

Brazil: The new conjuncture: Bolsonaro strengthened?

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There is a new political situation in the country. The Bolsonaro government has gained in strength, thus interrupting the process of attrition that began after the pandemic arrived in Brazil in mid-March. Understanding the factors responsible for the government's growing popularity and the abatement of the current political and institutional crisis, in the context of a serious health and economic crisis, is key to identifying the tendencies and contradictions of the present political and social reality, and for the formulation of a Marxist policy appropriate to the new conjuncture.

Four principal factors of the new conjuncture

1 - Impact of emergency aid

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), emergency aid coverage had by July reached 107.1 million Brazilians, over half of the population (50.7%). Another fact worth noting: 44.1% of the nation's homes are now included in the program.

Without this aid, there would have been a colossal and potentially explosive social crisis, especially given that there are 25 million people unemployed (the total of those both seeking and not seeking work). For example, according to COVID data from the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD), poverty among blacks would have increased from 17% to 30%. But the emergency program has kept this figure to around 20%. With the fifth installment of this aid, an estimated 200 billion reais (US\$ 37 billion) will have been spent. This is equivalent to what was spent on the Bolsa Família (Family Allowance), a social welfare program introduced by former Workers' Party (PT) president Lula da Silva, over almost seven years.

In March, Jair Bolsonaro and Economy Minister Paulo Guedes had begrudgingly wanted to pay individuals no more than R\$ 200 (US\$ 37) in aid. After much pressure from the left, Congress set the amount to R\$ 600 (US\$ 111), reaching R\$ 1200 (US\$ 222) for single parents. However, the fact is that the majority of the population attributes the benefits of the emergency program to those responsible for the payment, the federal government.

As public opinion polls demonstrate, the positive impact of this aid on people's lives (preventing many of them from going hungry or missing out on basic necessities) is the main reason for the increase in Bolsonaro's popularity. The latest survey from Datafolha saw the numbers of those who rate Bolsonaro as great or good climb to 37%. Among those who account for the rise in this index, almost 90% of them are people who earn less than two minimum wages, those who are precisely the main beneficiaries of this aid. Yet despite this, it is this income segment that is still the most critical of Bolsonaro.

2. Trivialization of the pandemic

Even with over one hundred thousand deaths and the continuation of an uncontrolled pandemic, the Bolsonaro government, the Brazilian ruling class and the majority of governors and mayors are conducting an intense campaign to naturalize the disease.

Along with this, there is a prevailing view among the population that the worst is over. The exhaustion caused by five long months of pandemic and the positive expectations generated by the partial resumption of the economy all help to explain the rise in popular optimism, which in turn fuels Bolsonaro's popularity.

It is worth pointing out that the campaign of trivialization is anchored in a basic factor of Brazilian national reality: structural racism. The enormous tolerance in Brazil for the death of the country's black and poor people, who make up the majority of COVID victims, is reinforced by Bolsonarismo, which dilutes and minimizes the perception of the humanitarian tragedy we are now in.

In addition to this, deaths caused by the virus only spread little by little, day by day. It is not like a bomb that destroys a city in a fraction of a second or a plane crash, which have an immediate impact. Deaths caused by COVID begin to be part of the "new normal," which has to a certain extent become assimilated into everyday life.

Taking this normalization of the pandemic into account should not lead to the mistaken conclusion that the Brazilian people are to blame for this situation. The majority of the working class has adhered to social distancing to the best of their ability, is critical of the revisionist policies of Bolsonaro, and is still opposed to the return of school classes. The battle as to how this tragedy we are living through concludes is not over. It will still be the object of political disputation in the coming months and years.

3. Interim "upstairs" agreement

June 18 marked a turning point for Bolsonaro. That was the day that Fabrício Queiroz, former advisor to the president's son Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, was arrested. That same week saw Bolsonarista parliamentarians, business leaders, and Youtubers become the target of Federal Police operations ordered by the Federal Supreme Court (STF).

After the arrest of his friend and the legal offensive against his neo-fascist supporters, Bolsonaro adopted the line of "paz e amor" (peace and love). He put his threats of a coup to one side, negotiated a deal with politicians from the political center, formed a more expansive base in Congress for the government, and tolerated the legal repression of his most radical right wing supporters. In addition, Bolsonaro began to focus his travel schedule on visits to inaugurations of public works (particularly in the Northeast) and on capitalizing on the popularity of the emergency aid package.

Thus, the line of the big bourgeoisie prevailed: neither a coup nor impeachment, but a disciplined Bolsonaro government. President of the Chamber of Deputies Rodrigo Maia and National Congress President Davi Alcolumbre, the Federal Supreme Court (STF), the traditional right-wing Democrats (DEM) and Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) parties, and several governors, along with support from the military core of the government, were all crucial to this agreement. Also worth emphasizing is the negative role played by left governors from the Workers' Party (PT) and the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), who bet on an alliance with the traditional right (against Bolsonaro) led by Rodrigo Maia and gave in to pressure from businesses calling for an end to social distancing in their states.

The ruling class wants to maintain the neoliberal economic program of Minister of the Economy

Paulo Guedes (cuts in social spending and labor rights; privatizations), but not concede to the adventurism of a Bolsonaro coup. A temporary intermediate solution has therefore been found: the neo-fascist president remains in power, but he has been obliged to renounce, at least for now, any authoritarian escalation against Congress and the Supreme Court (STF). In a tactical move, Bolsonaro has in turn taken a step back from his agitation for a coup, and in so doing seeks to regain strength for a future authoritarian offensive.

