold jobs for which they are paid too much or are unqualified. Unfortunately, that office 'is responsible for oversight of the federal executive but has no power over the military'. Besides that, many generals and soldiers are very critical of Lula's Workers' Party. They remember how in 2007, Lula consolidated civilian control over the armed forces by naming Nelson Jobim, an influential politician, as Defence Minister – eight years after President Fernando Henrique Cardoso had created that Ministry, thereby reducing the generals' influence.

Workers' Party governments also created the National Truth Commission, which, although it had only symbolic value, shed critical light on the army's role during Brazil's twenty-year dictatorship. The army saw that as violating their amnesty. Not even the fact that the Workers' Party governments passed the largest military budgets ever – funding helicopters, fighter jets and French submarines – prevents lots of army personnel from enthusiastically supporting Bolsonaro's radical *anti*-Lula stance. Emblematic of this is the notorious tweet from 2018 in which former army chief Villas Bôas suggested the army should intervene if the Supreme Court did not send Lula to prison.

Four years later, the courts have overturned Lula's corruption convictions and paved his way to re-enter politics. Lula is poised to return to the presidential palace – if Brazil's generals don't block him by backing



Oliver Stuenkel
São Paulo

Oliver Stuenkel is an Associate Professor of International Relations at the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV) in São Paulo, and a non-resident Fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) in Berlin. He is the author of *The Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order* (Polity, 2016).