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(ed.)

LATIN AMERICA AT A GLANCE

*Recent Political
and Electoral Trends*



Latin America at a Glance

Recent Political and Electoral Trends

EDITED BY
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Political Reversals in Brazil: The Redemption of Lula and the Decline of Bolsonaro

THOMÁS ZICMAN DE BARROS¹

Abstract. This paper examines the profound political shifts in Brazil between 2018 and 2023, focusing on the contrasting trajectories of Jair Bolsonaro and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. In 2018, Bolsonaro rose to power in the wake of a weakened left, while Lula faced imprisonment. Fast forward to 2023, Lula has reclaimed the presidency, whereas Bolsonaro confronts a series of legal inquiries. The paper unfolds in two parts: the first segment traces Lula's journey, examining the achievements of his initial terms marked by emancipatory populist politics, economic growth, and poverty reduction, and the subsequent contentious charges of corruption resulting in his imprisonment and eventual release. The latter part scrutinizes Bolsonaro's rise amid crises and his subsequent decline, outlining his reactionary populism characterised by transgressive communication and assaults on democratic institutions, which culminated in the scenes of chaos in Brasília on 8 January 2023, following his electoral defeat. The paper concludes by claiming that these seismic shifts signal a complex political landscape. It underscores both the strengths and constraints of Lula's conciliatory populism, as well as the enduring influence of Bolsonarism, emphasising the need for addressing historical authoritarian tendencies in Brazil's political culture.

Keywords: Brazilian Politics; Brazilian History, Lula, Bolsonaro; populism.

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The year 2023 in Brazil is ending curiously: the current political scenario seems to be almost the exact opposite of what it was in 2018 when Jair Messias Bolsonaro was elected president. In 2018, Bolsonaro came to power in a context in which the left was very weak. The Workers' Party (PT), by far the largest left-wing political group in the country, remained an important political force, but had suffered successive defeats and had seen its main leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, behind bars. Five years on, the extraordinary is before our eyes: Lula has left prison to return to the presidency, and Bolsonaro, once president, retains political relevance but finds himself increasingly embroiled in accusations of corruption and other crimes, facing a not insignificant risk of arrest.

How did one get from one situation to another in such a short space of time? To explain such major transformations – and think about what they indicate about the future – this brief paper will be divided into two parts. Firstly, I will deal with the decline and redemption of the Workers' Party and Lula as an emancipatory populist leader. Next, I will explore the rise and fall of Bolsonaro as a reactionary populist phenomenon. I will conclude with a very brief discussion of the future of Bolsonaro and the limits of Lula's conciliatory strategies.

Lula's redemption

On 1 January 2003, Lula came to power for the first time. It was an important victory for the left in Latin America, in what later became known as the 'pink tide'. Brazil, after all, is the largest country in the region, in terms of both population and economy. Indeed, being a former Portuguese colony and a country of continental dimensions, Brazil's historical trajectory differs from that of its neighbours, and the country often sees itself as an island, de-

tached from the world and, above all, from the rest of the continent. However, it is erroneous to overlook Brazil's central role in the process of regional integration. Especially under Lula, Brazilian diplomacy has sought to adopt a leadership role in Latin America and has sponsored various projects to bring the region closer together politically and economically.

Lula's stance on international relations mirrors his domestic stance. Undoubtedly a conciliatory leader, Lula was trained in the new trade unionism and his hallmark lies in the search for compromises and negotiated solutions – to the point of being called a '*pelego*' [accommodationist, toady, scab]² by many on the left (see also Weffort, 2008, p. 7).

There is much debate about whether Lula could be classified as a 'populist' – an expression used to describe several of his counterparts in neighbouring countries. The very conceptualisation of populism is widely discussed, and my perspective, informed by the history of Latin America, interprets populism as an aesthetic transgression (Zicman de Barros and Lago 2022, pp. 114-15). Not only does the populist leader – when populism has leaders – deviate from the normal way of behaving in politics, but above all, by discursively opposing the 'people' to the 'elites', populism transforms the coordinates of what can and cannot appear in politics. This transformation incorporates subaltern sectors into the public sphere that previously had no voice.³

² The word '*pelego*' literally refers to the numnah placed between the horse's saddle and the animal's back to reduce friction while riding.

