

## The Bolsonaro effect

[opendemocracy.net/democraciaabierta/henrique-furtado/violence-bolsonaro-effect-and-crisis-of-brazilian-democracy](https://opendemocracy.net/democraciaabierta/henrique-furtado/violence-bolsonaro-effect-and-crisis-of-brazilian-democracy)

# democracia **Abierta**

la sección latina de **openDemocracy** 

Henrique Furtado 18 October 2018 (2018-10-18T23:24:01+01:00)

It sounds like a distasteful joke, but Brazilians are on the verge of electing a far-right president (Jair Messias Bolsonaro) and it is difficult to estimate what this means to progressive forces in Brazil. *[Español](#) [Português](#)*



It sounds like a distasteful joke, but Brazilians are on the verge of electing a far-right president. After winning the first ballot on 7 October, candidate Jair Messias Bolsonaro (Social Liberal Party) now leads the polls for the second ballot enjoying 58% of voting intentions (considering only the valid votes). It is difficult to estimate what this means to progressive forces in Brazil.

Much more than a controversial figure, Bolsonaro has become famous for expressing openly homophobic, unapologetically misogynist, shamelessly racist and hysterically anti-communist views. The presidential candidate represents the ugliest and most violent face of the global far-right movement, currently on the rise in all corners of the world.

Bolsonaro stands out as the messiah of what many have dubbed a conservative counter-offensive in the making after decades of leftist governments.

A former military officer Bolsonaro remained a marginal figure within Brazilian politics for the good part of his 27 years as a congressman. Only recently has the far-right candidate experienced a stratospheric rise in notoriety. Bolsonaro stands out as the messiah of what many have dubbed a conservative counter-offensive in the making after decades of leftist governments.

His radical anti-leftist rhetoric (accusing progressives of corrupting Brazilian democracy) and hyper-liberal agenda (in defence of property and minimum state interference) seems to be especially appealing to those who were “never left behind by anything”: the well-educated, male middle classes that saw their privileges relatively undermined by small distributive gains during the Worker Party’s administrations.

The “Bolsonaro effect” already raises serious questions regarding the relationship between violence and democracy in Brazil.

Despite a longstanding political career, Bolsonaro managed to play the role of an “outsider” capable of cleansing the Brazilian political system from a series of impurities (ranging from crime and corruption scandals, to Bolivarianism and “gender ideology”).

Seen as a joke by many, Bolsonaro became a serious contender when Lula da Silva (the historic leader of the Worker’s Party) was first imprisoned and later forced out of the presidential campaign on account of controversial corruptions charges.

To this very day, the far-right leader shows ever stronger signs that he might, against all odds and against all good sense, become the next president of Brazil.

Irrespective of the results, the “Bolsonaro effect” already raises serious questions regarding the relationship between violence and democracy in Brazil.

First and foremost, Bolsonaro’s constant flirtation with violent ideas and behaviour is simply incompatible with the basic tenets of democracy.

The frontrunner has more than once expressed abject political views regarding the rights of minorities. He has condoned rape, stated that African-descendants are useless, and confessed he would rather see one of his sons dead than in the arms of another man.

The frontrunner has more than once expressed abject political views regarding the rights of minorities. He has condoned rape, stated that African-descendants are useless, and confessed he would rather see one of his sons dead than in the arms of another man.

Bolsonaro’s views on public security (and specially state-led violence) are at best rudimentary and at worst truly frightening. A passionate advocate of relaxed ownership laws for small weapons, Bolsonaro believes that a police officer who does not kill is underserving of the blue uniform.

A stark supporter of the civic-military dictatorship (1964-1985), the far-right leader has many a times expressed his admiration for former state terrorists and agents of the political police.

In his view, the fact that political dissidents were systematically tortured during the dictatorship is not a problem. The real problem is that some of them survived.

Brazil is already an unacceptably violent country. Last year, more than 60,000 people were assassinated. Between 2003 and 2011, the number of homicides in Brazil (449,985) went well beyond the overall casualties of the Iraq War (251,000). Such high levels of violence include risks to the safety of politicians and social leaders.

This year, the death of Marielle Franco (Socialism and Liberty Party) – a black and LGBT rights activist, and councillor, assassinated by unidentified suspects in Rio de Janeiro – spurred outrage and commotion throughout the World. Without exaggeration, engaging in politics could well be classified as a high-risk job in Brazil.

Even in a context marked by violence, no one can honestly and responsibly dismiss the risks that Bolsonaro's strategy of embracing violence entails. In the past five years alone, at least 194 people were assassinated due to political reasons. If we go back in time from 1979 onwards (when Brazil was giving the first, baby steps towards transitioning from being a civic-military dictatorship to a liberal democracy) the figure rises to staggering 1345 documented cases.

