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Messiah Complex

How Brazil Made Bolsonaro

Brian Winter

Brazil has a face that it tends to present to the world: a country of glittering beaches and hillside favelas, of Oscar Niemeyer's delightful churches and museums, of João Gilberto crooning "The Girl From Ipanema." This is the Brazil of Rio de Janeiro, which is also, not coincidentally, the city that hosts global events, such as the Olympics, and that serves as a base for most foreign correspondents. This Brazil is troubled but romantic, a racial mosaic, violent but impossible to resist. It is a postcard, a nightmare, a dream.

Inevitably, a country of 210 million people has many other faces, from the riverside villages of the Amazon to the *Blade Runner*-style skylines of São Paulo and the old gaucho country of the far south. But the Brazil perhaps least known to outsiders is what some Brazilians call—sometimes fondly, sometimes with an eye roll—the *interiorzão*, which translates literally as "the big interior."

The *interiorzão* is not defined on any map, but it generally refers to a belt of land sagging around the country's geographic midsection, from the state of Mato Grosso do Sul in the west through Goiás, Minas Gerais, and parts of Bahia in the east. This is a Brazil of soy farms and cattle ranches, oversize Ford pickup trucks, air-conditioned shopping malls, and all-you-can-eat steakhouses. Some of it is old, but much of it was erected only in the last 30 years or so. Instead of Afro-Catholic syncretism and bossa nova, it boasts evangelical megachurches and *sertanejo*, a kind of tropicalized country music sung by barrel-chested men in cowboy hats and Wrangler jeans.

The *interiorzão*, more than any other region, is also the Brazil of President Jair Bolsonaro. It is where polls show his support is strongest

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and most intense. And it is critical to understanding why a president who is often regarded with a mix of incomprehension and horror by the rest of the world has maintained a steady domestic approval rating of about 40 percent. Bolsonaro's tenure in office has been marked by one of the world's deadliest outbreaks of COVID-19, a disappointing economic record, a global uproar over deforestation in the Amazon, and a growing array of scandals involving his allies and family members. Yet his followers have continued to stand by their man.

Since taking office in January 2019, the 65-year-old former army paratrooper has fed his supporters a steady diet of confrontation and outrage under the slogan "Brazil Above Everything, God Above Everyone." The story of his presidency so far illustrates how a generation of twenty-first-century populists, which arguably includes such disparate figures as U.S. President Donald Trump, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, has had far more staying power than many observers expected. The global factors that drove the rise of these leaders—including resurgent nationalism and anger over increasing economic inequality—have been exhaustively documented. But local factors have played as large a role: in Brazil's case, the growth of evangelical Christianity and a legacy of military rule that has never been fully overcome. Much of the media coverage of Bolsonaro, at home and abroad, portrays his government as perpetually on the brink of collapse, as if a great national epiphany were just around the corner. But a deeper look suggests that support for Bolsonaro—and, perhaps, for some of his peers—remains surprisingly resilient, even if he is in many ways utterly failing to deliver positive results for either his base or the country as a whole.

A NATION IN CRISIS

Bolsonaro spends much of his energy denouncing the various evils that he says plunged Brazil into economic and political crisis starting around 2013—a chasm from which it has still not fully emerged. He rages against "gender ideology" and moral decay and attacks everyone from the supposed "communists" who led Brazil for the past 25 years (in reality, a range of leaders from the moderate left to the center-right) to the climate activist Greta Thunberg ("a little brat"). These tirades are amplified online by a so-called digital militia made up largely of 20-something acolytes who talk of a conservative revolution that will last for 100 years.



Jair Bolsonaro

Bolsonaro's championing of increased gun ownership as a cure-all for Brazil's ills, including the COVID-19 pandemic, and his incessant clashes with the Congress and the judiciary have alienated or simply exhausted many in the country's cosmopolitan locales, such as Rio. In national polls, his negative ratings have steadily crept up. But in interior cities, such as Cuiabá and Goiânia, and in smaller towns, such as Barretos, where the president rode a horse in the rodeo last year, the fervor for the man they call "the Messiah" (*Messias*, which is Bolsonaro's real middle name, believe it or not) continues to grow.