³ The idea of populism as aesthetic transgression was inspired by Ernesto Laclau (2005, 155-56), Jacques Rancière (1995, p. 142; 2000, p. 12) and Georges Bataille (Bataille [1939] 1970, p. 228; [1933] 1989, p. 142). It was developed together with Miguel Lago, and later deepened in a rich partnership with Théo Aiolfi (see also 2022, p. 6) which should be published soon.

While it is true that Lula, due to his popular origins, broke with the well-behaved way of doing politics in Brazil, the Workers' Party staunchly rejected populism from its inception. Founded from a coalition of new social movements, socialist intellectuals, left-wing clergypersons and trade unions that was unprecedented in the world, the PT saw populist politics as outdated and undemocratic. In the Brazilian intellectual tradition, populism – associated, for example, with Getúlio Vargas – had always been cartoonishly seen as a process of class conciliation, in which subaltern sectors entered politics under tutelage (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022, pp. 62-63, 70-73)⁴. In favour of an autonomous workers' organisation, the PT actively opposed these practices.

Upon assuming power, however, Lula underwent a reconciliation with the populist legacy (Ab'Sáber, 2005, p. A6). Particularly from 2005 onward, the convergence of his social programs' success in integrating marginalised sectors and the escalating animosity from the elite in response to specific corruption scandals prompted Lula to embrace appeals to the 'people' against the 'elites' and even align himself with Vargas' legacy. Nevertheless, while he can be considered a 'populist', he does not fit into the reading that sees populism as inherently conflict-driven. Lula's brand of populism, more aligned with the Brazilian populist tradition, is based precisely on reconciling interests (Singer, 2010, p. J3; 2012, pp. 33, 42). At the end of his second term, while celebrating the height-

⁴ Among others, the seminal works of Hélio Jaguaribe, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Francisco Weffort stand out in the Brazilian strand of populism studies (Jugaribe, 1954; Cardoso, 1962; 1964; Weffort, 2003a). Despite its undeniable merits, this viewpoint tends to oversimplify Latin America's populist experiences, neglecting the substantial social progress achieved during that period (for a curious exception, see Weffort, 1976, pp. 79-82).

ened role of workers, blacks, women and the poor in politics, Lula proudly asserted that his presidency witnessed the most substantial gains for banks and businesspersons (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022, p. 113).

Many analysts on the left saw the conciliatory nature of Lula as a factor limiting the country's emancipatory struggles (Safatle, 2012, pp. 13-14; 2015, pp. 119-120; 2017, p. 44; Ab'Sáber 2011, §5). While there is some truth in this interpretation, it does not negate the fact that his first two governments are considered a great success. The period was marked by economic growth, poverty reduction, and the implementation of a series of public policies that improved the lives of subaltern sectors. By the end of 2010, Lula enjoyed approval ratings unrivalled by any other leader in liberal democracies at that time. He was '*the most popular politician on Earth*', as Obama once referred to him.

If Lula departed from power amidst celebration, managing to elect his successor, Dilma Rousseff, the years that followed were marked by a constant political weakening. Particularly since June 2013, when a series of unprecedented street demonstrations brought down the approval ratings of almost every politician in the country, the PT found itself cornered (Santos, 2022, pp. 15-23; 2018, pp. 128-129). In 2014, the so-called Car Wash operation began, spearheaded by the controversial first-instance judge Sérgio Moro. With repercussions throughout Latin America – notably but not only in Peru, Ecuador, Panama and El Salvador – this highly publicised anti-corruption operation, inspired by Italy's *Mani pulite* (Singer, 2018, p. 234; Moro, 2004, p. 61), destabilised the Brazilian political system, and had the Workers' Party and Lula as priority targets.

