

Brazil: Chronicle of a Coup Foretold

Tuesday 10 January 2023, by [HYLTON Forrest](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2023).

To the extent that history repeats itself, it does so in spiral fashion, rather than exactly, and more often as tragedy than farce. Yesterday in Brasília, when a bolsonarista mob briefly invaded the Praça dos Três Poderes and vandalised Congress, the Supreme Court and the Presidential Palace (already looted by Bolsonaro himself, who stole everything except the bathroom fixtures; vandals shat and pissed all over the place), elements of both were in evidence.

By causing chaos and destruction, and alleging electoral fraud, the mob hoped to force the army to intervene – as it had been demanding, to no effect, in the ‘civilian’ encampments (full of retired, reserve and active military personnel) that sprang up in front of army barracks throughout Brazil after Lula’s victory on 30 October. Before the elections, the Pentagon, CIA and State Department all made clear that the US government has no appetite for a fascist coup in Brazil at the moment. To say the 8 January plot was far-fetched is an understatement.

As in Washington DC on 6 January 2021, the looters and vandals in Brasília yesterday appeared to have received help from someone on the inside, perhaps from security, since they clearly knew their way around – it would not otherwise have been so easy to find the door to the office of the Supreme Court justice Alexandre de Moraes, and tear it from its hinges – and although no congresspeople were inside the legislative building, some were outside fraternising with the fascists. They are unlikely to go unidentified or unpunished.

Nothing remotely comparable has happened before in recent Brazilian history. On 6 January 2021, Bolsonaro – now known as ‘Captain Fugitive’ by his disappointed supporters – tweeted that the invasion of the US Congress was small potatoes compared to what he would have in store for Brazil should he lose the elections in 2022. For once, he appears to have been telling the truth, since the mob in the Praça dos Três Poderes was much larger than the one in DC, and wreaked greater destruction on the physical infrastructure of the federal government.

Like the 6 January riot on which it was explicitly modelled, the invasion of Brasília had been in the works for weeks if not months, and minimally competent intelligence work could have nipped it in the bud (assuming, for the moment, that the intelligence services are not completely penetrated by bolsonaristas).

Far from being a tightly held secret of seasoned conspirators, the would-be coup was advertised in plain sight, all over social media, with maps and photos, using the pseudo-military codename ‘Festa da Selma’, and the hashtag #BrazilianSpring, which Steve Bannon, together with Bolsonaro’s sons, Eduardo and Carlos, helped launch in November, though it only started trending after 5 January.

The justice minister, Flávio Dino, had vowed to prevent small groups of far-right fanatics from seizing power; his promise became an object of ridicule on Twitter on 7 January. ‘Partygoers’ were advised not to bring children or the elderly, but some came along anyway. They were also told to bring bibles, though these weren’t much in evidence. They took selfies and couldn’t help posting

them, incriminating themselves; several police officers also took selfies with looters.

The defence minister, José Múcio Monteiro, who held water for the dictatorship in the 1970s, referred to the encampments outside military bases – where he had friends and family members – as ‘peaceful, democratic’ protests. This was a major misstep: nothing could be further from the truth, as was obvious even without hindsight, since the same agribusiness interests that funded Bolsonaro’s campaign funded the encampments. They are illegal and should have been removed last week, after Lula’s inauguration ceremony on 1 January, where the peaceful crowd was orders of magnitude larger than the mob that attacked the Praça dos Três Poderes a week later. Lula received the presidential sash from an Afro-Brazilian woman who recycles tin cans, and his voice broke repeatedly as he described the difficulties faced by ordinary Brazilians.

As for the forces of law and order in Brasília, the chief of the Federal District police – Bolsonaro’s former justice minister, Anderson Torres – was in the US, and told his boss, Governor Ibaneis Rocha, that he had everything under control and was set to activate his agents to disperse the looters. He didn’t. The police pepper-sprayed protesters when they moved to break through the metal gates, but they had nothing like the numbers or the firepower to hold them back. The secret service (Batalhão de Guarda Presidencial), responsible for the security of the president, the vice-president and the seat of government, was MIA.

