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Brazil

Local elections indicate a new moment in Brazil

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The results of Brazil's recent local elections demonstrated an important defeat of the extreme right-wing and signal a change in the country's political situation, putting Brazil in tune with the resistance processes of several countries on the continent. After milestones such as the victory of the plebiscite for a new constitution in Chile, the electoral failure of the coup-right in Bolivia, and the defeat of Trump, the Brazilian people also gave a message at the polls against the neo-fascist Bolsonaro and his neo-liberal, racist, misogynistic, and scientific denialist government.

It was the first election after Bolsonaro came to power and had as great defeats the candidates supported by the president, in a movement very different from the Bolsonarism electoral phenomenon in 2018. Of the thirteen mayoral candidates nominated by Bolsonaro throughout the country, nine were defeated in the first round, and of the 45 candidates for councilman with more prominence among the Bolsonarism holders, only ten were elected. The traditional right grew again and occupied part of the space conquered by the radical Bolsonarism holders two years ago.

On the other hand, the combative left represented by the PSOL conquered an unprecedented advance in the history of the party, with the election of 88 of council seats throughout the country – with significant number of women and black representatives – and the arrival to the second round in the city hall of two capitals: São Paulo, the largest city in the country, with comrade Guilherme Boulos, and Belém, a large city in the Amazon region, with comrade Edmilson Costa.

Brazil is not an island

As internationalists, we cannot think of the Brazilian elections detached from the context of struggle that spread to Latin America and the United States in 2020. In 2019, the protests that overthrew the governor of Puerto Rico and the popular revolts against neoliberalism that began in Chile and Ecuador began days of struggle that developed on the American continent and intensified in recent months. The incredible antiracist revolt in the United States, the resistance to the parliamentary coup in Bolivia, the marches of the Colombian youth and now the uprising of the Peruvian people show that the working class in the continent faces a scenario of great polarization and continues fighting, far from being defeated.

All these processes are significant and still open. The uprising of the U.S. colony in the Caribbean has put the left of Puerto Rico in a new situation that is now reflected in the election of comrade Rafael Bernabe to the Senate, as well as the Ecuadorian uprising that continues to express itself in the country's political struggle. In Chile, cradle and possible grave of neoliberalism, the people – especially the youth – overthrew the constitution of Pinochet and gave a stop to the decades of mercantilization of life, seeking new models with the next constituent. And in Bolivia broad sections of the population rejected the coup and murderous government of Jeanine Áñez and the openly fascist regionalist groups, bringing MAS in the process of renewal back to power.

The black uprising over George Floyd's death in the U.S. took place in this context of struggles, striking at the international authoritarian conservatism that has Donald Trump as its principal model. The rebellion at the center of the empire, in which the masses defeated the repressive state apparatus, definitively altered the correlation of forces not only in "America" (as the U.S. legislative elections indicate), but throughout the American continent. We have no illusions about Biden, a legitimate representative of the imperialist bourgeoisie, but Trump's defeat was the

institutional change that most positively impacted the Latin American class struggle, with strong repercussions in Brazil.

And today we also see a democratic insurrection in Peru, very interesting because it has as one of its axes the fight against corruption that, unlike Brazil, has not been abandoned by the left or captured by the right. The political instability there has overthrown presidents, disorganized traditional political parties, and opened more and more space for action by socialists in the struggle for more democratic spaces in a country with a great tradition of class struggle.

The recent Brazilian elections are a distorted reflection of this multifaceted scenario. They are a reflection because they show the same trends as other international processes and are distorted because their results occurred without the pressure of the streets we see in other countries. Therefore we can see an element of polarization: the radical left advancing while traditional and bureaucratized progressive parties lose space; but we also see an apparent tendency toward political “normalization” due to the absence of street influence in the electoral process, which is expressed in the growth of traditional right-wing parties and the dehydration of the stock market.