Dilma Rousseff was re-elected at the end of 2014 but soon had to deal with an economic crisis – partly of her own making – and a political upheaval. Several factors converged with-

in the political landscape. Firstly, the right-wing opposition, having suffered defeat for the fourth time in the presidential elections, became enamoured with the idea of seizing power through non-electoral means – specifically, by impeaching the re-elected president. This strategy would propel her vice-president, the conservative Michel Temer, into office. Secondly, the entire Congress found itself besieged and vulnerable in the face of a legal and media consortium led by Moro. Recent revelations demonstrate Moro’s orchestration of prosecutorial actions and control over information leaks to the press. In essence, the political establishment aimed to facilitate the removal of an increasingly unpopular president through a contentious impeachment process, ultimately handing power to the right and quelling the widespread crisis, as articulated by a prominent senator advocating for ‘*stopping the bleeding*’ (Singer, 2018, pp. 272-273).

Paradoxically, if there was a bloodletting that was reduced with the fall of Dilma Rousseff, it was that of the PT itself. After being ousted from office in 2016, the party continued to struggle but managed to distance itself from the ongoing economic and political crisis, leaving right-wing politicians to grapple with these issues. Strikingly, the removal of Dilma Rousseff led to a consistent increase in the approval ratings of the PT. Against this backdrop, Lula reemerged as the unquestioned leader in opinion polls leading up to the presidential elections in October 2018. The right-wing was certainly displeased with the possibility of the PT, especially Lula, making a return to the presidency just two years after Dilma Rousseff’s ousting. The rapid trial, conviction, and imprisonment of Lula in early 2018, an unprecedented episode in Brazil’s typically slow legal system, prompted many to view it as a case of lawfare designed to eliminate him from the presidential race. Notably, this procedure was officially sanctioned by

the Supreme Court at the time, in a highly contentious ruling, and openly endorsed by the summit of the Armed Forces.

It is impossible to determine the outcome of the 2018 elections had Lula been a candidate. Many factors played in favour of Jair Bolsonaro, a politician from the bottom ranks of Congress, a former army captain expelled for indiscipline, notorious for his defence of the military dictatorship, advocacy for torture, propagation of racist, sexist and homophobic statements, and connections to paramilitary, white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups (Gherman, 2022, pp. 107-108, 155-156). Years of economic and political crisis fostered a deep anti-system and notably anti-left sentiment, which led elite and conservative sectors to support any candidate against the PT. Furthermore, driven by opportunism or miscalculation, many in the traditional right saw Bolsonaro as a useful tool: a buffoon they could employ to finally win the elections, to control him later.

Some of the major mass media outlets were undoubtedly complicit in the process of mainstreaming what undoubtedly stood as the most reactionary elected politician in the country. The very word ‘populism’ served this purpose very well: by calling both Lula and Bolsonaro ‘populists’, some newspapers created false symmetries (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022, pp. 11-18). On the one hand, this equivalence served to demonise the PT, which was presented as being as extremist as Bolsonaro. On the other hand, it served as a euphemism and contributed to the normalisation of Bolsonaro, portraying him as a politician comparable to past leaders who governed the country without major disturbances.

In addition to the implicit support of traditional mass media, Bolsonaro’s campaign was able to organise an unprecedented and efficient virtual campaign – albeit financed by obscure sources. Finally, Bolsonaro’s image benefited from a tragic stabbing incident that positioned the typically aggres-

sive and assertive politician as a victim. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Bolsonaro's electoral success was also influenced by the absence of Lula, who despite his woes remained the frontrunner in all the polls.

Bolsonaro took office on 1 January 2019, appointing Moro, the controversial judge responsible for imprisoning Lula, as Minister of Justice. This move, whose significance cannot be underestimated, showed how Bolsonarism combined and converted anti-corruption moralism, previously fuelled by the media, into a conspiratorial and resentful moral panic against all sorts of minorities (Gherman, 2022, p. 109). The process of mainstreaming the far-right continued to progress well, marking a departure from a political climate where openly embracing right-wing affiliations was uncommon (Pierucci, 1987, p. 36). Notably, Bolsonaro proudly embraced right-wing labels and echoed numerous 'dog whistle' slogans with clear Nazi-inspired undertones – such as 'Work sets you free' and 'Brazil above all', to name but two (Gherman, 2022, p. 92).