Maintaining an energized, loyal base even at the cost of intense polarization is regarded by politicians the world over as a necessary evil in this age of social media. But it has always been a matter of do or die in Brazilian politics, sometimes in the most literal sense. Two of the last four presidents who won election in Brazil prior to Bolsonaro

were impeached, in 1992 and 2016, after seeing their popular support melt away. Over the past 70 years, one Brazilian president resigned after less than a year, another committed suicide in office, another was

Despite comparisons to Trump, Bolsonaro is a Brazilian invention.

ousted by a military coup, another may have been murdered after leaving office, and yet another passed away—of natural causes—just before his inauguration. Bolsonaro's immediate predecessor, Michel Temer, saw his approval

rating sink as low as three percent and staved off impeachment in 2017 only by funneling billions in patronage to allies in Congress. Brazil is not a good country for presidents without friends.

Today, there are at least 40 separate motions before Congress seeking Bolsonaro's impeachment for various causes, including his disastrous handling of the pandemic and his alleged interference in the investigations of his allies by the Federal Police. The conventional wisdom in Brasília is that congressional leaders will wait to push these cases forward at least until late this year, after the worst of the pandemic has presumably passed, for fear of plunging Brazil into an even deeper crisis. But the real deterrent is the support Bolsonaro enjoys from both his resilient base and the military; it is a combination that makes impeachment impractical, if not physically dangerous, for its proponents. If the president can maintain both pillars of support, even leaders of the opposition concede—in private, between clenched teeth—that Bolsonaro seems likely to at least serve the entirety of his four-year term, until the end of 2022. In Brazil, that would be an achievement in itself.

Of course, surviving isn't everything. Brazil has seen some progress under Bolsonaro: violent crime is down (although the causes are disputed), and the government has passed some pro-market reforms and cut red tape for small-business owners. But overall, the country seems terribly stuck. It is confronting the real possibility of a second consecutive "lost decade" of economic stagnation, political dysfunction, and diminished ambition. Even before the pandemic began, Brazil's moribund economy was, astonishingly, smaller than it had been in 2010 when measured on a per capita basis, and it had failed to grow any faster under Bolsonaro than it did under his predecessors.

A country that a decade ago was clamoring for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and preparing to host the World Cup and the Olympics now seems content to pursue a foreign policy of near-

automatic alignment with the United States, with little tangible benefit so far in return. Hunger is rising, the middle class is shrinking, and some fear democracy itself is in danger. And yet this man, who is best known abroad for telling a female legislator that she “didn’t deserve to be raped” and for making such statements as “a policeman who doesn’t kill isn’t a policeman,” has not seen his popularity budge by even one percentage point in some polls. Fully explaining why requires a deeper dive into Brazil’s past and present.

A TRUMP OF THE TROPICS?

International media coverage tends to portray Bolsonaro as “the Trump of the Tropics,” a “far-right” nationalist who is even more unrefined, more vulgar, and more of a threat to the established world order than the man in the White House. Such renderings are incomplete, although they are not always unfair.

Indeed, Bolsonaro himself has done much to encourage the comparisons, including once streaming a Facebook video in which he simply sat in front of a television for more than an hour watching Trump give a speech. Bolsonaro’s national political profile first began to take off in early 2017, just as Trump took office, and it is obvious that he was taking notes. Prominent U.S. conservatives, including Steve Bannon, have direct ties to the government in Brasília; in 2019, the Conservative Political Action Conference, a right-wing U.S. organization, held a meeting in Brazil for the first time. In November 2018, Bolsonaro’s son Eduardo, a member of Brazil’s Congress, walked out of the Trump hotel in Washington, D.C., wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat. Bolsonaro himself regularly complains about “fake news,” fantasizes aloud about locking up his political rivals, and wages a constant crusade against independent institutions, most notably the Supreme Court. Like Trump, Bolsonaro is on his third marriage, to a telegenic, much younger woman. At times, the similarities are almost eerie.

But make no mistake: Bolsonaro is a Brazilian invention. He is a product of the singularly awful economic and political crisis the country has endured over the last decade and, just as important, of Brazil’s long tradition of being ruled by conservative white men of military background. Throughout most of Brazil’s existence, going back to the nineteenth-century monarchy of Emperor Dom Pedro II and beyond, members of the armed forces have held critical positions in politics and business, forming the very backbone of the country’s elite. One

can see the legacy clearly in Rio, Brazil's capital from its independence until 1960, where a disproportionately large number of thoroughfares bear names such as Admiral Barroso Avenue, Major Vaz Tunnel, and Captain César de Andrade Street.

