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Brazil

8 January: Contradictions and alternatives in the struggle against fascism

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In a fantasized Brazil, Lula's inauguration took place on 2 January, with seven representatives of the oppressed and exploited representing the Brazilian “people” handing the presidential sash to the new president. The aim was to highlight the wishes of Lula's voters – including those who voted for him only to remove Bolsonaro from power – and thus crown the two-month process of negotiations for the formation of the new government.

From fantasy to the real Brazil

But it wasn't the real Brazil. Because the real Brazil is also militiamen, religious fanatics, landowners and their *jagunços* [paramilitaries], ultra-neoliberal businesspeople, gold miners... all expressed by the acronym BBB which symbolizes in the Federal Congress the parliamentarians representing the interests of “beef, bullets and the Bible”. 40% of those consulted by Atlas Research on 10 January 2023 believe that Lula did not win the presidential elections in October and 37% say they are in favour of military intervention to invalidate these illegitimate results – even if only 10% are in favour of installing a military dictatorship. Vladimir Safatle is right when he notes that what happened on 8 January is the “principle of reality”.

It is therefore right that various analysts describe 8 January as “Lula's second inauguration”. The fanatical *Bolsonaristas*, who encouraged the ransacking of the Praça dos Três Poderes in Brasilia, did what they had long promised to do and gave Lula the welcome they thought he deserved. An exemplary action of the fascist gangs. But according to the Atlas poll cited above, only 18% of respondents approved of the *Bolsonarista* invasion of Congress. The attacks of 8 January are an unavoidable event, a synthesis of multiple and contradictory trends, on which the population as a whole is forced to vote – the Quaest poll on Bolsonaro's popularity on social networks shows that it fell to its worst rating in four years, from 40% the previous week to only 21% on 9 January. In the 11 January Datafolha poll, 93% of respondents condemned the attacks and most advocated the arrest of those involved. In the 13 January Ipsos poll, 81% of respondents condemned the attacks – while 9% fully approved and 9% partially approved of them. The raids were both a shock to institutions of state power that believe they are removed from disorder and a practical experiment in Bolsonaro's fanatical militancy for immense masses of Brazilians.

The newspapers compare 8 January 2023 in Brasilia to 6 January 2021 in Washington. However, beyond the desire to deny the election results and reveal the challenges posed to liberal political systems today by illiberal or neo-fascist movements, comparisons have limits. Bolsonaro had already left office and Lula had been sworn in as president, while Trump was still in power and the US Congress had yet to recognize the election result. The US fascist mobilization was aimed at Congress keeping in power rather than Biden. The Brazilian insurrection is a widespread destruction of the seats of the three powers – the Alvorada Palace, the Federal Congress and the Federal Supreme Court – whose significance is that of a coup d'état, seeking to create a situation of chaos, civil war and government bankruptcy, which would justify the intervention of the Armed Forces. And the tradition of civilian control over the military places 6 January in a completely different structural framework from that of 8 January: Brazil's last military dictatorship ended in 1985 but it retained the militarization of the police force and a special status in public service for the military.

Fortunately, the institutional response in Brazil – including from conservatives – has been much healthier than that of Republicans in the United States. The fact that Lula managed a crisis of this magnitude to his advantage when he had barely a week in office and that he rallied the political authorities around him says a lot about his political capacity. But it also expresses the fear of the Brazilian elites in the face of disorder and the presence of people in the

streets.

The immediate reaction of the left and progressivism has so far been fairly unified, judging by the number of demonstrations that were held across the country on 9 January. It is necessary to fight against complacency and connivance towards political violence and the militarization of society; to offer no truce or amnesty to those involved in the coup attempt; to make Bolsonaro and his friends responsible for their actions; to dismantle the fascist core power that has been installed in the armed forces and other organs of the state; to fight for withdrawal of the military from political life and the demilitarization of the police, politics and society. It seems that the meaning of “authoritarian rubble” has resurfaced in the consciousness of the left 34 years after the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution.