This seems to have been more deliberate than incompetent. On Sunday evening, Governor Rocha issued an apology, clearly hoping to avoid sanction, but Justice Moraes removed him from his post for ninety days. Rocha had already fired Torres and the federal government took direct control of Brasília’s police, who rallied in sufficient numbers – with reinforcements from neighbouring states – to disperse the crowd, most of whom left peacefully and without a fight; 260 others fought briefly before being arrested and bused to the police station. An additional 1200 from their encampment, many of them elderly, have so far been detained. Some have testified that agri-business financed the invasion, while elements of the military helped plan it.

The armed forces are divided, and it is hard to know how much support Bolsonaro still has among them – among active division commanders, it would appear to be slim to none, but each wing of the armed forces is an elephantine bureaucracy, and Bolsonaro no doubt still has many sympathisers, hidden as well open. At least half a dozen of them are four-star generals who played prominent roles in his government. Had Lula ordered the army rather than police to clear the Praça dos Três Poderes, who knows if it would have obeyed. If not, then what? And had the army swung into action, how many people would it have killed?

At least seven journalists were threatened, restrained or injured by the rioters, including the award-winning Tereza Cruvinel, who narrowly escaped a lynch mob thanks to a bolsonarista neighbour of hers of some standing and repute, who was able to convince the mob that she was indeed an important journalist, while also promising to confiscate her phone, with which she had been filming. Various journalists had their equipment stolen.

Globo’s coverage of events, by contrast, was a study in evasion – unsurprising, given the network’s role in the overthrow of Dilma Rousseff in 2016, the imprisonment of Lula in 2018 and the election of Bolsonaro the same year. CNN Brazil did somewhat better, as one of its anchors confronted a politician who was running cover for the golpistas on air.

And what of Bolsonaro himself, currently in hospital in the US with (yet again) intestinal complications – or is he? The hospital in Orlando claims no one registered under that name has checked in. Photographed dining alone at KFC, then subject to verbal harassment by an anti-fascist Brazilian activist outside his new home in Orlando, the former president sought to distance himself

from the looting and vandalism without renouncing his cause. It's possible that one purpose of his one-way trip to the US was to give him plausible deniability when the coup inevitably failed.

I hesitate to look for silver linings, or take solace in the fact that the coup never had any real chance of success: nevertheless, no one was seriously injured or killed; and a broad consensus has rapidly formed among the executive, the legislature and the courts in Brasília that 'live and let live' is not the way to denazify Brazil – the urgent task of the moment, along with feeding 33 million hungry people.

This consensus enjoys international support. The governor of Goiás, Renan Calheiros, is a man of the right, but a democratic constitutionalist rather than a golpista; he has called for Bolsonaro's extradition to Brazil. The White House has indicated that it has yet to receive an extradition request, which may hint at a willingness to act on one, given the threat that Trumpismo, including the tropical variety, poses to Biden's re-election bid. The State Department has said that Bolsonaro's visa might be revoked. And Alexandre de Moraes has made it clear that the Supreme Court plans to go after those who instigated the golpistas – which presumably includes Bolsonaro himself.

In a textbook case of the unintended consequences of perverse behaviour, the failed coup has rallied and unified the disparate, even incompatible elements in Lula's impossibly broad democratic coalition as perhaps nothing else could have, and opened the door to reforming the police and military sooner rather than later.

Today, millions of people took to the streets in cities across Brazil in defence of democracy. With any luck, this may prove a prelude to a more sustained mobilisation from social movements. Should that happen, the US government and its citizens will have much to learn.

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P.S.

• London Review of Books - LRB blog. 9 JANUARY 2023:
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2023/january/chronicle-of-a-coup-foretold>