

Brazil: contradictions and alternatives in the struggle against fascism

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A decisive democratic struggle has opened against impunity, violence, disregard for life, the multiplication of private militias and the militarization of society. The focus of this struggle is the criminal accountability of [former President Jair] Bolsonaro and his associates for the coup they tried to perpetrate against the result of the 2022 election.

Lula da Silva's presidential inauguration took place on 2 January in a fantasy Brazil, in which seven representatives of the oppressed and exploited, representing the Brazilian "people", handed the presidential sash to the new president. This is the country desired by Lula's voters, including those who voted for Lula only to remove Bolsonaro from power. It crowned the two-month process of negotiations for the formation of the new government.

From the island of fantasy to real Brazil

But this is not the real Brazil, the country that also includes militiamen, religious fanatics, landowners and their hired thugs, ultraliberal businessmen, gold miners... - all expressed in the acronym BBB, symbolising the right wing ox, bullet and Bible caucuses in the Federal Congress. We mustn't forget that 40% of those consulted in the Atlas Research of January 10, 2023 believe that Lula did not win the October presidential elections and 37% declared themselves in favour of a military intervention to invalidate his illegitimate victory (although only 10% are in favour of installing a military dictatorship). Vladimir Safatle is right when he reminds us that what happened on January 8 is called the "reality principle".

It is therefore appropriate that several analysts are calling January 8 "Lula's second inauguration". The fanatical Bolsonarists, who promoted the break-in at the Praça dos Três Poderes in Brasilia, did what they promised long ago. They offered Lula the reception they thought he deserved. An exemplary action by fascist bands. Fortunately, according to the Atlas poll cited above, only 18% of respondents agreed with the Bolsonarists invading Congress. The 8 January attacks are an inescapable event, a synthesis of multiple and contradictory trends, about which the population as a whole is forced to have an opinion - the Quaest poll on Bolsonaro's popularity on social networks shows that it has fallen to its worst rate in four years, from 40% the week before the riot to just 21% on 9 January. In the Datafolha poll of 11 January, 93% condemn the attacks and most advocate arresting those involved. In the January 13 Ipsos poll, 81% condemn the attacks, while 9% fully approve and 9% partially approve. These events were a shock to institutions of state power that believe themselves far removed from disorder and to the broad masses of Brazilians, who had this practical experience with fanatised militant Bolsonarism.

The newspapers are comparing January 8, 2023 in Brasilia to January 6, 2021 in Washington. Of course, both riots sought to deny the election results and reveal the challenges posed today for liberal political systems by illiberal or neo-fascist movements. But the comparisons have limits. In the Brazilian case, Bolsonaro had already left office and Lula had been sworn in as president. In the

US, Trump was still in power and it was a matter of the US Congress recognising the electoral result. The US fascist mobilisation was aimed at having Congress keep Trump in power and not grant the mandate to Biden. The Brazilian insurrection was a generalised destruction of the headquarters of the three powers - the Alvorada Palace, the Federal Congress and the Federal Supreme Court - whose meaning is that of a coup d'état, seeking to create a chaotic situation, civil confrontation and misgovernment, which would justify the intervention of the Armed Forces. And of course the secular civilian control over the US military places the US events of January 6 2021 in a completely different structural framework from January 8 2023 in Brazil, in a country that ended its last military dictatorship only in 1985, but still maintained the militarization of the police forces and a special status for the military in the public service.

Fortunately, the institutional reaction in Brazil - including from conservatives - was much healthier than what we saw from the Republicans in the US. That Lula managed a crisis of this magnitude to his advantage after only a few days in office, gathering the political authorities around him, testifies to his political capacity. But it also reveals the Brazilian elites' fear of disorder and people in the streets.

The immediate reaction of the ideological left and progressivism has, up to now, been fairly united, judging by the slogans of the demonstrations organised around the country on 9 January. It is necessary to overcome the careless tolerance of political violence and the militarisation of society; to offer no truce or amnesty to those involved in the attempted coup; to make Bolsonaro and his core accountable for their actions; to dismantle the fascist power core that has been installed in the armed forces and other state bodies; to fight for the withdrawal of the military from political life and for the demilitarisation of the police, politics and society! It seems that 34 years after the 1988 Constitution was promulgated, the meaning of the "authoritarian rubble" has returned to the consciousness of the left.

Contradictions of Lula's government

This major event in national life raises an inescapable question: how was it possible that an event like this could be organised without prior knowledge and reaction by the federal government?

The explanation that has been offered until now is that the Federal District government connived with the demonstrators. Indeed, Jair Bolsonaro's former Minister of Justice and Secretary of Security for the Federal District government, Anderson Torres (who was by good fortune travelling to the USA), became the main suspect for the plot that culminated in the riot.