Even in a context marked by violence, no one can honestly and responsibly dismiss the risks that Bolsonaro's strategy of embracing violence entails.

There is a serious concern that the "Bolsonaro effect" could lead to an even more sombre scenario, in which republican ties of conviviality are dissolved.

So far, Bolsonaro has done very little to dispel this risk. On the contrary, expressing a trademark contempt for civility, the far-right leader jokingly suggested during one of his political rallies that "supporters of the Worker's Party should be gunned down".

To make things worse, days after his reproachable comment, Bolsonaro himself was the victim of a failed assassination attempt. The candidate was stabbed by a member of the public during one of his rallies, in the city of Juiz de Fora, state of Minas Gerais.

Similar to what happened in Britain after the Brexit vote, a series of violent incidents involving far-right supporters have been reported on social media after Bolsonaro's resounding victory in the first ballot. These range from verbal aggression (including chants that Bolsonaro will order the deaths of LGBT people) and multiple beatings to gruesome episodes.

Two cases worth mentioning involve far-right supporters carving up a swastika on the flesh of an anti-fascist activist, and murdering a capoeira master, stabbed 12 times for voting for the Worker's Party candidate, Haddad.

Brazil was no paradise before it was seized by the "Bolsonaro effect", but there is now a palpable fear that a bad situation could significantly worsen.

## **The question of political violence**

---

Bolsonaro's endorsement of political violence has even managed to scare the fervently anti-leftist liberal media. Alluding to the murder of political leaders and dismissing death threats to advocates of specific causes obviously leads to the question of a form of violence that is inherently political (terrorism, however defined it may be, could also be inserted here, but let's not complicate things further).

If the far-right candidate wins the Brazilian elections, the issue of political violence is likely to take to the news once again.

The relationship seems obvious. Political violence refers to the instrumental use of violence (in whichever way or form) in order to achieve a certain political goal, or in this case, to prevent others from doing so. If the far-right candidate wins the Brazilian elections, the issue of political violence is likely to take to the news once again.

But fearing Bolsonaro for his failure to reproach political violence has some limitations. In theory the concept of political violence works well. It is clean, easy to understand and provides an immediate account of which acts are not to be tolerated under democratic rule (such as murdering those you disagree with). But in practice, things are always more complicated.

To speak of “political violence” requires clear definitions of what both politics and violence mean. In other words, in order to classify an act as such we have to make uncomfortable, and many times unhelpful distinctions between which motives are political, and even worse, which actions can fit into the category of violence.

There are also further complications. The concept of political violence mobilises a liberal tradition of blaming that struggles with complex chains of responsibility and assumes clear-cut distinctions between those who perpetrate and those who are the victims of violence. In practice, things are never that simple.

Effectively, the concept of political violence creates a series of problematic and arbitrary distinctions that end up concealing the ways in which violence is embedded in our modern societies.

A couple of examples might clarify the issue. Often, drug-related homicides are not treated as political violence (for the absence of a clear “political” motive) even though they are clearly affected by a certain politics (from policing, to the criminalisation of drugs).

Why aren't deaths caused by austerity cuts to social welfare seen as political violence? Isn't dying a form of violence? Aren't fiscal policy choices political?

Likewise, the assassination of “adulterous” partners (sic), a crime that disproportionately affects ex-wives or ex-girlfriends, is often treated as a personal/passional crime and not as a political crime as such, even though feminists have tirelessly reminded us that the personal is deeply political.

We could go on. Why aren't deaths caused by austerity cuts to social welfare seen as political violence? Isn't dying a form of violence? Aren't fiscal policy choices political?

There is an endless list of other real-case examples where a rigorous and honest distinction between what constitutes political violence and what doesn't is nearly impossible.

In other words, violence always betrays a certain politics even when its motivations are not seen as properly political.

## Structuring violence

---

A much more helpful way of looking at the relationship between violence and democracy in contemporary Brazil would be to avoid an excessive focus on the question of political violence (although it obviously matters) and to try and analyse the “Bolsonaro effect” through more holistic and systemic lenses.

This means understanding that the relationship between violence and politics is much deeper and, sadly more sedimented within the fabrics of Brazilian democracy.

Movements normalising or advocating violence always happen in specific historical and social contexts and are as much responses to the circumstances in which they happen as they are somehow enabled by them.

The institutional racism that is still rampant throughout the world, and particularly in Brazil, would be violent because it prevents people of colour from realising the liberal promises of equal treatment.

Attempts to understand violence from a holistic and systemic perspective have long defined what one could loosely call the field of violence studies.

Some, like Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung, famously argued that violence also has a structural face, expressed as a series of impediments to the full realisation of human potentials.

In this account, the institutional racism that is still rampant throughout the world, and particularly in Brazil, would be violent because it prevents people of colour from realising the liberal promises of equal treatment.