A century ago, an editorial in the military journal *A Defesa Nacional* (National Defense) spelled out the need for Brazil's armed forces to exercise a "conservative and stabilizing role" in politics to correct what officers saw as the inevitable excesses of self-interested and corrupt civilian leaders. In the ensuing decades, the armed forces frequently acted on this sense of noblesse oblige, although usually with a modicum of restraint. That changed in 1964, when the military toppled President João Goulart, who had flirted with China and Cuba. The ensuing dictatorship held on to power until 1985 and oversaw a spurt of extraordinary economic growth, the so-called Brazilian miracle, when GDP briefly grew faster than ten percent a year, until it fizzled out amid high inflation and unsustainable debt. The regime also tortured and murdered suspected dissidents, censored the media, and tolerated little opposition in Congress.

The military emerged from that era chastened and unpopular, but not quite disgraced. Brazil's generals, unlike their contemporaries in neighboring Argentina, were largely able to dictate the terms of the transition to democracy and never faced justice for their crimes. Civilian leaders initially did little better at managing the economy, and street crime began a terrifying surge. Still, the end of the Cold War seemed to signal that the days of coups and military leaders were over, not just in Brazil but throughout Latin America. A duo of transformational two-term presidents, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2003) and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–11), ushered in a period of solid economic growth and democratic stability, and Cardoso carefully installed a civilian-run defense ministry for the first time in Brazil's history. Under President Dilma Rousseff (2011–16), a former left-wing guerrilla who had been tortured by the dictatorship, a truth commission was established to investigate past crimes, although it had no power to arrest or punish anyone. It seemed that the soldiers had retreated to the barracks for good.

That Jair Bolsonaro would be the one to bring the military back to power, or close to it, is profoundly ironic. Bolsonaro served in the army from 1977 to 1988, but he ran afoul of senior officers on several occasions and never rose beyond the rank of captain. In one instance,

he spent 15 days in a penitentiary for insubordination; in another, he was court-martialed for an alleged plot to blow up Rio's water supply, ostensibly to protest low wages for the military rank and file. (Bolsonaro denied wrongdoing and was acquitted for lack of evidence.) One of his commanding officers described him as "lacking logic, rationality, and balance." Ernesto Geisel, a general and former president under the

In the sweep of Brazilian history, Bolsonaro is not an aberration but a return to normalcy.

military dictatorship, singled out Bolsonaro in a 1993 interview as "a bad soldier" and "an abnormal case."

Bolsonaro's subversive style always played better among the military's rank and file than with its commanders; in 1991, after leaving active duty, Bolsonaro was elected to Congress, repre-

senting Rio de Janeiro, home to a large contingent of retired military veterans. He soon emerged as a lonely voice of nostalgia for the dictatorship, at a time when such sentiments were not uncommon in private but definitely taboo in public. He also drew attention for his invectives against women, LGBTQ people, leftists, and establishment figures such as Cardoso, who he said "should have been shot" during the dictatorship, "along with 30,000 other corrupt people." During his 27 years as a legislator, such statements often made headlines, but Bolsonaro was mostly treated as a sideshow—more embarrassment than menace, too marginal to be taken seriously.

Then came the collapse. Not long after the commodities boom of the first decade of this century ended, Brazil descended into a morass of street protests, the worst recession in the country's history, and a series of unprecedented corruption scandals. Crime also continued its post-dictatorship rise; in 2017, Brazil recorded 63,000 homicides, more than any other country. In a tale that has been repeated in other, comparatively less troubled countries in recent years, Bolsonaro's outsider status suddenly became his greatest asset.

But that was only part of the story. By 2018, the year of the election, polls showed that the military had once again become Brazil's most popular institution. This was precisely because soldiers had been absent from politics for several years and therefore could not be blamed for the meltdown. Nostalgia surged for a safer, more stable, supposedly less corrupt past. Bolsonaro wisely emphasized his military background during the campaign (leaving out the rougher parts, of course)

and chose a retired general as his running mate. For some voters, Bolsonaro represented less a revolution than a restoration—even if many of them, in a country where half the population was under 35, were too young to know exactly what that meant.

Since becoming president, Bolsonaro has indeed brought soldiers back to the table—to the degree that many Brazilians think of his administration as a military government in all but name. By July of this year, retired or active-duty soldiers were leading ten of 23 ministries and occupied hundreds of key positions throughout the federal bureaucracy. Along with social conservatives, they form the two main pillars of Bolsonaro’s support.

In private, members of the military tend to say that their experience has been mixed. They are delighted that one of their own now runs the Defense Ministry, instead of the civilian leaders of previous years. Not coincidentally, the government largely exempted the armed forces from recent budget cuts and reductions to pensions. Government officials have vowed to rewrite school textbooks to de-emphasize the military dictatorship’s atrocities, and the National Truth Commission’s work has mostly been forgotten. Yet even though the generals should have known Bolsonaro better than anyone, many have expressed shock at his government’s perpetual disorganization, penchant for constant conflict, and narrow emphasis on topics they view as secondary—or completely irrelevant—to Brazil’s well-being. Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, a retired four-star general whom Bolsonaro fired from a senior position in early 2019, summed it up for many when he called the government “*um show de besteira*”—freely translated, “a shitshow.”

