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Brazil

Lula won, but Bolsonarism is still very much alive

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With his heart in his mouth and with 67% of the votes counted, Lula managed to overtake Bolsonaro, thus putting on track a victory which ended with a narrow margin of one and a half percentage points or a difference of just over two million votes. This is a very important popular victory for democracy in Brazil and one that has fundamental geopolitical repercussions for the continent, since it not only implies a defeat for the reactionary international that has had in Bolsonaro its main regional bastion these last few years, but also the consolidation of a new wave of progressive governments in the region.

This victory also has lessons for the left, both in Latin America and in the rest of the world. Perhaps one of the most important is that of having underestimated Bolsonarism and the capacity of authoritarian neoliberalism to become the political leadership of the dominant fraction of the Brazilian bourgeoisie. Because, although Bolsonaro has been defeated at the polls, Bolsonarism is still very much alive in Brazil. The margin between the two candidacies, the narrowest in history since Brazil regained democracy, is a good indication of the implantation of Bolsonarism and its resilience.

Bolsonaro is the first Brazilian president not to be re-elected, but Bolsonarism has managed to be the first force in the presidential elections in most of the country's states: it will control the Senate; it will be the main force in Congress and has won the governorships of the most populous states in the country, starting with São Paulo. Thus, we are facing a defeat for Bolsonaro, but a victory for Bolsonarism. I think this would be the best definition of the electoral process that has just ended in Brazil.

Bolsonaro managed to come to power in 2018 after a successful coup against Dilma Rousseff, the imprisonment of Lula in the Lava Jato case, and a deep breakdown of the traditional parties of Brazilian politics, especially those of the right. A good example of this was the presidential candidacy of the neoliberal Geraldo Alckmin for the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira [PSDB/Brazilian Social Democracy Party]. Despite the support of the media and the establishment, he only obtained 4.76% of the vote in the first round.

Bolsonaro's victory in 2018 was a protest vote that connected with various malaises and dark passions of Brazilian society, but which would not have been possible without the organic crisis of the Brazilian right. In this particular context, the figure of Bolsonaro emerged as a "Bonapartist" option for a sector of the Brazilian bourgeoisie in order to suture its crisis and try to apply a programme to completely destroy the political legacy of the working-class victories of the 1980s of which the PT and Lula himself are heirs, as well as to put an end to the timid redistributive policies of progressive governments.

One of the golden rules of Roger Stone, adviser to Richard Nixon as well as Donald Trump, consists of using hate in electoral campaigns, which he considers a stronger mobilising factor in politics than love or solidarity. Hate was the petrol which fuelled the engine of Bolsonaro's campaign in 2018, enabling him to win those elections, and the one that has guided the exercise of power in these years of government.

A hatred of the legacy of the first governments of Lula and the PT, but also of the new wave of feminism that is developing on the continent; a hatred towards the native peoples and their defense of their lands; a hatred of people of African descent and their incorporation into the political life of the country; a hatred of sexual diversities and the questioning of the neoconservative moral order. A hatred of the different, of those subjects who, with their very existence, question the advance of authoritarian neoliberalism and its moral order.

The Bolsonaro phenomenon in Brazil, as Micaela Cuesta stated, "is not an isolated case, it is the 'healthy son' of the current neoliberal moment, inseparable from an increasingly widespread social authoritarianism. It is here that 'strong figures' are claimed." Because Bolsonaro represents a decomplexed extreme right, explicitly racist, misogynist, anti-LGBTI, religiously fundamentalist, anti-communist and climate-denialist. But an extreme right that does not stop defending the same ultra-neoliberal economic programme of the Brazilian elites that Temer represented after the coup against Dilma: an ambitious economic restructuring at the expense of the working class, with brutal methods. And in this process, Bolsonaro's Bonapartism has shown itself to be a fundamental element in establishing itself as the "political leadership" of the majority fraction of the Brazilian bourgeoisie. In fact, the break with Moro [Sergio Moro, initially a Bolsonaro and one of the lead judges in the prosecution of the Lavo Jato case against Lula], one of the most beloved characters on the right, evidenced the hard struggle during his government for the political leadership of the right-wing bloc. A battle that, against the odds, Bolsonaro, that bastard son of Lava Jato, managed to win, and not Moro, his true champion.

