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Brazil

Bolsonaro's Most Dangerous Supporters

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Establishment outlets like the *Economist* insist the Brazilian military is a moderating influence on the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro. But precisely the opposite is true.

The first round of Brazil's elections saw the neo-fascist candidate Jair Bolsonaro come within four points of victory. Between Bolsonaro and victory however stands The Workers Party's (PT) candidate Fernando Haddad. [1] He has less than two weeks to stop Bolsonaro, after coming second with only 29 percent of the vote. Moreover Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party (PSL) went from political irrelevance to become the second-largest party in Brazil overnight. It is no exaggeration to say that Brazilian democracy itself is at stake.

Even if Haddad manages to pull off a last-minute victory, in the polarized climate of Brazilian politics there could still be a hard military coup to follow the soft congressional coup that removed Dilma Rousseff in 2016. Bolsonaro has the backing of significant sectors within the military hostile to the PT.

These sectors, along with many on the Brazilian right, claim the PT is trying to enact "a "silent revolution" with the goal of turning Brazil into a communist dictatorship. In order to understand both Bolsonaro's rise and the danger to democracy he poses, it is vital to examine the anti-PT faction in the military.

Bolsonaro's running mate General Antônio Mourão was the face of public opposition among senior officers in the armed forces to Dilma Rousseff's Truth Commission. The Commission was given the mission of shining light on crimes committed by the military during the 1964–1985 dictatorship.

Truth Commission

While the military has been more or less hostile to the PT since it was formed, the more virulent and mobilized anti-PT sentiment can be traced to the start of Brazil's Truth Commission in 2012. The commission was carefully constructed by the PT as a decidedly non-partisan affair led mainly by figures of the judiciary rather than civil society. The word "justice" was avoided, so as not to scare the generals.

It was backed by opposition parties — including conservative ex-presidents José Sarney, Fernando Collor, and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who all later backed Dilma's impeachment. However, there remains little analysis either in English or Portuguese from the left regarding political divisions within the military and how this influences Brazilian politics. Establishment media like the *Economist* continue to hold delusions that the military has no desire to take power, and would moderate a future Bolsonaro government.

This is profoundly mistaken. The Brazilian military not only represents a threat to Brazilian democracy; it is the location of one of the most powerful far-right factions backing Bolsonaro's rise to power.

The PT and the Military

There is a lingering hatred for Lula and the PT among the military's top brass. An internal faction is openly conspiring

to keep any left-leaning government out of power by all means possible. This same faction will play a major role in a future Bolsonaro government. This opposition festers despite the fact that Lula's government heavily increased military spending and expanded its role overseas.

Lula's strategy of appeasement, which mirrored the PT's orientation to Brazil's plutocratic media and big capital, failed. Both retired and active members of the armed forces — many of whom are today top figures in the Bolsonaro camp — publicly came out against the commission and denied torture under the military regime. At the same time, given that the commission wasn't supposed to punish anyone, it ended up strengthening and bringing together anti-PT networks in the armed forces.

The Brazilian military dictatorship, unlike its counterpart in Argentina, was not removed from power through political defeat. Instead, facing increased political opposition, corruption scandals, and economic crisis in the mid-1980s, dictatorship forces opted to carefully manage Brazil's transition to democracy. This ensured that their allies were well positioned within Brazil's new political system and the constitution would protect them from repercussions for the dictatorship's brutal crimes.

To this day, the military has maintained a certain reputation. First, as an independent actor who only intervenes in politics to protect the national interest. Second, among a section of the population, the dictatorship is remembered as a crime- and corruption-free golden age where family values were respected and everyone had a job.

Several high-ranking military officers such as General Sérgio Etchegoyen or General Joaquim Luna e Silva already occupy cabinet positions in Michel Temer's current government. The generals have been using their growing space in the media, especially in Brazil's largest media company Globo, to voice alarmingly anti-democratic sentiments.