The left secured a good result in the second round, but its main leader was in jail. For many, Lula had become a liability for the left and was in danger of dying in jail with a tainted reputation. There were ongoing debates on how to organise the opposition against Bolsonaro outside the Workers' Party, and even suggestions that the PT should change its name or be re-founded, as the rejection of the party was consolidated.

The fortunes of the PT and Lula began to shift in June 2019, following the leak of a series of private messages revealing the collusion between the then-judge Moro, prosecutors, and the media. In November of that same year, the Supreme Court altered its stance, permitting Lula's release. At first still ineligible, the PT leader was once again a free man after 580 days in prison.

Bolsonaro's damnation

Bolsonaro's victory brought a coalition of reactionary forces into power. His appeal to the 'people' against the 'elites' brought together the military, traditionalists, eccentric monarchists, ultra-liberal economists, and religious evangelicals in an ensemble that was not necessarily coherent, but was openly fascist in nature (Gherman, 2021, 46:00-48:30). One might characterise the militant core of his base as what Hannah Arendt would call a 'mob' (Arendt, [1951] 1967, p. 107). As Arendt explains, the mob is not the poor. Mobs exist across social strata (Arendt, [1951] 1967, p. 107; Canovan, 1978, pp. 9-10)⁵. These are silenced sectors whose entry into the public sphere does not emancipate anyone (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022, pp. 17-18). They are far-right groups, who reproduced themselves on the margins and in the shadows of society, found it difficult to express their opinions, and were catapulted to the centre of politics by the reactionary populist leader.

Bolsonaro's appeal and his ability to mobilise this mob are rooted in various fantasies. In a world of growing precarity, precariousness, and constant transformation (Arendt, [1954] 1994, p. 357; Canovan, 2002, pp. 407-408; Butler, 2009, p. 33; 2019, p. 26), Bolsonaro presents himself as the figure capable of re-establishing order. Perhaps his main ideological guru, the late Olavo de Carvalho, was a traditionalist astrologer, conspiracy theorist and self-proclaimed 'populist' (Carvalho, 2017a; 2017b), who saw modernity as a tragedy (Gherman, 2022, pp. 118-119, 122-124, 154). According to him, the original sin of

⁵ This understanding has surprising affinities with Weffort's early reflections, in which he claims that populism can be supported by the lumpen-proletariat, but also by what he calls the lumpenbourgeoisie (Weffort, 2003b, pp. 33, 38).

modernity stemmed from the separation of states from the Church, opening the door to relativism and, ultimately, to the destruction of the family and the damnation of humanity (Carvalho, 1998, pp. 271-275). In his peculiar and conspiracy-driven worldview, the intellectual and administrative elites, guided by foolish deconstructivist ideas, were the main actors accelerating this modern hecatomb (Carvalho, 2002, p. 7).

Fantasies of re-establishing order do not solely account for Bolsonaro's appeal. In apparent contradiction, a significant appeal to transgression accompanies his authoritarian insistence on reaffirming the law (see also Safatle, 2015, p. 117). Bolsonaro is not only aesthetically transgressive by bringing previously marginalised, invisible groups to the forefront of politics. He is transgressive in his performances (see also Moffitt, 2023, p. 2; Aiolfi, 2022, p. 1; Ostiguy, 2017, p. 73). Presenting himself as just one more in the crowd – the *uomo qualunque* – he swears, dresses in an outlandish manner, and makes low-brow jokes. This way of behaving – also adopted by Olavo de Carvalho, another fan of swearing – resonates with another fantasy mobilised by Bolsonaro: the fantasy of 'freedom'. Bolsonaro often portrays himself as a 'freedom fighter', a 'taboo-breaker' in the name of 'free speech'. However, this is a particular notion of freedom: the freedom of the triumph of the will of the virile white man, who does whatever he wants, whenever he wants, despite everyone else (Zicman de Barros and Lago, 2022, p. 124).

Bolsonaro's transgressive communication strategy, compatible with the new digital social media environment (Bucci, 2018, p. 29; 2021, p. 143; Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 745; 2022, p. 120), relentlessly flooded the public sphere – or what was left of it – with absurd statements and disinformation. By saturating the public debate with crises, and using the populist maxim inspired by Donald Trump that 'the best way to weather

the storm is to be the storm' (Zicman de Barros, 2020, p. 18; see also Moffitt, 2016, pp. 113-132), Bolsonaro mostly kept the opposition in a purely reactive mode.