On the 8th January, Lula ordered an intervention in the area of security in the Federal District until 31st January. Then, in the early hours of the 9th, Federal Supreme Tribunal minister Alexandre de Moraes removed the Bolsonist governor of the Federal District, Ibaneis Rocha, from his post for 90 days and defined a series of measures aimed at the total dissolution of the rightist protest camps across Brazil within 24 hours, the arrest of protesters and confirmation of the location of the financiers of the riot. On the 9th, more than 1500 protesters were arrested in Brasilia. Acts by social movements in defence of democracy and against any amnesty for the coup plotters were held throughout the country. On the 10th, Federal Supreme Tribunal minister Alexandre de Moraes decreed the arrest of Anderson Torres, who had allegedly met with Jair Bolsonaro in Miami on January 7. On the 11th, the National Force, composed of police officers from different states rather than the military, was tasked with the security of the Esplanade, to which public access was closed.

The complicity of the Federal District government with the demonstrators seems evident. But it represents only the surface of the events. As investigations progress, it appears that January 8 was Bolsonarism's Plan B. The draft of a decree found by the Federal Police in Anderson Torres' house

shows that Plan A proposed by Bolsonaro's entourage was a coup d'état, in which, with the support of the Armed Forces, he would instate a State of Defense over the Superior Electoral Court and change the outcome of the 2022 election. This would place the military as the moderating power of a second Bolsonaro government. Plan A was not executed, because it did not gain the support of the majority of effective troop commanders, and probably not the supreme Army Commander. When the whole thing becomes visible, Plan B reveals itself as an alternative to Plan A.

The underlying problem of the federal government's lack of prior reaction is linked to the characteristics of the Lula government and the challenges it needs to address. It was set up as a government of the democratic front that brought Lula and Alckmin to federal power - a government of the PT and its progressive allies (with the exception of the PSOL, which did not agree to participate in the new executive), including people like Marina Silva and Sonia Guajajara, but also reaching out to Simone Tebet and the liberals. This makes a part of the left see itself as within the dynamics of Lula's 'front'. and seeking to resolve its challenges around, essentially, the idea of neutralising the ultraliberal pressure of the markets and of the banking-finance elite. The problem is real, and the concern is correct, but it leads part of the left into a delirious economicism. On 11 January, in an article entitled "How to de-Bolsonario-ise Brazil?" Elias Jabbour wrote: "Bolsonarism will only start to be overcome when some consensus in our society is reached around the need for accelerated economic growth, industrialisation and the construction of the material bases for a Brazilian welfare state". It is worth asking: what planet is the author living on, when welfare is retreating all across the world? The struggle against contemporary fascism is a broader struggle for meaning and significance, for projects that are not reduced to economic demands or to policies that counteract the social atomisation of the popular masses.

The composition of the Lula government seeks to respond to two other interconnected characteristics. On the one hand, moderation in the treatment of Bolsonaroism and its organised core in a sector of the Armed Forces command. This moderation seems to be considered essential, facing the increased public presence of reserve military personnel in recent years. José Múcio was appointed to the Ministry of Defence, shielded by the pragmatic Flávio Dino in the Ministry of Justice, as an attempt to make a negotiated transition with the military and important sectors of the right wing that were encased in state institutions. For this, Lula brought into government moderates, particularly inclined to reach agreements with supporters of former President Bolsonaro or, at least, with many conservative sectors normally hostile to Lula's PT (Workers' Party). This is proving to be the great contradiction of the events of 8 January, as Bolsonaro's Plan A comes to light and the complicity of some sectors of the Armed Forces with the attacks becomes evident.

On the other hand, the new Lula government has always been, in Lula and the PT's view, an attempt to "buy" governability in the legislature by paying the price demanded by the deputies and senators of the "Centrão", the bloc of conservative parliamentarians who participate in any government, offering them ministries with large budgets. The two objectives are interconnected: the conciliation is with Bolsonaro's non-Bolsonarist supporters, who in good measure are in the three Centrão parties pulled into the government (the MDB, Kassab's PSD and União Brasil). They take 9 of the 31 ministries (including the strategic Ministry of Communications). Lula has chosen to accept as Minister of Tourism a União Brasil figure, linked to militiamen from Rio de Janeiro.

It is because the political space created by these three contradictory dynamics exists that the fascists moved so nimbly, without prior preparation, last Sunday.

The life of events

But the facts have a life of their own. Lula knew how to take advantage of the circumstances that presented themselves and is trying to move ahead of them. The enormous violence displayed by the

demonstrators on January 8, typical of classic fascist bands, was rejected by the immense majority of the population and political leaders. It seems to have significantly isolated and weakened militant Bolsonarism. Governors elected in the wake of Bolsonaro's vote in the first round - such as the new governor of São Paulo, Tarcísio de Freitas, a possible political leader of the conservative sectors - had to go to Brasília to repudiate the "terrorist acts" and the actions of "vandals" (as the press is calling them) and to show solidarity with Lula. Even Valdemar Costa Neto, president of the Liberal Party, to which Jair Bolsonaro is now affiliated, criticised the riots. Bolsonarist camps are being dismantled across the country on direct orders from the Supreme Federal Tribunal.