The Bolsonaro Crisis

Bolsonarism is still a robust and dangerous political force in Brazil’s political reality, but in these two years the Bolsonaro government has experienced a series of crises that demonstrate its limitations. First, because the initial composition of its government already engendered great contradictions by bringing together the military (including many of the active ones), ultra-liberal economists (represented by Economy Minister Paulo Guedes), traditional corrupt politicians and sectors of judicial activism represented by Sérgio Moro, judge of Operation Car Wash and Justice Minister appointed by the Bolsonaro at the beginning of the government that directed the main investigations to cover cases of corruption in the government of the Workers’ Party (PT).

This Bolsonarism composition, combined with rhetoric of violence against the left and social movements, represented a real risk of closure of the regime at the beginning of the government and led many organizations of the left to fear and impressionism. However, the very internal contradictions of the extreme right’s power condominium led to the successive crises faced by the Bolsonaro government.

An example of these crises came with the corruption issue, with the disclosure of the “Queiroz case” in which Fabrício Queiroz, a former ally and advisor to Bolsonaro, was discovered in a money laundering scheme involving the president’s family, notably his son Flavio Bolsonaro and first lady Michelle. Queiroz is a former police officer with proven connections to paramilitary groups in Rio de Janeiro (who executed PSOL councilwoman Marielle Franco in 2018) and was on the run from justice after the scandal was spread, being found in a house owned by Bolsonaro’s own lawyer. Throughout the process, it is remarkable the effort of Bolsonaro in using all the institutional tools he has to defend his son.

This scenario made Sérgio Moro’s position unsustainable, as he had electoral pretensions and stood as a “paladin of justice,” making Moro resign in April 2020 and generating the first major rupture in the Bolsonarism base, turning away from the government a sector that saw him as an expression of the anti-corruption struggle and bringing him closer to the traditional and corrupt right so criticized by the president before the elections. As a symbol of this change, the government today has as one of its main defenders Roberto Jefferson, symbolic leadership of the parliamentary group called “centrão” (Central-Wing) (parties that operate opportunistically without clear political ideology) that was arrested as a consequence of the Mensalão corruption scandal that took place in the first Lula administration.

The deepening of the relationship between Bolsonaro and the traditional right wing parties notably weakened his “outsider” discourse to the extent that he approached right wing parties that were also at the root of the Lula and Dilma governments. His neoliberal base, which expected deep economic reforms, saw the weight of Paulo Guedes diminish more and more as the government approached the political groups it had criticized so much before.

Moreover, his extremist rhetoric was not enough to mobilize and organize a neo-fascist militancy in his favor, which occurred with the failure to legalize the Alliance for Brazil party, a bet by Bolsonaro for a political organization proper to the extreme right with violent discourse and evidently neo-fascist traits (his number in the ballot box would be 38, inspired by the caliber of the most popular firearm in the country). Despite the enormous danger represented by the “militias,” paramilitary gangs in the state of Rio de Janeiro made up mainly of police officers who work with extortion, misdemeanors, and drug trafficking, and have a great political reference in the Bolsonaro family, it is important to note that no “fascist bands” have formed in the Brazilian middle class, such as the so-called “youth unions” in Bolivia or the white supremacists in the US.

The government’s scientific negationism was also a negative mark before important sectors of society. Its denial of the environmental catastrophe that hits the Amazon through arson and deforestation, in addition to the unscientific rhetoric in the face of the coronavirus pandemic and even against the vaccine itself for this disease caused great worldwide commotion and directly influenced the displacement of sectors of the right that seek to differentiate themselves from the obscurantism represented by Bolsonaro

Broken since 2019 with the PSL (Partido Social Liberal), the small “rental party” he used to come to power, Bolsonaro is today on the verge of entering some traditional party and moving further and further away from the fallacious position of “new” in politics, which indicates the emptying of its ideological support base but may also result in the construction of a new political base that reorganizes the right. Bolsonaro continues to be an enormous danger for Brazil, but is losing more and more credibility before the people – especially among women and youth – which places new tasks on Brazilian socialists.