As Bolsonaro had said in his campaign, his main objective was not to build anything but to dismantle a series of public policies and institutions established over thirty years of democracy. Various regulatory agencies have been taken over by government allies and subsequently rendered dysfunctional. To cite just a few examples, organisations such as the foundation for fighting racism were seized by a militant who denied that racism was a problem in the country, even arguing that the legacy of centuries of slavery was positive. Evangelical leaders were appointed to oversee the foundation responsible for indigenous policies. The Ministry of the Environment – which Bolsonaro originally promised to incorporate into the Agriculture portfolio – was occupied by a politician linked to deforestation companies. Finally, the Attorney General's Office, entrusted with overseeing the president's actions, was handed over to a bland character whose main task was to shelve any investigations against Bolsonaro and his close circle.

Early in his tenure, Bolsonaro expressed a strong hostility towards the other branches of the republic. According to him and his supporters, the legislature and judiciary would be obstacles for the president to push through his agenda. Within the first six months of his term, his supporters organised marches against the Supreme Court and Congress, demanding that they be closed down.

The coronavirus pandemic only aggravated the tension between Bolsonaro and the other branches of government (Zicman de Barros, 2020, pp. 18-20). In a country renowned for the wide popular support for vaccination campaigns, the president espoused denialist theses. He questioned the seriousness of the disease – referring to it as only a 'little cold' –, expressed reluctance to take the vaccine, cast doubts on its

effectiveness, and opposed social distancing measures, mask-wearing, and any form of lockdown. All this, once again, was justified in the name of so-called ‘freedom’ and to save jobs. Many former allies distanced themselves from him. Moro, for example, quit the government, accusing Bolsonaro of being a ‘populist’ (Moro, 2020, p. 3). With an anti-vax president leading the country, it was up to Congress and, notably, the Supreme Court to take charge of the pandemic. Faced with Bolsonaro’s inaction, the Supreme Court opted to empower state governors to implement essential measures in handling the crisis, aiming to avert further deaths and the potential breakdown of the healthcare system. Despite their efforts, Brazil ranked among the world leaders in deaths from the disease, surpassing 700,000 casualties. Displeased, and fearing the effects of the pandemic on his popularity, Bolsonaro reinforced the mobilisation of his bases with threats of a *coup d’état* against the parliament and the judiciary.

Eventually, Bolsonaro’s tensions with Congress were addressed. A striking feature of Brazilian politics is the fragmentation of its parliament. With around thirty parties represented in Congress, forming parliamentary majorities poses a challenge for any president. Without such a majority, the president runs the risk of impeachment – a procedure used twice since re-democratisation and made common with the controversial fall of Dilma Rousseff.

While he attacked Congress, Bolsonaro simultaneously negotiated the support of traditional catch-all crony parties. His strategy to remain in office was to relinquish much of the power to determine the budget to the legislative branch. By doing so, Bolsonaro armoured himself against impeachment calls, albeit at the cost of entrusting the management of crucial sectors in the federal administration to traditional politicians – the very individuals he had pledged to distance him-

self from during the campaign. Furthermore, this alliance did not enhance his ability to influence Congress. On the contrary, Bolsonaro was the president since re-democratisation who approved the fewest executive-initiated bills. Parliament's priorities were set by the legislature itself, in an informal semi-presidential system. Growingly incapable of steering the legislative agenda, Bolsonaro acted mainly through infralegal measures – for example, with decrees that regulate existing laws, which are the prerogative of the executive branch and do not need to go through Congress.