The contradictions of Lula's government

But this major event in national life raises an inescapable question: how could an action like that in Brasilia be organized without the federal government being informed beforehand and being able to react?

The explanation offered to us until now was that of the collusion of the government of the Federal District with the demonstrators. As a result, the former justice minister and security secretary of Jair Bolsonaro's federal district government, Anderson Torres (who was providentially traveling to the United States), became the prime suspect in the plot that led to the assaults. Also on 8 January, Lula decreed a federal intervention in the public security organs of the Federal District (DF) until 31 January. Then, in the early hours of 9 January, the judge of the Federal Supreme Court (STF), Alexandre de Moraes, dismissed the pro-Bolsonaro governor of the Federal District, Ibaneis Rocha, for 90 days and ordered a series of measures aimed at the total liquidation within 24 hours of the camps in front of the barracks throughout Brazil, the arrest of the demonstrators and the search for the financiers of these actions. On the 9th, more than 1,500 demonstrators were arrested in Brasilia. Social movement initiatives in defence of democracy and against any amnesty for putschists took place throughout the country. On the 10th the STF judge, Alexandre de Moraes, ordered the arrest of Anderson Torres, who allegedly met Jair Bolsonaro in Miami on 7 January. On the 11th, a National Force, composed of police officers from different States and not soldiers, was responsible for the security of the Esplanade, access to which was closed.

The DF government's complicity with the protesters seems obvious. But this only represents the surface of events. As investigations progress, it seems that 8 January was the plan B for Bolsonaro's supporters. The draft decree found by the federal police at Anderson Torres' home shows that Plan A proposed by Bolsonaro's entourage was a coup d'état, to establish, with the support of the armed forces, a “state of defence” of the Superior Electoral Tribunal and change the result of the 2022 election. [\[1\]](#) This would have put the military in the position of moderating the power of a second Bolsonaro government. If Plan A has not been executed, it is because it has not obtained the support of the majority of the operational commanders of the troops, probably not that of the Army Commander. As this becomes known, Plan B turns out to be an alternative to Plan A.

The problem arising from the lack of prior reaction of the federal government is related to the characteristics of the Lula government and the challenges it faces. It was formed as a democratic front government that brought Lula and Alckmin to federal power – a government of the PT and its progressive allies (with the exception of the PSOL, which did not agree to participate in the new executive), including Marina Silva and Sonia Guajajara, and going as far as Simone Tebet and the liberals. [\[2\]](#)

This leads a part of the left to recognize itself in the dynamics of this front and to seek to level its challenges around, essentially, the idea of neutralizing the ultra-neoliberal pressure of the markets and “Faria Lima” [high finance]. The problem is real, and the concern is correct, but it leads a part of the left to a delusional economism: in an article

entitled “De-Bolsonarize Brazil. How?” of 11 January, Elias Jabbour asserts: “*Bolsonarismo* will only begin to disappear when a certain consensus in our society is reached around the need for accelerated economic growth, industrialization and the construction of the material foundations of a Brazilian welfare state.” [3] It is worth asking on which planet the perpetrator is when well-being is declining all over the world. The struggle against contemporary fascism is a broader struggle to find meaning and perspectives, projects that cannot be reduced to economic demands or policies that thwart the social atomization of the popular masses.

The composition of the government, however, seeks to respond also to two other interconnected characteristics. On the one hand, moderation in the treatment of *Bolsonarismo* and its organized core in a sector of the command of the Armed Forces, indispensable because of the important role that the military reservists have obtained in recent years. José Múcio was appointed to the Ministry of Defence, supported by the pragmatic Flávio Dino in the Ministry of Justice, in an attempt at a transitional pact with the military and the significant sectors of the right that are anchored in the institutions of the state. To this end, Lula has brought into government moderate people who are particularly inclined to strike deals with supporters of Bolsonaro or, at least, with many conservative anti-PT sectors. This turns out to be the great contradiction of the events of 8 January, as Bolsonaro's Plan A comes to light and the complicity of certain sectors of the armed forces with the attacks becomes evident.