CULTURE WARRIOR UNTAMED

There is a particular type of Bolsonaro voter who has repented in the past year: relatively wealthy and well educated, often an executive at a bank or a large company. Among this tiny but disproportionately influential demographic, many cite one particular moment when they realized the president was never going to “pivot”—that he would always be the same volatile provocateur he has been since the 1980s.

That moment came just two months into his presidency, on March 5, 2019, when Bolsonaro tweeted a video of a man urinating on another man’s head during a Carnival celebration in São Paulo. The post was meant to expose the supposed decadence of the left in general and the LGBTQ community in particular. “I do not feel comfortable showing

this . . . but this is what Brazil's Carnival has turned into," the president wrote. The next day, in an apparent effort to either feign ignorance or stir controversy even further—it is not clear which—the president tweeted: "What is a golden shower?"

This made headlines around the world, and late-night TV comedians from Argentina to the United States had a field day. But in Brazil, especially within business circles, the episode was treated as something utterly serious: a confirmation that Bolsonaro's presidency would always be more about the culture wars—about the need for "boys to wear blue and girls to wear pink," in the words of his women's affairs minister, Damares Alves—than about pro-market reforms or even the fight against corruption. The Brazilian media have reported extensively on "the cabinet of hate," a group of mostly young aides that allegedly includes the president's three politically active sons and dedicates itself to attacks against—and spreading fake news about—the government's opponents. (Bolsonaro and his sons deny the group exists.) The administration's chief ideologue is Olavo de Carvalho, a septuagenarian and former astrologer who lives in the woods of rural Virginia, dresses like a modern-day Marlboro Man, and, via YouTube videos often recorded in the predawn hours, excoriates anyone—including generals and other military figures within the government—who deviates from his version of conservative dogma.

Time and again, the president has opted to please the *olavista* portion of his base, as it is known, even when doing so sabotages other parts of his agenda. Throughout much of 2019, Carvalho and other online warriors turned their wrath on Rodrigo Maia, the president of Brazil's Chamber of Deputies. Maia was the key to passing a pension reform bill that would help close a gaping budget deficit—a bill that had been the holy grail of pro-market types in Brazil for years. Maia, a centrist, was supportive of the reform from day one, but he still came under relentless, frequently vulgar attacks on Twitter from Carvalho and Bolsonaro's sons for supposedly being part of Brasília's corrupt old guard. Maia reacted with exasperation, calling the government "a desert of ideas," urging Bolsonaro to stay off social media, and lamenting "this radical environment where they have to feed meat to the lions every single day." After months of delays, and a few strained gestures of reconciliation from the president, the pension reform finally passed in October 2019. But by that point, many investors had lost interest and moved on.

Indeed, the economy has suffered extensive damage from the president's combative approach. Wall Street was at first euphoric following Bolsonaro's election, believing that the finance minister, the University of Chicago-trained Paulo Guedes, would have free rein to cut entitlements, privatize state-run companies, and simplify what the World Bank has characterized as the world's most complex tax system. ("I truly don't understand economics," Bolsonaro frequently insists, in an effort to underline Guedes's autonomy.) Guedes has made some changes, including privatizations, but almost all the truly transformational reforms require legislative approval. Bolsonaro's relationship with Congress has been so dysfunctional that in November 2019, he dropped out of his own party, which he had essentially created himself a year earlier. With the reform agenda mostly stalled, Brazil's economy ended up growing just 1.1 percent in Bolsonaro's first year, its worst performance in three years and less than half what economists expected when he took office.

For many, the final straw came in mid-2019, when massive fires set by illegal land speculators broke out in the Amazon and international commentators began using the word "pariah" to describe Brazil. Activists called for boycotts of the country's soy and beef, and some investment funds, especially those in Europe, dropped Brazilian assets from their portfolios. After initially lashing out at "globalists," the government eventually took some steps to suppress the fires, including deploying the military. But concern flared again earlier this year when a video surfaced of a cabinet meeting in which the environment minister urged Bolsonaro to remove as many environmental regulations as possible while the world was distracted by COVID-19. This prompted another wave of political instability, pressure for divestments, and exasperation with the president. One Brazilian CEO privately lamented, "It's like Trump, but without the good economy."

