

Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil Is a Nightmare That Could Get Worse

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If Jair Bolsonaro isn't stopped, Brazil may go down a far-right path of no return. We need a political project strong enough to defeat him.

Just a couple of months ago, commentators were complaining that [Jair Bolsonaro](#) was not doing much with his presidency. The Brazilian president, recovering from a surgery related to the knife wound he sustained during last year's campaign, seemed a bit off, even though his overhaul of the government was already underway. Speculations about the incompetence of Bolsonaro's team, and their inability to see past ideology to push the country forward, were common.

Since April, though, the material basis of these ideological premises has become increasingly obvious. The government has gone full steam ahead on matters the Bolsonaros and their close political nucleus [can agree on](#), which means that everywhere you look, you find social rights and public goods under attack. It was never about incompetence, but about doing away with as much as possible as fast as possible. They just needed some time to get adjusted.

All in for Pension Reform

The Bolsonaro government's priority project is, of course, pension reform. Reforming the Brazilian pension system, which is currently designed around a solidarity approach, is one of the reasons the capitalist class orchestrated a parliamentary coup against former Workers' Party (PT) president Dilma Rousseff, elevating her neoliberal vice president Michel Temer in her place. It's also the reason they later promoted Bolsonaro's extreme-right candidacy, even though he had no solid economic credentials. His shot at winning depended on taking the PT's historical leader Lula out of the picture. The judge responsible for that task, Sergio Moro, is now Bolsonaro's justice minister.

Millions of reais are being invested in convincing the population that pension reform is necessary. One argument is that without it, the economic crisis will deepen even further. This same rationale was provided for the budget ceiling implemented under Temer. The results of the budget ceiling are most apparent in the crippling disinvestment from health care and public education. The government's austerity measures are essential to allocate remaining funds to service the public debt and its high interest rates — at the pleasure of the financial market.

Reformers harp on exceptional instances of unfairness in the current pension system to push a wholesale overhaul. For example, daughters of career military officers sometimes enter into stable relationships but refuse to marry in order to keep their fathers' pension. This benefit was extinct in 2000, but the already existing pensions are still honored at a cost of over 5 billion reais.

It's true that the Brazilian population is aging. But those in favor of pension reform have treated the aging population as a problem rather than challenge. The point is to make the discourse as fatalist as possible, so that support for the reform grows out of its dire inevitability. This ruse distracts the Brazilian people from how any pension deficit could be fixed by considering other variables. In

particular, it could be addressed by formal job creation — the kind that comes with rights and benefits. Such jobs are now rarer thanks to Temer’s anti-workers’ rights reforms. Over 13 million Brazilians are unemployed, with many others thrown into informal jobs, driving for Uber and doing food delivery. Bolsonaro’s focus on approving the pension reform at all costs means never talking about job creation and the potential impoverishment of the Brazilian population.

Combining just enough popular support with a minimum number of congressional sponsors is Bolsonaro’s main challenge at this point. His Finance Minister, former Chicago Boy Paulo Guedes, represents powerful sectors of the financial market. Confidence in the government is tied to its ability to do the bidding of banks, hedge fund managers, and private pension and insurance companies.

The latest polls indicate that six out of ten Brazilians agree with the pension reform. Even higher numbers reject paying more taxes to keep the system afloat. The Brazilian tax system is extremely regressive, and if people believe that the only options are reforming pensions or paying higher taxes, they’ll be easily manipulated towards reform.

In the meantime, the Left has not yet managed to provide a powerful counternarrative to rally the masses against the reform, or the Bolsonaro government more generally. Center-left and center-right politicians have gotten a lot of attention for standing up to Bolsonaro and his policies here and there. There is a struggle to define who will lead the real opposition against Bolsonaro and gather strength for the next election.

Out With Public Research, in With Startups

The educational system seems to be the Bolsonaro government’s next target. His original, extremist educational minister was removed, but the new one, Abraham Weintraub is even worse. Weintraub’s outlook combines neoliberal economic orthodoxy with the lowest levels of extreme-right ideological nonsense. Now, he’s launched a full attack on public universities.

He began by announcing 30 percent budget cuts to three universities handpicked for promoting too much disruption; that is, universities with a long history of political mobilization and student movement activity. Soon after, he extended the cuts to all federal universities, most of which were already scrambling given the asphyxiating budget ceiling.

In addition to cutting graduate scholarships, the government is planning on diverting resources from sociology and philosophy departments to areas it claims are more useful for the job market. President Bolsonaro argued that he wanted young people to focus more on learning practical skills and less on learning politics. The late educational theorist Paulo Freire has been targeted by far-right pundits for years in order to foster panic about “cultural Marxism.” Bolsonaro’s ring of supporters present such moves as a response to the threat of communism. This is the ideological façade crafted carefully by the Right’s intellectuals to gather support for the dismantling of public education and research in Brazil.

The Brazilian educational system is split between the private and public sectors, with 75 percent of post-secondary students enrolled in the private system. Public universities’ dwindling budgets may force them to slash the number of seats available to new students. Meanwhile the private system will be protected, even though it, too, benefits indirectly from programs — important as they are for giving poor youth access to university — consisting of public subsidies and government sponsored student loans.

Weintraub’s plan to starve public universities is not simply because they are, as he claims,

supposedly filled with young Marxists (we wish!). His goal is to change the character of public universities by introducing more public-private partnerships, plus business incubators and startups on campus. The liberal-conservative essence of the Bolsonaro government means that no single conservative stunt is devoid of a clear opportunity for business elites to act and shape the landscape.