In his speech on the night of the 8th, Lula seemed to have abandoned the comfort zone of the reconciliation policies that have guided him since he left prison, in his strategy of alliances, in the electoral campaign and in setting up the government. After decreeing an intervention in the security of the Federal District, he called the fascists fascists, criticised Bolsonaro, recalled the deforestation of the Amazon and its importance for all humanity, pointed the finger at the "evil agribusiness" that is destroying the forest and poisoning our food and said he will go after the financiers of the coup plotters. This is an at least partial break with the strategy of seeking a negotiated transition with Bolsonarism, even without Bolsonaro's endorsement. Throughout the week, Lula made other points explicit, stating that he does not trust the military and that the role defined for them by the Constitution is not what they think it is, of being a "moderating power".

But "evil agribusiness" is the dynamo of Brazilian exports and the heart of the oligarchic power apparatus that is the Brazilian State. On the other side, the pact is also the search for an agreement with the Armed Forces, which Bolsonaro has sought to turn into the pillar of support for his government. The 1988 Constitution preserves a role in the political order for the military. Lula and his closest advisors and ministers are seeking the path of broader alliances and conciliation. Can they initiate ruptures, even if only occasionally? How to do this and maintain the three foundations of their moderate political strategy (democratic front government, transition pact with the military and conservatives and low-cost integration of the Centrão in the governability pact)?

Which way forward against Bolsonarism?

Events are relentless, and the political contradictions at the base of the Lula government emerged with full force on January 8. Lula's Defence Minister José Múcio is effectively an ambassador of the military to the government and their omission or complicity seems to have been central to the protesters' unhindered occupation of the headquarters of the three powers. Múcio emerged from the episode quite worn down, but Lula openly debated the problem and concluded by reaffirming his confidence in Múcio, certainly with an eye to the continuity of dialogue with military sectors. On the other hand, Lula's reaction has also been to confront the coup plotters and in this he is relying on another figure who has proved central, Supreme Federal Tribunal Minister Alexandre de Moraes.

Moraes has a political-legal trajectory of two decades linked to the PSDB of São Paulo and former governor Geraldo Alckmin. He was Michel Temer's Minister of Justice and was appointed to the Supreme Federal Tribunal. But in the last four years he has started to openly confront the Bolsonaro government, in the name of "fighting extremism". This led the former president to unsuccessfully petition the Federal Senate for Moraes' impeachment in August 2021. Moraes is leading an enquiry into "anti-democratic acts" and another into "digital militias", whose main suspect is one of Jair Bolsonaro's sons, Carlos Bolsonaro. It was Moraes who led Brazil's Electoral Justice with an iron fist in 2022, creating draconian procedures to proscribe social media fake news during the campaign, and who has been taking equally tough measures against various Bolsonarist initiatives. He has become the icon of anti-Bolsonarist legal activism, necessary but worrying in its concentration of powers.

Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, another son of the former president, reportedly said that “the pacification of the country passes through the filing of enquiries that (target Bolsonaristas and) are with Alexandre de Moraes at the Supreme Federal Tribunal”. On 12 December, when validating the result of the election of Lula and Alckmin, Moraes said that “this testifies to the full and indisputable victory of democracy and the rule of law against antidemocratic attacks, against misinformation and against hate speech uttered by various organized groups that are already identified. I guarantee that they will be held fully accountable so that these phenomena do not return in the next elections.

All this has come to the fore in the last few days, with the revelation of the failed Plan A of the coup, and the call for punishment of the coup plotters. On January 13 the Attorney General appointed by Bolsonaro, Augusto Aras, under pressure from 79 members of the Federal Public Ministry, requested that the Supreme Federal Tribunal include Bolsonaro in the enquiry into the responsibility for the the coup acts; this petition was immediately accepted by Alexandre de Moraes.

Debolsonizing Brazilian society requires measures that we do not discuss here, such as resuming the autonomous organization of civil society and the reoccupation of the streets by social movements, the regulation and democratization of digital platforms and networks that feed and profit from radical right-wing activism, increasing the confidence of popular sectors in their own strengths, and an economic system that breaks with the extractivism and agribusiness that has been supported or tolerated by all forces in government over the last forty years. It also demands international alternatives. The political intelligentsia of Bolsonarismo has been constructed at the global level, in conjunction with other conservative nationalist forces that are at “war against modernity”. No democratic victory will be definitive if it is not projected as part of an alternative for all humanity and for the web of life on the planet.

A decisive democratic struggle has now opened, an opportunity to confront impunity, violence, the disregard for life (with the criminal deaths of so many Brazilians during the Covid pandemic as the most glaring case), the growth of private militias and the militarization of society, linking all this to the criminalization of the coup activities of Bolsonaro and his associates. Mobilising for the demand that coup plotters answer for their actions can - and, in our opinion, must - catalyse a process of popular self-organisation under leftist banners. Such a coup against Brazilian fascism, if consolidated, will also put traditional conservatism in a defensive position and will strongly influence the strategic correlation of forces.

Seizing this opportunity requires that the Lula government and the Brazilian judiciary navigate zones that they have not frequented in recent decades. It also demands that the institutionalised left come out of its inertia, reviving its (forgotten) capacity to leverage popular self-organisation. We must all seek the routes for this. The next period will be anything but peaceful!

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Translated from Portuguese by AN

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