

Brazil's presidential election: fearful LGBT community prepares for a 'proud homophobe'

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Jair Bolsonaro is clear favourite to win Sunday's presidential election - a 'repulsive' prospect for the country's beleaguered minorities.

It was exactly a fortnight after round one of Brazil's poison-filled presidential election that Aretha Sadick found herself sprinting for her life away from a man wielding an iron bar.

"It was a hate crime. No doubt about it. Hate is the only word," recalled the 29-year-old black transgender artist and campaigner, still shaken by her run-in with death.

"It was on a street I always walk down. An area where I always go. And I've never experienced such an overt act of hostility," she said. "These things don't happen by accident. There's been a validation."

Sadick and fellow members of São Paulo's LGBT community are clear who they blame for legitimising such violence: a far-right firebrand who is notorious for his spiteful, homophobic remarks and looks very likely to become Brazil's next president on Sunday.

In nearly three decades as a congressman, Jair Bolsonaro has never concealed his dislike of gay people. "Yes, I'm homophobic - and very proud of it," he once proclaimed.

In a 2013 interview with Stephen Fry [[1](#)] - which the British actor later called "one of the most chilling confrontations I've ever had with a human being" - the far-right populist claimed "homosexual fundamentalists" were brainwashing heterosexual children to "become gays and lesbians to satisfy them sexually in the future". Bolsonaro declared: "Brazilian society doesn't like homosexuals."

The politician - whom polls give a 12-point lead over his leftist rival Fernando Haddad, down from 18% a fortnight ago - has ramped up such rhetoric during the campaign, accusing LGBT campaigners and other minorities of "self-pity", while simultaneously claiming that he will govern for all.

Activists, however, say that while violence and discrimination against the LGBT community have long existed, Bolsonaro's brazen bigotry has helped launch a new era of brutality and threats.

"It's as if the gates of hell have been opened - as if hunting season had been declared," said Beto de Jesus, a veteran LGBT activist and founder of São Paulo's huge annual gay pride parade. "It's barbarism."

James Green, an American academic with longstanding ties to Brazil's gay movement, said Bolsonaro's "repulsive" discourse had left some gay and lesbian couples wondering if it was even still safe to hold hands in public: "He has unleashed all the demons in Brazilian society and they are

out there now: unmasked and vicious and violent.”

Renan Quinalha, a São Paulo-based lawyer and LGBT activist, said recent weeks had seen a “frightening” spike in reports of physical or verbal abuse carried out by Bolsonaro supporters. He described a mood of fear and trepidation, both at the violence and the prospect that, as president, Bolsonaro might try to roll back hard-fought gains such as the 2011 legalisation of same-sex unions.

Even if the far-right candidate suffered a shock defeat, the hatred he had fanned and sanctioned would remain, he said. “It’s no longer just about Bolsonaro, but a set of values and postures that he represents and that will live on in Brazilian society.”

But Quinalha and other activists said there was a determination, too, to fight back: “Nobody is going back into the closet. We will resist.”

One place that is already happening is Casa 1, an LGBT shelter and cultural centre whose exterior has been plastered with anti-Bolsonaro posters reading: “Not him. Never. Ever”.

The walls inside are similarly decked with protest art. “Without struggle (and poofs) there will be no revolution!” reads one banner. Another says: “Stop killing trans!”

Iran Giusti, the centre’s founder, said Casa 1 had been conceived as a space that was politicised but had no party affiliations. Facing Bolsonaro’s threat, however, it was throwing its weight behind his Workers’ party (PT) opponent, Haddad, hosting meetings of an anti-Bolsonaro “brigade” and serving as a distribution centre for PT pamphlets that ask voters: “What kind of a Brazil do you want?”

“We are here defending our very survival,” said Giusti, 29.

Casa 1 is also offering counselling sessions to those disturbed by Bolsonaro’s rise. After a pre-election session of “drag bingo”, Giusti said it would also open its doors as the results were announced: “Lots of people don’t want to go through this moment alone.”

Giusti said he saw some bright spots amid the gloom. In a historic first, two trans politicians, Erica Malunguinho and Erika Hilton, recently secured places in São Paulo’s state legislature. But the overall atmosphere was bleak: “We can feel the fear.”

Sadick – who escaped serious harm after a friend saw her being attacked, and intervened – said she also felt despondent. As mayor of São Paulo from 2013 to 2017, Haddad had assisted its “T community”, creating an educational programme called Transcidadania (Transcitizenship), she remembered. Bolsonaro, in contrast, had helped release a deep-rooted loathing towards LGBT people previously “hidden in people’s hearts and minds”.

Sadick said she was so troubled she was considering exit strategies. “I have been talking to my friends about the possibility of leaving Brazil, about asking for political asylum,” she admitted. “I just don’t know how much I want to expose myself and my body ... Is it worth being a martyr?”

One member of São Paulo’s LGBT community will not get that chance. Two days after the attack on Sadick, Jessica Gonzaga, a 25-year-old trans woman, was murdered just a few streets away, near some of the city’s most famous LGBT bars and clubs.

One witness recalled hearing shouts of “Bolsonaro!” and “Faggots must die!” as Gonzaga was stabbed – although the victim’s cousin, Gabriela, said police now believed it had been a crime of passion – the latest chapter in a long and brutal history of exclusion and violence to which Brazil’s trans community is exposed.

On Friday lunchtime, as Brazil prepared to vote, Gonzaga's body arrived at a palm-dotted cemetery in the city's south inside a black hatchback provided by the town hall.

The mourners were so few in number that the Observer had to help carry her plywood coffin into an outdoor chapel with a mud-coated floor and pigeons nesting in its roof. One of the nine people who had turned up to say goodbye placed two pots of yellow and white marguerite daisies on the casket. Another wore a badge reading: "Ele Não!" ("Not Him!").

Trans activist Maite Schneider said she had come "because a piece of me has died. I live one block away from where she was killed - it could have been me."

"Whatever the motive - political or not - it doesn't matter. It's a life," Schneider, 47, continued. "Just this year I must have been to 15 burials. I've stopped counting ... I'm just grateful that, after all this, I still have tears."

Seven years ago, Schneider clashed with Bolsonaro during a chat show in which she accused him of fuelling violence against gay people, and said: "Love should be respected, whatever form it takes."

On Friday, with that same man poised to become her country's leader, Schneider said she feared what came next: "Whatever happens, the damage has been done."

Tom Phillips

P.S.

• The Guardian, Sat 27 Oct 2018 22.00 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/27/dispatch-sao-paulo-jair-bolsonaro-victory-lgbt-community-fear>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/proginfo/2013/42/stephen-fry-out-there-ep2.html>