On the other hand, this beginning of the presidential term has always been, in the eyes of Lula and the PT, a space to “buy” the governability of the legislature by paying the price demanded by the deputies and senators of the *Centrão* – the bloc of conservative parliamentarians that participates in every government – by offering them ministries with large budgets. The two objectives are linked: conciliation with Bolsonaro's non-*Bolsonarista* supporters, who are to a large extent in the three *Centrão* parties drawn into the government (the MDB, Kassab's PSD and União Brasil). These represent, officially, 9 of the 31 ministries (including the strategic Ministry of Communications), which has already earned Lula a minister from União Brasil linked to militiamen from Rio de Janeiro at the Ministry of Tourism. [4]

The reality of events

However, facts have their own lives. Lula was able to take advantage of the circumstances that arose, but he must also try to anticipate them. The enormous violence unleashed by the demonstrators on 8 January, worthy of classic fascist gangs, was repudiated by the vast majority of the population and political leaders. It seems to have isolated and significantly weakened militant *Bolsonarismo*. Governors elected in the wake of Bolsonaro's first-round vote – such as São Paulo's new governor, Tarcísio de Freitas, a possible political leader capable of inheriting conservative sectors – had to travel to Brasília to disavow “terrorist acts” and the actions of “vandals” (as the press calls them) and to show their solidarity with Lula. Even Valdemar Costa Neto, president of the PL, to which Jair Bolsonaro is now affiliated, criticized these acts. *Bolsonarista* encampments were dismantled throughout the country, on the direct orders of the STF.

Lula seemed, in his speech on the night of the 8th, to have abandoned the comfort zone of the conciliatory policies that have guided him since his release from prison, both with regard to his strategy of alliances and his electoral campaign and the establishment of the government. After decreeing intervention in the DF's security organs, he called out the fascists as fascists, criticized Bolsonaro, recalled the deforestation of the Amazon and its importance for all of humanity, singled out “evil agribusiness” that destroys forests and poisons food and declared that he will attack the financiers of the putschists. This is at least a partial break with the strategy of seeking a transition in alliance with *Bolsonarismo*, even without Bolsonaro's approval. Throughout the week, Lula made other points, including not trusting the military and that the role defined by the constitution is not that of being a “moderating power”.

But “evil agribusiness” is the dynamo of Brazilian exports and the heart of the oligarchic power apparatus that is the Brazilian state. Moreover, his “pact” is to seek an agreement with the armed forces – which Bolsonaro has tried to turn into a pillar of support for his government. The 1988 Constitution preserves the role of the military in the political order. Lula and his closest advisers and ministers are seeking the path of broader alliances and conciliation. Can they initiate breaks, even if only occasionally? How can they do this while maintaining the three pillars of their moderate political strategy: a democratic façade of government, a transition agreed with the military and conservatives, and the cost-effective integration of the *Centrão* into the governance pact?

How to fight Bolsonarismo?

The political contradictions are implacable and those that underpin the Lula government appeared in force on 8 January. José Múcio is the military's ambassador to the government, and his inaction or complicity appears to have played a central role in the protesters' unfettered occupation of the *Praça dos Três Poderes*. Múcio came out of the episode rather discredited, but Lula spoke openly about the problem and reaffirmed his confidence in him, no doubt taking into account the continuity of dialogue with the military sectors. At the same time Lula's reaction was to confront the putschists and, to do so, he relied on another figure who has proved central, the STF judge, Alexandre de Moraes.

Moraes has a two-decade political-legal trajectory linked to São Paulo's PSDB and former governor Geraldo Alckmin. He was the Minister of Justice under Michel Temer, who appointed him to the STF. But over the past four years he has clashed harshly with the Bolsonaro government to “fight extremism.” This led the former president to ask the Federal Senate in August 2021 for Moraes' impeachment – without success. Moraes is leading an investigation into “anti-democratic acts” and another into “digital militias,” targeting one of Jair Bolsonaro's sons, Carlos Bolsonaro. It was Moraes who ruled Brazil's electoral justice in 2022 with an iron fist, creating draconian procedures to outlaw fake news on social media during the campaign. And he took equally severe measures against various *Bolsonarista* initiatives. He became the icon of legal activism against the *Bolsonaristas* – necessary... but worrying because of its concentration of power.

Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, another son of the former president, reportedly said that “the pacification of the country requires the classification of the investigations that [target the Bolsonaro supporters] are led by Alexandre de Moraes at the STF”. Moraes later said – on 12 December during the validation of the result of the election of Lula and Alckmin – that “this ceremony attests to a total and indisputable victory of democracy and the rule of law against the anti-democratic attacks, disinformation and hate speech uttered by various organized groups already identified, that will, I guarantee, be held fully accountable so that this does not happen again in the next elections.”

All this seems to have been brought to light in the last two days, with the revelation of the failed coup A in Anderson Torres' project and the putschists' call for sanctions. On 13 January Bolsonaro's appointed attorney general, Augusto Aras, under pressure from 79 members of the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, asked the STF to include Bolsonaro in the investigation into the authorship of the acts of the coup, which Alexandre de Moraes immediately did.

De-Bolsonarizing Brazilian society requires measures that we do not address here, such as the resumption of the autonomous organization of civil society and the reoccupation of the streets by social movements, the regulation and democratization of digital platforms and networks that feed and profit from the activism of the radical right, policies aimed at increasing the confidence of popular sectors in their own strength, and an economic system that breaks with the extractivism and agribusiness generated by all the forces in power over the last forty years. It also requires international alternatives. The political capacity of *Bolsonarismo* was built by articulating itself on the world terrain with conservative nationalist forces that are at “war against modernity.” No democratic victory will be final if it is not

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projected as an alternative for all humanity and for the fabric of life of the planet.

However, a decisive democratic struggle has begun. This is an opportunity to confront impunity, violence, disregard for life (the criminal deaths of the pandemic being the most egregious case), militarization of society and its control by militias – linking it all to the criminalization of the coup activities of Bolsonaro and his associates. The mobilization to hold the putschists accountable can – and, in our view, must – catalyse a process of popular self-organization under the banners of the left. Such a coup against Brazilian fascism, if consolidated, will also put traditional conservatism on the defensive side and strongly influence the strategic balance of power.

To seize this opportunity, the Lula government and the Brazilian judiciary must navigate areas they have not frequented in recent decades. It is also necessary for the institutionalized left to emerge from its inertia, by reviving its – forgotten – capacity to take advantage of popular self-organization. We must all look for ways to do this. The next period will be anything but peaceful!

13 January 2023

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[1] The “state of defence” is an instrument provided for by the Brazilian Constitution that can be activated by the President to “preserve or restore public order”. According to Article 136 of Brazil’s Carta Magna, such a measure can only be taken when the order is “threatened by serious and imminent institutional instability or affected by large-scale natural calamities.” Coercive measures may include restrictions on rights of assembly, secrecy of correspondence, and telegraphic and telephone communications.

[2] Marina Silva was elected senator in 2002 under the label of the PT, and served as Minister of the Environment from 2003 to 2008 under the presidency of Lula. She was appointed by Lula as Minister of Environment and Climate Change in the new government. Sonia Guajajara is an indigenous activist from the Guajajara tribe working for the protection of the environment and the PSOL who is now Minister of Indigenous Peoples. Simone Tebet was a candidate in the 2022 presidential election for the *Centrão* coalition (MDB-PSDB-Cidadania) and came third in the first round with 4.2% of the vote. She is Minister of Planning and Budget in the new government.

[3] <https://www.ihu.unisinos.br/625492-desbolsonarizar-o-brasil-como>

[4] União Brasil is a right-wing party resulting from the 2021 merger between the Democrats (DEM) and the Social Liberal Party (PSL), which then had the largest number of federal deputies and now has only 59 out of 513 after the 2022 elections.