In this way, Bolsonaro has managed in the years of government to go from being an outsider to building an organic movement with a programme based on three fundamental points: the "minimum State" at the service of the neoliberal economic programme of the Brazilian elites, with the application of structural reforms against social rights conquered in the previous stage; the questioning of liberal democracy, with an authoritarian Bonapartist leadership, insistently claiming the legacy of the dictatorship and which has had its main anchoring elements in the army and the police; and the moral conservatism of the "new Christian right", represented especially by the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches. An organic movement with such a capacity for political leadership of the dominant bloc of the Brazilian bourgeoisie is what makes Bolsonarism so dangerous and at the same time explains to a large extent its social implantation and its electoral resistance that we were able to verify on October 30.

There is no doubt that the huge spending on social aid, much of it explicitly directed to prominent sectors of the Bolsonarist base such as truckers and taxi drivers, helped improve their electoral results. But by themselves they do not explain the results of the legislatures nor of the governorships where Bolsonarismo has managed to overcome the left. No one doubts that the victory of the left would not have been possible without the figure of Lula, which makes him essential. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a "lulism" without Lula; the defeats of Fernando Haddad show that. [Haddad was Mayor of São Paulo from 2013 to 2016. As the Workers' Party candidate for President of Brazil in the 2018 election, he replaced former President Lula, whose candidacy was barred by the Superior Electoral Court. Haddad lost the election to Jair Bolsonaro with 44.87% of the votes against Bolsonaro's 55.13%. In 2022, Haddad ran for governor of São Paulo against Tarcísio de Freitas, a minister in the Bolsonaro administration. Haddad lost the election in the second round, winning 44.73% of the vote to Tarcísio's 55.27%.] It is, however, feasible to think of Bolsonaro as an interchangeable figure, which allows us to speak of a Bolsonaro movement beyond its current leader.

Although important, the post-election protests represent more of an exercise in reactionary gymnastics and a notice to navigating the legislature, than a truly serious attempt to reverse the verdict of the polls. But pressure comes not only from the streets: big Brazilian employers and their related media have already been quick to declare that the victory does not belong to Lula, but to all those who have opposed Bolsonaro. The new president, therefore, is unable to apply his programme to all but rather has to agree to the interests of the Brazilian elites. This is yet another warning to moderate any redistributive whims of a Lula government that could reverse the structural reforms undertaken by the previous executive.

All these "warnings" should alert us to the capacity of Bolsonarism to ripen the conditions for a new coup d'état in the style of the one carried out against Dilma. Let's not forget the recent past of the current vice president Temer: the Trojan horse would already be inside. A sword of Damocles that will fly over the new government and the Brazilian left. A situation that, if it is not counteracted with the construction of a strong independent popular movement, will be the perfect alibi for the moderation of government policies and the resignation of the left.

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With such a context, we cannot fail to recall Walter Benjamin's classic thesis: "every rise of fascism bears witness to a failed revolution." An affirmation that not only continues to be current today, but is perhaps more pertinent than ever, even if not in a strictly literal way, to understand how the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism and/or neofascism is closely related to the current weaknesses of the left. A useful thesis to keep in mind regarding the risks of a government that moderates and does not meet the expectations of change of the popular classes. Because when expectations are dashed, dissatisfaction and frustration arise that feed the dark passions on which the reactionary international is built.

And that is where the role that the PSOL should play becomes fundamental; as not only the second party on the left in the Brazilian Congress, but also the political force that best knows how to represent the emergence of the new Latin American left: young, feminist, black, from the favelas, environmentalist and anti-capitalist. This young formation has the task of accompanying the new Lula government with the reaffirmation of its political and organic independence to be able to put pressure on the executive from the left. If it manages to escape the temptation of settling on becoming the "left wing" of the ruling bloc, its role could be much more ambitious.

The PSOL has the possibility of helping to build and energise a movement that tests experiences of popular power in confronting Bolsonarism and that shines light on an ecosocialist horizon to the organic crisis of the Brazilian bourgeoisie. Because it is building a political movement where Lula is a non-essential interchangeable figure. On Sunday it gained precious time to achieve it.

5 November 2022

Translated by David Fagan from [Punto de Vista Internacional](#).

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