Bolsonaro secured a deal with Congress at a considerable price, sacrificing both political initiative and large chunks of the budget, yet it granted him some respite on one front. However, this serenity did not extend to his relationship with the judiciary. Feeling directly attacked by the president, the Supreme Court did not stand idly by and watch in astonishment at the threats to democracy. In March 2019, in what some class as an exercise of 'militant democracy' (Loewenstein, 1937a, p. 417; 1937b, p. 638), the court set up the so-called 'fake news inquiry' *ex officio*. Based on flexible interpretations of regulatory loopholes, the court acted on its own volition to investigate the president's close circle, including some of his children. The investigation targeted coordinated online attacks against republican institutions – starting with the Supreme Court justices themselves – during and after the elections. The fake news inquiry was joined by the so-called 'anti-democratic acts inquiry' in June 2020. Both under the direction of Justice Alexandre de Moraes, these inquiries loomed over the president. While tension between Bolsonaro and the Supreme Court intensified – culminating in the Independence Day celebrations on 7 September 2021, where Bolsonaro, encouraged by a crowd of supporters, said 'Get out Alexandre de Moraes! Stop being a scoundrel!' – the in-

vestigations served as a deterrent against presidential *coup* temptations.

The Bolsonaro government faced successive crises, coupled with a steep rise in poverty and food insecurity, leading to a precarious position as the election year approached. Bolsonaro had been able to keep his militant base loyal and energised, but had alienated a significant portion of the electorate. When Lula regained his political rights in April 2021, many predicted that Bolsonaro's days were numbered. Quickly, the PT leader began to appear well ahead of the former captain in all opinion polls (Singer, 2023, pp. 8-9). In a successful move to unify the opposition around him, dispelling the discourses of false equivalence prevalent in 2018, Lula strategically invited Geraldo Alckmin, a traditional right-wing politician now pardoned for his past 'sins', to be his vice-presidential running mate (Singer, 2023, p. 7; see also Ab'Sáber, 2011, §9). Foreseeing his disadvantage, Bolsonaro reinforced his old discourse that the Brazilian electoral system was susceptible to fraud, all the more so because by a calendar coincidence the same Justice Alexandre de Moraes presided over the electoral authority.

The 2022 election campaign proved to be much more heated than some had predicted. The two great political forces that had been unable to compete in 2018 finally clashed. While Lula had managed to become the candidate of a broad front, leveraging the memory of his highly approved governments and an enormous capacity to connect with the most subaltern sectors of the population, Bolsonaro held the advantage of being the incumbent president. The amount of resources distributed by the government – notably a generous emergency aid package instituted by Congress, of which Bolsonaro soon claimed paternity – and the use of the public machinery to entice voters showed one of the reasons why never before in Brazil's history had a sitting president lost re-

election. On 30 October 2022, Lula won, but with the narrowest result in the country's history.

Defeated, Bolsonaro refused to accept the result and retreated to his official residence, opting for silence. After two days of intense pressure from the political class, his first press statement was very short and extremely vague, dealing only with what he said had been an 'injustice' and insinuating electoral fraud. In his absence, it fell upon his chief of staff to announce the establishment of a government transition commission. Upset by his defeat and maintaining his silence, Bolsonaro left the country two days before the end of his term, settling in Florida for four months. He refused to take part in Lula's inauguration ceremony on 1 January 2023, when the former trade unionist triumphantly walked up the ramp of the presidential palace accompanied by representatives of workers, women, black and indigenous people.

While Bolsonaro chose silence, the same cannot be said of his supporters. Immediately after the elections, with the clear connivance of the Armed Forces, Bolsonarist groups camped out in front of the Army headquarters, calling for the military to stage a *coup* and prevent Lula's inauguration. These individuals were responsible for incidents of vandalism in Brasília upon the official confirmation of the elections results. They attempted to detonate a bomb at the capital's airport on Christmas Eve and, finally, partook in the regrettable acts of 8 January 2023.

Conclusion

On Sunday 8 January 2023, the absurd happened. The Bolsonaro mob, in their thousands, marched towards Brasília's main square and, with the complicit omission of the police, stormed and plundered the buildings of the three branches of govern-

ment. It was the Brazilian equivalent of the attacks carried out by Trump supporters on the Capitol in Washington two years and two days earlier. The demonstrators aimed to force Lula into declaring a form of state of siege, believing it would leave the president hostage to the Armed Forces. That is not what happened, however. Lula initiated a one-off federal intervention in the Brasília police, which eventually regained control of the capital. Many demonstrators, including relatives of high-ranking military personnel, managed to flee with the protection of the Armed Forces, but the following day around 1,400 people were arrested for taking part in the attacks.