For instance General Luiz Rocha Paiva openly called for a coup on GloboNews, in order to thwart the PT's "silent revolution." [2] In a disturbing display of naked paranoia, the general spoke about the dangers of a PT electoral victory turning Brazil into a communist country.

Mourão — who was removed from his post as the head of the Military Command of the South for openly clashing with Rousseff over the truth commission's work — later took part in a bizarre episode during the 2016 impeachment, in which he appeared on a Youtube clip made by a Masonic Lodge in Brasília announcing his willingness to support military intervention in order to "maintain stability." [3]

The degree of opposition within the military to the PT has only become clear this year. For instance, the day before the Supreme Court cleared the path for Lula's arrest, army head General Vilas-Boas took to twitter to publicly pressure the judiciary to arrest the former president.

Following his tweets, almost all of Brazil's high military command went online to celebrate the PT's defeat. [4] At the time they were only timidly criticized by a lone justice on the Supreme Court. But the issue has returned to the headlines during the electoral campaign, with the three candidates of the Left — Fernando Haddad, Ciro Gomes of the PDT, and PSOL's Guilherme Boulos — denouncing military meddling in civilian affairs.

Lava Jato and the Army

The far right also seems to have closer relations with the Lava Jato investigation than many imagined. In the lead up to the first round of the elections, Judge Sergio Moro, the man who sent Lula to prison, released damaging testimony

of a close Lula ally collected months ago in a move clearly designed to enact maximum damage on the PT's election prospects.

Bolsonaro has openly talked about elevating Moro to Brazil's Supreme Court and key Lava Jato judges like Marcelo Bretas even endorsed Bolsonaro openly. Bolsonaro will likely strengthen Lava Jato if elected and use it as a means to criminalize the Left.

Thompson Flores, head of the Southern federal court of appeals responsible for overseeing Lava-Jato anti-corruption operations, was invited by General Mourão to give a lecture at Rio de Janeiro's Military Club. [5] The invite came soon after Flores made headlines for ignoring legal procedures to personally block an order issued by a dissenting judge in the court Flores leads to free Lula. Mourão and Flores claimed during a press conference that the meeting had nothing to do with Lula's arrest, instead citing what they described as their long-term friendship.

Currently presided over by Mourão, the Military Club was one of the centers of the conspiracy that toppled Brazilian democracy in 1964. In 2014, the day after the truth commission published its report, the club placed an advertisement in Rio de Janeiro's main paper defending the military dictatorship.

Haiti

Mourão, together with General Augusto Heleno, were Brazil's top military commanders in its disastrous intervention in Haiti. According to international observers and human rights organizations, they are responsible for massacring dozens of civilians in the slums of Port au Prince in 2006. Now, they stand close to the highest political office in Brazil.

Haiti was thrown into turmoil by Western states in 2004 after the United States, Canada, and France supported the overthrow of Jean Bertrand Aristide's mildly social-democratic government. After losing the countryside to an insurgency based in neighboring Dominican Republic, Aristide was forced on February 29 into an unmarked plain by American marines. They took over Port au Prince's international airport and sent Aristide to the Central African Republic against his will. Eventually he was granted exile in South Africa.

Instead of offering solidarity to the deposed leader, Brazil's left government supported the coup against Haiti's popularly elected government. The PT government effectively volunteered to occupy Haiti. They were moved in part by the illusion that Brazilian military involvement in United Nations peacekeeping missions would elevate the country to the Security Council. The results were disastrous for both Haiti and Brazilian democracy.

Heleno was met with immediate hostility from Haitians after assuming control of military operations in the island by mid-2004. Pro-Aristide supporters, based in the peripheries of Cite Soleil and Belair, clashed with UN blue helmets in the capital, Port au Prince. The biggest slum in the country, Cite Soleil, was also Aristide's main power base and the home of his party Fanmi Lavalas. In an attempt to eliminate opposition to the intervention, on July 5 Heleno ordered the execution of the slum's pro-Aristide community leader Emmanuel "Dread" Wilme. Tens of mostly women and children were killed in the operation.