STANDING BY THEIR MAN

In Brazil, as elsewhere in the world, the pandemic has exposed the shortcomings of this generation of populist leaders on both the ideological left and the ideological right. As of late June, Bolsonaro's Brazil, Trump's United States, Boris Johnson's United Kingdom, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador's Mexico were among the countries with the highest number of deaths and confirmed cases. Brazil has a history of bold, creative public health responses to diseases such as AIDS and Zika.

But Bolsonaro, again taking cues from Washington, dismissed COVID-19 as “a little flu,” frequently refused to wear a mask in public, and championed chloroquine as a miracle cure. He also fired or forced out two health ministers in the span of a month and actively undermined governors and mayors who espoused social-distancing policies—to an extent that surpassed even Trump’s actions. When journalists asked Bolsonaro about the rising death toll in April, he replied, “What do you want me to do? My name is Messiah, but I can’t make miracles.” Even when he tested positive for the virus himself in July, his initial reaction amounted to a shrug.

Through it all, Bolsonaro’s base has barely wavered. Nor has it lost its remarkable ability to explain away obvious setbacks. When Sérgio Moro, a former judge and an iconic figure in Brazil’s fight against corruption, resigned as Bolsonaro’s justice minister in May, alleging that the president had tried to interfere in police investigations, the online brigade quickly labeled him an “opportunist” who had never been a true conservative believer. Investigations of two of Bolsonaro’s sons for their alleged roles in a kickback scheme among public servants in Rio and in spreading libelous statements against their rivals have been dismissed as sour grapes on the part of a corrupt elite still angry over the 2018 election result. The loss of support Bolsonaro has experienced amid the pandemic among wealthy, well-educated voters has been offset by an increase of support among poor Brazilians, who are grateful to be receiving a new emergency government stipend of about \$125 a month.

Indeed, even as deaths from COVID-19 mounted and the economy slid deeper into recession, many of Bolsonaro’s supporters were urging him to make a play for even greater power. This time, the Supreme Court was the main target; signs appeared at pro-Bolsonaro rallies urging the president to arrest some members of the court or even to close it entirely. Following several adverse rulings, Bolsonaro declared that neither he nor the armed forces would accept further “absurd orders” from Congress or the judiciary. This fed widespread rumors that the military could intervene on Bolsonaro’s behalf in the power struggle and even stage a coup. Most observers doubt that is likely, in part because of many army commanders’ misgivings about Bolsonaro. Regardless, the parlor game of trying to decipher the military’s true motivations and the power dynamics among individual generals has once again become a national pastime in Brazil—as it was throughout most of its history until the 1990s.

The opposition, meanwhile, has remained divided and in search of a new message, still focused on its losing argument of 2018: that Bolsonaro poses a threat to democracy. By the middle of this year, efforts were gathering momentum to launch a broad, pro-democratic front with promising young leaders such as Flávio Dino, the leftist governor of the state of Maranhão, and Luciano Huck, a television host and entrepreneur popular with both the business community and Brazil's working class. But much of the left has refused to participate. Early polls suggest that the 2022 election is shaping up as another battle between Bolsonaro and Lula da Silva's leftist Workers' Party—which is still widely reviled for its role in Brazil's collapse during the last decade—and that in such a matchup, Bolsonaro would win handily.

Doomsday predictions for Bolsonaro, frequent in both the Brazilian and the international press, have failed to hold up. Some political analysts believed that the scandals involving his sons would damage his approval ratings. Others have predicted that if Trump loses his reelection bid in November, it could spell doom for Bolsonaro, depriving him of his greatest ally and hastening the impeachment process in Congress. Anything is possible; Trump's recent struggles suggest that today's populists are not invincible. But these forecasts have probably been shaped by the same fallacy that has plagued Bolsonaro's opponents since his unexpected rise to power began: they ignore not only the strong loyalty Bolsonaro inspires but also the profoundly Brazilian nature of his appeal. In the broad sweep of history, Bolsonaro is arguably not an aberration but a return to normalcy. The exceptional period may prove to have been the past 30 years, when civilian authority, a degree of tolerance, and an emphasis on reducing inequality were the rule.

Today, Brazil is a country where, according to a *Veja*/FSB poll taken in February, 61 percent of people support Bolsonaro's idea to open new military schools, 60 percent favor mandatory religious instruction in schools, and majorities oppose gay marriage and abortion. The progressive Brazil the world was accustomed to seeing, the Brazil of samba and Carnival, still exists; it hasn't disappeared. But the Brazil of 2020 is more like its president than many would care to admit. 🌐