The failed attacks on 8 January 2023 have further complicated Bolsonaro's situation. Throughout the presidential campaign, he harboured the expectation that securing re-election would alter the dynamics of negotiations with Congress, providing him the opportunity to nominate additional justices to the Supreme Court and shape a court aligned with his preferences. His defeat, a scenario many claim he astonishingly did not anticipate, had already left him vulnerable to the institutions he vehemently criticised. However, the scenes of havoc wrought by his supporters provided the compelling momentum needed to bring Bolsonarism to the dock.

There are countless investigations against the former president, in both electoral and ordinary courts. Bolsonaro lost his political rights in June 2023 for eight years due to exploiting the presidency's structure to call the Brazilian electoral system into question. At the end of October 2023, a new conviction for electoral offences reinforced his ineligibility.

The possibility of Bolsonaro being arrested should not be ruled out. On the contrary, this is a scenario that many consider increasingly plausible. He, his closest allies, and family members face various documented corruption allegations. Even if he does not end up behind bars, his image will be badly

tarnished, sparking a rush in right-wing and far-right circles to seize the political spoils of Bolsonaro's political influence.

Just as it was a mistake to say that the PT and Lula were politically dead in 2018, though, it would be premature to declare the end of Bolsonarism. Bolsonaro does not have a party structure like the PT, but he has awakened a legion of followers who, however weakened, remain very loyal to their leader. His voters are disciplined and have elected a not insignificant number of deputies and senators in the legislative elections. At the very least, Bolsonaro remains a very important electoral force that should not be neglected.

Furthermore, while Bolsonaro's performative transgressions explain part of his appeal, they also constitute limits to his action. Because he was too vulgar, too rude, the former president limited his mainstreaming capacity. A Bolsonarism without Bolsonaro, or one where Bolsonaro takes a less prominent role, potentially led by a figure who exhibits a greater level of decorum, may pose a heightened threat as it could prove to be more effective.

It is crucial to underscore that Bolsonaro's ascent in Brazilian politics is not a mere happenstance. He has successfully revitalised a historical authoritarian streak in Brazil, a facet the country has grappled with. Brazil's legacy of centuries of slavery and subsequent decades of military dictatorships have not been adequately confronted, often overshadowed by broad amnesties. As emphasised earlier, Brazil's political culture is marked by a proclivity for conciliation, where moments of transition are frequently portrayed as sweeping agreements that, paradoxically, uphold the existing state of affairs. While there have been instances of revolt, protest, and violence, they have consistently been quelled by state force and relegated to the sidelines of Brazil's official history. Contemporary Brazilian society faces pronounced violence, albeit in a

depoliticised urban context. Concurrently, institutional politics tends to suppress overt conflict. The two – social conflagration and political conciliation – certainly go hand in hand, and will only be resolved together (Safatle, 2008, p. D6; Ab’Sáber, 2010, pp. 192-193).

In this sense, Lula’s conciliatory aspect, which is so Brazilian, may also show its limits. Conciliation has its merits, but only if it is done in conjunction with the symbolisation of trauma. A possible arrest of Bolsonaro that does not attack the historical roots of Bolsonarism, which sacrifices him to preserve those around him, could lead us to repeat history as farce once again.

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Latin America at a Glance: Recent Political and Electoral Trends presents an incisive collection of academic essays derived from a series of international seminars held at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan between November 2022 and April 2023. Edited by Samuele Mazzolini, this volume synthesises the intellectual contributions of some leading experts, offering a meticulous exploration of contemporary Latin American politics. The essays traverse the intricate terrain of the region's political landscape, delving into historical underpinnings, democratic dilemmas, social protests, electoral challenges, unexpected political outcomes, and the emergence, evolution, and ramifications of populism. With nuanced discussions on Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, and broader regional trends, this collection illuminates diverse perspectives, providing invaluable insights into the multifaceted realities of Latin American politics. This anthology serves as a foundation for comprehending the dynamics of the region's political evolution. It is an essential resource for scholars, researchers, and students seeking to comprehend the historical legacies and complex transformations that shape current Latin America's political identity and trajectory.

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