Hope takes up positions

The PSOL’s great victory in the local elections raises a number of important reflections. The countless evidences that we live in a scenario of interregnum and polarization in Latin America and the United States have overturned the impressionistic and paralyzing hypotheses of the supposed “conservative wave” defended by many comrades and leftist organizations in Brazil, including within the PSOL. On the contrary, we see that the world crisis and the very crisis of US imperialism radicalize the political scenario, emptying the moderate center-right and center-left poles in favor of alternatives that present themselves bluntly against the current political system.

A situation of political and social polarization does not necessarily mean a balance of forces, and in recent years we have experienced a polarization in which the right-wing pole advanced but also suffered great resistance. The example of Ele Não!, a day of gigantic demonstrations against Bolsonaro before the 2018 elections, was one of the first strong signs of this resistance, which was consolidated in other demonstrations such as the “Education Tsunami” against the cuts in funds for public universities in 2019 and now shows its fruits in the local elections.

Brazilian local elections were never easy for the left because we fought against the economic power of traditional political groups and even mafias that control basic public services such as public transportation, children’s education and even health care. Clientelism and even vote buying are a real problem in local election processes, making it very difficult for city councils to compete.

However, never have so many black men and women been elected, and the strong electoral expression of blackness indicates, as do the street movements, the structural importance of the antiracist agenda in political struggle. The electoral success of representatives of historically excluded sectors of society and the protagonism of the PSOL as the main party tool that gives voice to these representatives indicate a qualitative change in the political scenario of the country and the advance of a democratic and leftist camp in response to the successive absurdities of the Bolsonaro government.

This contrasts with the performance of traditional left-wing parties such as the Workers' Party (PT), which went from 256 to 179 victories in local governments, and the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), which lost half of its governing mayors. This process of weakening the PT is even more significant because the party won no capital in the first round and runs the second round in only one (Recife, capital of Pernambuco), with only 8% of the vote in São Paulo and 6th in the city that was once the party's fortress. The PCdoB is disputing the city hall in the second round in Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande do Sul with a great tradition of voting on the left.

The unprecedented arrival of the PSOL in the second round in São Paulo with Boulos, as well as the result of Belém, are significant victories that confirm the argument of the qualitative change in the situation lived in the country. The PSOL consolidates itself as a left-wing alternative, aware of the need for the broadest unity of action against fascism and the extreme right but with an independent and radical profile to give concrete answers to the difficult questions presented in a continental country. This new stature achieved by the party changes its characterization from being "the rebel brother of the PT" to affirming itself more and more as the pole of a radical and popular left that affirms itself against sectarianism and opportunism.

A future of possibilities and risks

Great possibilities are opening up in Brazil in the midst of the evident risks caused by the extreme-right government and the deepening of the social and economic crisis that could occur from 2021 onwards, especially with the possible end of the emergency financial aid distributed due to the coronavirus pandemic. The consequences of the pandemic such as bankruptcies and the very high rate of unemployment, as well as the neoliberal government's refusal to carry out deeper distributive measures, as well as a priority export policy that has driven up the price of food and the cost of living in general, are data that form a scenario of poverty and instability that can be as explosive as in other countries.

Likewise, Bolsonaro's movement toward traditional parties, abandoning his narrative of "new politics" but maintaining the call for a deeply conservative agenda, does not mean a defeat of the Brazilian far-right project, but a relocation that allows for a strengthening of this field on new bases of governability. Political violence tends to grow, as already seen in these elections against opposition candidates in general and the PSOL in particular in several states (and with the case of comrade congresswoman Talíria Petrone as the most significant), as well as the widespread dissemination of fake news that absurdly associate the PSOL with crimes such as pedophilia or drug trafficking.

As in the continent as a whole, the Brazilian socialists are facing a risky path but with great possibilities. Electoral victories increase our responsibilities, including because possible demoralizations and failures will serve as arguments for future attacks by the extreme right.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the only way out of this scenario is to respond as a whole in an international manner, increasingly articulating the social organizations and movements that do not face in each country the neoliberal and authoritarian exits. The deep connections that reality establishes between the struggles of the peoples of Latin America and the United States open a new field of action that demands this articulation in an increasingly

deep way. This is the task of the socialists of the American continent at this moment.

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