We could also say, borrowing from Amartya Sen’s somehow similar thesis, that the features of socio-economic underdevelopment (such as lack of access to education, sanitation and secure housing) also constitute forms of structural violence.

With one of the highest levels of inequality in the world, with more than half the adult population without basic education and with 61% of the population without access to safely managed sanitation services, Brazil is certainly defined by high levels of structural violence.

These violent impediments to the full realisation of human potential (exclusion, exploitation and repression) are mechanisms that have long played a crucial function in the process of capital accumulation.

But as the Marxist tradition suggests, violence is not only structural but it is also a *structuring factor* of modern capitalist societies. In other words, impediments to the full realisation of human potential are not simply barriers that can be lifted by economic development and the strengthening of institutions.

These violent impediments to the full realisation of human potential (exclusion, exploitation and repression) are mechanisms that have long played a crucial function in the process of capital accumulation.

According to this current of thought, the exclusion of large masses of the global population from the promises of liberalism is not a flaw, but a pre-condition for the smooth functioning of the ways in which we produce and distribute wealth. Quite simply, without dispossession there is no impulse to work.

Without the impulse to work there is no worker. And with no worker there is no industry. The consequence is that, in order to produce at an ever-increasing rate, capitalist societies have to constantly reproduce a certain level of insecurity (the fear of joblessness, the fear of mounting debt, the fear of capital flight and etc...).

It is no exaggeration to say that Brazilian history is the history of enforcing a brutal compulsion to work via the dispossession of the most basic rights. Since the days of colonial slavery, local authorities strived to secure high returns on investments by producing a state of generalised social insecurity.

And at no point did the connection between accumulation, violence and insecurity become clearer than during Bolsonaro's beloved dictatorship (1964-1985).

Generously supported by business, the authoritarian regime liberalised capital flows, violently repressed strikes, and systematically reduced real wages.

In effect, decades of violent insecurity have created an atmosphere in Brazil where life itself is seen as disposable.

And the sad realisation is that, whereas the transition to democracy (1985-1988) managed to democratise the political sphere, the Brazilian economy remained tied to the authoritarian-like dictates of neoliberalism.

The democratic New Republic (1988-?) was characterised by the undisputed rule of austerity (sucking even the once socialist Worker's Party into its ranks), fluctuating levels of informality and unemployment, the permeant blackmail caused by fear of capital flights, and the decision to privilege "law and order" policies over the protection of basic human rights.

Some of these elements were mitigated by decades of leftist governments, but it might have been too little, too late. In effect, decades of violent insecurity have created an atmosphere in Brazil where life itself is seen as disposable.

The disregard for life that defines the "Bolsonaro effect" is nothing but the most recent, and most extreme expression of the general disregard for life that has structured contemporary Brazil.

## **Violence and the failure of democracy**

---

However we chose to understand violence, one thing is undisputable: violence is always bad for democracy. The immediate effect of violent acts can be catastrophic to political life. As Hannah Arendt once brilliantly put it, political violence is unpredictable as it risks destroying the foundational promises of collective life.

When invisible violence is left unaddressed for too long, as it has been in Brazil, then it is no wonder that society becomes a fertile ground for the type of authoritarianism demonstrated by Bolsonaro and his supporters.

Liberal segments see this violence as the imminent danger posed by the “Bolsonaro effect”: the danger of authoritarianism and radicalisation. But we cannot forget that Brazilian democracy has already been struck from within, by the silent and invisible threat posed by *structural forms of violence* (such as exploitation and exclusion).

When this invisible violence is left unaddressed for too long, as they have been in Brazil, then it is no wonder that society becomes a fertile ground for the type of authoritarianism demonstrated by Bolsonaro and his supporters.

Not everything is lost, though. There is still a slim, but real chance that Fernando Haddad (Worker’s Party) might win the second ballot.

This would be a first, vital step in the struggle to halt the rise of the far-right. But even in a best-case scenario, the “Bolsonaro effect” will not stop unless something is done about the structural and structuring forms of violence that exist in Brazil. And this is the real challenge faced by the left.

About the author

**Dr Henrique Tavares Furtado** completed his PhD in Politics from the University of Manchester in 2016, when he joined the Politics and IR programme at UWE. Prior to his appointment at UWE, he worked as a teaching assistant at Manchester University (2013-2015) and as part of the Distance Learning MA team at Leicester University (2015-2017).

**Dr Henrique Tavares Furtado** completó su doctorado en Política de la Universidad de Manchester en 2016 y en el mismo año empezó a trabajar para la University of the West of England como profesor. Anteriormente, había trabajado como profesor auxiliar en la Universidad de Manchester y como parte del equipo de enseñanza a distancia en la Universidad de Leicester.

Related Articles

Subjects

Related Articles

---