Nothing Is Accidental

There is not a single action put forward by this government that does not reflect capitalist interests. For instance, Bolsonaro's latest decree authorizes parents to let their underage children learn how to shoot firearms without judicial permission. He has allowed lawyers and journalists to carry their own firearms, and negotiated a bill with Chamber of Deputies president Rodrigo Maia (DEM) to authorize rural landowners to carry their firearms around their property. This means good business for the firearms manufacturers that Flávio Bolsonaro, the president's senator son, is trying to attract to Brazil. It could also mean that indigenous and landless workers' demands for agrarian and land reform are not just ignored, but met with deadlier force than usual.

Minister Damares is most known as the oddball conservative woman and as a target of leftist memes. But she should not be underestimated. As a representative of fundamentalist religious leaders, Damares has sought to reinforce traditional gender roles in a blunt anti-feminist campaign. This has a direct impact on everything from reproductive rights to the roles played by women in the job market. She is feared by indigenous communities due to her missionary work, yet she's now in charge of the National Indigenous Foundation. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health has officially removed the concept of "obstetric violence" from its agenda for being too "socialist," even though one in four pregnant women report being victim to this kind of medical abuse. This is good news for private health care providers, which will be able to push inappropriate C-sections more easily. Meanwhile, negligence of pregnant women in public hospitals, and those hospitals' deteriorating infrastructure, will be more easily justified.

So far, every measure implemented by the Bolsonaro administration fits with a broader agenda of taking social guarantees to pieces in order to position the private sector, banking interests, and evangelical churches to swoop in once the state "fails." Given that the Brazilian army is already able to shoot over eighty bullets at a family's car in Rio de Janeiro, killing the father, and it is business as usual, the state failed a long time ago. The difference is that this government is not the slightest bit interested in building something other than its cultural wars, repression, and managing the "common affairs of the whole of the bourgeoisie."

Organizing the Opposition

If the Brazilian capitalist class as represented by the Bolsonaro government is not stopped this year, the country may go down a path of no return. Hope can be seen emerging from young students, whether or not they are part of the leftist student movement. High school students from Colégio Pedro II in Rio de Janeiro defied Bolsonaro and his allies directly by taking to the streets autonomously, which has further encouraged other groups of students, as well as labor unions and political parties, to organize a national day of struggle against the austerity measures. One wonders whether this will lead to an epidemic of school occupations as occurred under Temer.

A general strike remains part of the discursive repertoire of the Brazilian left. But since both moderate and radical streams remain under the delusion that simply calling for a strike is enough, its execution beyond a few strategic sectors coordinated by the main union federations is still uncertain. CUT is the largest union federation in Brazil and is highly connected to Workers' Party politics. However, union credibility has declined and today less than 20 percent of the formal workforce is unionized. In April 2017, the unions and leftist parties managed to organize a

successful work stoppage, but by June, a second general strike attempt failed miserably as unions shifted their negotiation tactics with the Temer government. Now, Bolsonaro is trying to further weaken unions by proposing that union dues may no longer be deducted directly from members' paychecks. A successful general strike is needed to pressure the government, but also to demonstrate the relevance of unions to the working class and ensure their survival.

During the election, the Left did manage to unite behind PT candidate [Fernando Haddad](#) against Bolsonaro; and in the face of attacks it is continuing to search for common ground. But it needs to learn that mobilization is not a matter of hitting the perfect narrative or having the right leader call out to the masses. Mobilization is about organizing, and the Left has found it hard to do so beyond an electoral base. Lula remains relevant as the leader of the PT, but the failures of the Lulista strategy may be seen in the difficulties the PT has encountered in its basic task of mobilizing against the former president's unjust conviction.

The radical left organizations, on the other hand, are in a worse state today than before the coup against Rousseff. Leftist articulation depends not only on overcoming organizing barriers, but also on creating a proper economic platform that can address the issues Bolsonaro has neglected, such as unemployment, interest rates, inflation, cost of urban living, and personal debt. Such an economic program is strategic both for connecting to the mass of unemployed and underemployed people, and for distinguishing the radical left from the neoliberal center.

Bolsonaro has catalyzed widespread indignation, and with it, new layers of activists ready to enroll in a political party and get organized. Yet there is an overall feeling that no one really knows what to do beyond denouncing everything Bolsonaro does. The PT is struggling to reconnect with the public due to the power of *antipetismo*. That anti-leftist zeitgeist has also affected the PSOL, which is still far from being a mass party — very far. The party's bet of bringing Guilherme Boulos from the Homeless Workers' Movement on board did not result in a significantly stronger popular base as expected. Other parties are even smaller, though they have pushed for the political formation of their ranks. The Landless Workers' Movement has a clear target on their back and the indigenous communities worry that this government aims to intensify ethnic cleansing.

Something has to be done, and center-left organizations are hoping it is their time to shine. The PDT's *Ciro Gomes* broke with Haddad's campaign last year and even engaged in some *antipetismo* of his own in order to differentiate his party. There are calls everywhere for more moderate positions, since Brazilians cannot handle so much polarization anymore. The post-politics of "neither left nor right, but technical" that won REDE's *Marina Silva* some traction in 2014 is making a comeback, thanks to a new generation of elected representatives trained at "political candidate startups" fueled by corporate foundation money. They aim to fill the vacuum if this government eventually falls. The problem is that although Bolsonaro's government is less hegemonic than he'd like (partly because of right-wing infighting) without strong popular opposition politicized by the Left, Bolsonaro may still stand. And as long as Bolsonaro is standing, Brazil is free-falling. It's time to organize to ensure that there is a strong left, with a clear political project, ready to catch it.

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