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Brazil

Despite disasters and crimes, the Bolsonaro government continues

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The Bolsonaro government in Brazil is a huge catastrophe and a dangerous threat: ineffectiveness in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, disastrous international relations, a deliberate anti-environmental line, attacks on democratic institutions, human rights and the (precarious) gains of civilization. Its policy towards indigenous peoples is genocidal in nature. Even before the pandemic, its economic policy had failed. Brazil is the second most affected country in the world in number of Covid-19 cases and deaths, behind only the United States, with more than 125,000 deaths. The picture could be even worse, but Bolsonaro has been prevented by court rulings from imposing his line.

The government is criminal, even from a strictly legal standpoint. Several of Bolsonaro's actions are crimes, and his family has close (and well-known) ties to "mainstream" organized crime in the country, particularly with the so-called "militias" of the state of Rio de Janeiro. Bolsonaro's resignation from the government is therefore urgently needed. Until June, things seemed to be heading towards his overthrow. But the situation has changed.

Until June

Polls showed that rejection of Bolsonaro was increasing, especially after the start of the pandemic, although he still had the support of about a third of the population. The plan to create a new party, entirely led by the Bolsonaro family and its most loyal allies, "Alliance for Brazil", had failed. Until June, recurring threats to democratic and human rights were compounded by Bolsonaro's gamble on confronting Congress and the Supreme Court, as well as state governors and mayors, motivated by his irritation at his inability to impose his policies and the various criminal investigations which threaten him (for crimes committed by his supporters, even by armed groups, and by his sons, such as the dissemination of fake news and threats against the authorities).

Pro-Bolsonaro activists organized weekly protests, mainly in the country's capital, Brasilia, to attack (and sometimes directly threaten) the Supreme Court and Congress, as well as the press and other institutions, and Bolsonaro was present on a number of occasions (which was already sufficient legal reason for his removal from the presidency). According to a report (not denied by Bolsonaro) in *PiauÃ*- magazine, the culmination of Bolsonaro's aggression came on 22 May, when he decided to intervene against the Supreme Court to replace its judges, with the aim of "restoring the authority of the president". According to the magazine, this plan was not implemented because Bolsonaro's own military ministers convinced him it was not viable.

Everything indicated that the continuation of this line of confrontation followed until then by Bolsonaro would end up causing his resignation. But Bolsonaro started to change his line. He abandoned a campaign theme, that of the fight against corruption, which allowed him to start forming a base of support in Congress with the group of right-wing MPs called *centrÃ*, the most corrupt MPs, who literally sell their support, and who had been heavily attacked by Bolsonaro during the campaign.

After 18 June

On 18 June, a close friend (and accomplice) of Bolsonaro, FabrÃ-cio Queiroz, was arrested. He is accused of corruption (in association with one of Bolsonaro's sons, FlÃvio, and presumably with Bolsonaro himself and his wife,

Michelle). Bolsonaro understands he runs the risk of being directly involved in the investigations and then convicted. Since that day he has ceased to participate in the protests against the Supreme Court and Congress - and soon the Bolsonarists ceased to organize them. The political involvement of his sons (who are part of the far right wing of his supporters) has been drastically reduced.

In Brazil, it is the President of the Chamber of Deputies who decides on the opening of the impeachment trials of the President of the Republic. The current president, Rodrigo Maia, even after receiving more than fifty requests to start this process, has not followed up. In early August, in a television interview, he finally spoke out against it. He said he does not believe Bolsonaro has committed a crime that can justify his impeachment.

What Maia's statement means is that most of the Brazilian "political class", reflecting the predominant position of the bourgeoisie, has chosen to keep Bolsonaro in power. This can be explained by the (more than dubious) idea that he can be "controlled", or simply by the fact that this class does not resent the more undemocratic and genocidal aspects of government. Moreover, even though Bolsonaro has not yet been able to offer most of the unpopular measures the bourgeoisie expects from him, it hopes he can still be of use. Likewise, the mainstream Brazilian media have relativized their critical position with regard to Bolsonaro, even if they maintain it.

The impact of "emergency aid" and the government's reorientation

On 14 August, according to a poll, government approval rose from 32% to 37%, and disapproval fell from 44% to 34% compared to the previous poll (June). The trend of gradual decline in the popularity of the government has reversed. It is among the poorest voters, and in the northeast of the country (so far the biggest base of support for Lula), that hostility to the government has subsided the most. Perhaps the most surprising change is that 47% of those polled believe that Bolsonaro is not culpable for the deaths caused by the pandemic. 41% believe he has some responsibility, and only 11% believe he is the main culprit. It is not difficult to deduce that the main reason for this favourable change in government has been the reception by a large part of the population, since April, of "emergency aid" to compensate for the contraction of the economy due to the pandemic.