4. Absence of mass mobilizations

At the height of the attrition in support experienced by Bolsonaro back in May, when a popular majority had taken shape against the government, it was not possible to take to the streets en masse because of the serious risks of infection. At the moment the neo-fascist president threatened a coup, thousands (not tens of thousands) of fighters, even with the danger of the new coronavirus, took to the streets across several cities. But this was the limit of what was possible.

The persistence of the disease, which remains uncontrolled, was - and still is - an obstacle to the existence of massive demonstrations in the streets. Without being able to resort to one of the main and most effective methods of struggle, the left, the social movements, and the unions could not test out the possibility of mass struggle until now.

It must be concluded that the absence of major street mobilizations facilitated the “upstairs” agreement and the recovery of Bolsonaro’s popularity that began in mid-June.

This observation should not eliminate from the analysis the existence of important struggles and militant actions that have occurred in recent months. There have been several demonstrations of frontline health professionals; countless solidarity campaigns by social movements; courageous anti-racist and anti-fascist mobilizations; important strikes by public transport workers, such as metroviários (subway workers) and rodoviários (highway bus drivers), and metalworkers (such as the Renault strike in Paraná); two days of national stoppages by food app deliverers; demonstrations by education professionals against the reopening of schools; and mobilizations of the homeless and landless, among other actions. At this moment, a national strike of postal workers is underway.

These processes of struggle indicate that, even with Bolsonaro’s increase in popularity, there is the possibility of expanding and strengthening the resistance of the working and oppressed class in the next period.

Tendencies and contradictions

Brazil continues to experience a reactionary situation which is characterized, among other factors, by a bourgeois offensive led politically by a neo-fascist president. The dynamic which began in March of the weakening of the government has since mid-June been interrupted by the opening up of a new situation marked by the de-escalation of the political crisis and a rise in Bolsonaro’s popularity.

However, the scenario of an economic, social and health crisis, which will continue to guide the life of the country, does not offer a basis for a more lasting political stabilization. The contradictions are set: record unemployment, an uncontrolled pandemic, a fragile economic recovery in Brazil and the world, clashes of different political projects, the historic emergence in the United States of the anti-racist uprising and the consequent weakening of Trump, among other elements.

Without continued emergency aid (or with a reduction in its value and reach), tens of millions of poor workers, the majority black, will be suddenly plunged into poverty and misery. This will cause a brutal social shock and could reverse the rise in the president’s popularity that has been seen among

the poorest. Bolsonaro knows this and, with an eye on the polls, wants an expanded Bolsa Família.

But how is greater social spending to be reconciled with neoliberal prescriptions based on radical cuts in public investment? The big bourgeoisie is applying pressure and Paulo Guedes has already threatened the militia-loving president: if the *Teto de Gastos* (Spending Ceiling - a constitutional 20-year public spending limit implemented in 2016 by then-President Michel Temer) falls, Bolsonaro may fall with it.

The truth is that those “upstairs” can negotiate an intermediate solution: cuts to public education, social rights (like salary bonuses), the civil service, and other areas that finance the continuation of aid with a smaller amount and reduced scope. In this case, another contradiction will be set in place. For example, the largest street mobilizations since the election of Bolsonaro were those of students and education professionals in 2019, which were opposed precisely to funding cuts such as these.

Moreover, as we have seen, several categories of workers, black and white, young people and the feminist movement among others, are demonstrating their capacity to resist such attacks. No defeat of an historic level of the exploited and oppressed has taken place. It is still possible to defeat Bolsonaro and his neo-fascist project.

The politics of the socialist left

Taking into account the evaluation of the new situation, we believe that it is possible to summarize the tasks of the socialist left in three main points:

1 - Strengthen the struggles and the United Front of the Left

At this time, the left must build and actively support all struggles of resistance (such as the postal strike and the campaign against the reopening of schools), so that they have a victorious outcome, just like the subway strikes, the metalworkers at Renault, and other mobilizations. In addition to strengthening each of these struggles, it is critical to move forward in the construction of the *Frente Única pelo Fora Bolsonaro* (United Front for Bolsonaro Out) and the defense of social rights, involving left-wing parties, labor unions, social movements, the black movement, feminist movement, youth organizations, among other organizations of our people.

2 - Prepare the electoral challenge for the fight against *Bolsonarismo*

The municipal elections will be an important moment in the political struggle in the country. In each city, candidacies from the Party of Socialism and Freedom (PSOL) should be a point of support for confronting *Bolsonarismo* and advocating a program for the working and oppressed majority. Where unification of the left is not possible in the first round, we must fight for alliance in the second round to defeat the far-right and the traditional right.

3 - Present a concrete program in defense of the working-class majority, blacks, women, LGBTs, and indigenous peoples

At this moment, it is necessary to defend the maintenance of emergency aid for an indefinite period without reducing its value; for social distancing measures and mass testing to control the pandemic; for moving the struggle against racism and the genocide of black people forward; for defending measures that protect and create jobs and prohibit mass layoffs; for greater investments in health and public education, for an end to the *Teto de Gastos* (Spending Ceiling) and the taxing of large fortunes and the banks; and for the defense of the public service, public servants, and state enterprises. A program for the defense of the Amazon is also critical, including both the forests and indigenous peoples, which are threatened by the advance of agribusiness, mining, and other criminal

activities that are destroying the environment.

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P.S.

Here, the editorial board of the Brazilian socialist publication Esquerda Online, which represents the Resistência current within the Party for Socialism and Freedom, reviews the state of Bolsonaro's administration and the state of the left, trade unions, and social movements who oppose him. Translated by Bobby Sparks for [Esquerda Online](#), republished by [No Borders News](#).

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