Video footage of the massacre, collected by human rights observers from the San Francisco Labor Council, which was later aired on Democracy Now!, showed gruesome images of dead Haitians killed under Heleno's command. According to Seth Donnelly, who went to Cite Soleil the following day and witnessed Dread Wilme's funeral, the event was widely attended by the traumatized community. [6]

"We found homes, which when we say homes, we are talking basically shacks of wood and tin, in many cases, riddled with machine gun blasts as well as tank fire," said Donnelly. "The holes in a lot of these homes were too large just to be bullets. They must have been tank-type shells penetrating the homes. We saw a church and a school completely riddled with machine gun blasts."

The massacre fell very much in line with the Brazilian political discourse of law and order. When asked about the raid, General Heleno, says Donnelly, "initially challenged us, our delegation, as to why were we concerned about the rights of the 'outlaws,' the term that he used, and not the 'legal force.' He seemed to write off community testimony as being part of community hostility and part of these 'gang attacks' on UN forces."

Estimates say at least twenty-seven Haitians were killed in the raid, mostly young women. Heleno's response mirrors the Brazilian right's championing of mass murder in the peripheries as a valid security policy, claiming that the only good bandit is a dead bandit.

Pressured by the Haitian solidarity movement in the United States, change in MINUSTAH leadership later that month sacked General Heleno. [7] However following a sinister chain of events, his successor, General Urano Bacelar, was found dead three months after substituting Bolsonaro's current chief adviser in Port Au Prince. While the Brazilian army described it as a "suicide" and avoided an official investigation, Wikileaks cables reveal skepticism towards the hypotheses, possibly linking his death to different conflicts involving the United Nations. [8]

Brazil's presence on the island was also partially responsible for spreading a cholera epidemic that killed thirty thousand people. Additionally, there were over two thousand accusations of rape leveled against Brazilian soldiers. Racist to its core, the operation was cheered on by the media as an opportunity for the Brazilian army to practice its future occupations of Rio's favelas, with black Haitians serving as guinea pigs. Out of all the PT's mistakes that strengthened anti-democratic elements in Brazilian society, Haiti was one of its most disastrous ones.

What's at Stake

Brazil's democracy hangs in the balance. Bolsonaro's candidacy if successful will likely result in bloodshed, mass violence against the Left, and the destruction of what remains of workers' rights.

Bolsonaro and his allies in the military are openly hostile to democracy. This ugly coalition has concluded that Brazil is impossible to govern democratically and only an authoritarian solution based on a new constitution will be able to return the country to stability.

Bolsonaro seeks to channel popular anger against Brazil's political system and corrupt political class against democracy itself. While this anti-democratic sentiment has crystallized around opposition to the PT, one of the errors of the PT's time in government was its failure to curtail the power of the military.

Bolsonaro's response to Brazil's social and security crisis is open violence. Like Duterte in the Philippines or Sisi in Egypt he promotes a politics that can be reduced to shooting your way through the country's crisis. In a country where police mass murder is already business as usual, if elected Bolsonaro and his friends in the military could

unleash a historic slaughter, the victims of which won't only be poor black youth in the favelas. It will also include land activists, trade unions, socialists, and LGBT people. In this the murder of Marielle Franco serves as an example of a nightmarish future.

[Jacobin](#)

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[1] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/09/fernando-haddad-pt-brazil-lula-elections>

[2] <https://globosatplay.globo.com/globonews/v/7021954/>

[3] <https://www.sul21.com.br/ultimas-noticias/geral/2017/09/em-palestra-general-mourao-fala-em-possibilidade-de-intervencao-militar-no-pais/>

[4] <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-43644404>

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[6] https://www.democracynow.org/2005/7/11/eyewitnesses_describe_massacre_by_un_troops

[7] https://www.huffpostbrasil.com/entry/democracy-now-turns-up-in_n_884482

[8] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/jan/21/haiti-wikileaks?INTCMP=SRCH>