The government had offered aid of 200 reals. Congress, however, forced it to increase this aid to 600 reals (just under 100 euros at the current exchange rate) or, in a few cases, to 1,200. The economic impact of this measure has been enormous, much greater than expected. It has benefited more than 65 million people (out of a population of 210 million). With this, the incomes of the poorest part of the Brazilian population increased during the pandemic, despite the very severe economic crisis (in the second quarter, the GDP fell by 9.7%). In the northeast, the poorest region of the country, average income increased by 26%; in the north, it increased by 24%. Even in the richest region of the country, the south east, it increased by 8%. The share of the employed population with recognized employment rights is less than 38 million people - just over half the number of those receiving emergency aid.

Another very relevant comparison: the "Family Purse" program, responsible for much of the electoral support that Lula had in his government, currently reaches just over 14 million families, who receive from the program on average less than 200 reals per month. So emergency aid is reaching a lot more people, with much higher values. The exact counts are not known, but the monthly cost of emergency aid is about twenty times that of the Family Grant. Bolsonaro has profited from a social program he did not propose; his defeat benefited him. Likewise, the fact that his line of action in the face of the pandemic has been prohibited by the judiciary and the legislature makes it easier for him to say that "the responsibility for the pandemic lies with the governors and the mayors". The biggest setback and the greatest threat he has suffered so far - Queiroz's arrest - caused him to (partially) change his behaviour in relation to the main institutions of the Brazilian state, which allowed the bourgeoisie to collaborate with him again.

A “left” Bolsonaro?

Until recently, Bolsonaro was critical of the social programs instituted by the PT governments. He has changed his stance dramatically, and is now involved, in some cases, in expanding these programs, changing their names to place his brand on them. The housing program, which was called “My House, My Life”, has undergone some changes and is now called “Green and Yellow House” (these are the colours of the Brazilian flag). The Family Grant program will be expanded and will be called “Renda Brasil”. Emergency aid during the pandemic has been extended until the end of 2020, although in the last four months of the year the amounts paid have been cut in half.

Bolsonaro’s alliance with the ultra-neoliberal Paulo Guedes (Minister of the Economy) was never founded on conviction; it has always been practical. Now, however, he has started to clash with his minister and the sectors of the bourgeoisie he represents. Completely absurd characterizations have begun to be made: the Bloomberg corporate news site has published an article claiming that Bolsonaro’s “internal leftism has resurfaced”, which has been taken up in the Brazilian press. The Sao Paulo newspaper *Folha* has published an appalling editorial under the headline “Jair Rousseff”, linking Jair Bolsonaro with the deposed president.

It is obvious that Bolsonaro has not become a “leftist” at all; social assistance policies are not “left”, even if they are broadened. In PT governments, moreover, these policies cost the budget very little and have been hailed by the World Bank and other similar institutions.

“Emergency aid” costs much more, and has only been supported by the ruling class in the context of the pandemic. In the post-pandemic period, the bourgeoisie will push for the resumption of the ultra-orthodox austerity that was Guedes’s promise; and Bolsonaro, who has gone from adversary to enthusiast in relation to welfare policies, has already begun to oppose Guedes, whose future in government has become uncertain.

Perspectives

Bolsonaro has grown stronger, although he continues to face several very significant risks - in particular the various investigations into him and his relatives. The recent support he has garnered (such as that of the *centrão*) is not firm, and the benevolent tolerance of most of the bourgeoisie for him is not certain either. In addition, some of those responsible for his electoral victory, such as former judge Sergio Moro, have become his enemies. Although public rejection of the government has waned, much of society maintains a strong oppositional position; even in the conditions of the pandemic, there were mobilizations against the government, and there still are.

Bolsonaro's position, on the other hand, is not only favoured by the tolerance of the bourgeoisie and the complicity of the right-wing parties. It also takes advantage of weaknesses in the opposition, which works with the government on fundamental issues. The governors of the PT and the PC do Brasil, for example, have forced through “social security reforms” in the states they govern similar to those approved at the federal level, and suppressed opposition movements. The challenge of strengthening a more coherent opposition remains open, on the part of popular movements and the parties which are to the left of the PT and which defend a line of class independence.

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