

Opinion – Bolsonaro's Green and Yellow Guards

Written by Rodrigo Fracalossi de Moraes

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RODRIGO FRACALOSSO DE MORAES, SEP 11 2020

Bolsonarismo, the movement led by Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro, is complex and often contradictory, but one of its main declared goals is 'purifying' the country from left-wing and socially liberal ideas. From its members' standpoint, leftists and socially liberals built a hegemony around educational and cultural institutions, the press, the state and international organisations, thereby hindering progress and corrupting traditional values and institutions. Brazil's minister of foreign affairs, Ernesto Araújo, has argued that globalization has been hijacked by 'cultural Marxism' and that the country's foreign policy should be guided by the 'Christian faith'.

At the top of Bolsonarismo, there are segments of elites within and outside the state: politicians, military personnel, businesspeople, religious leaders and journalists, forming a network of like-minded people promoting each other's interests. Helped by 'market-friendly' people like Paulo Marinho and Paulo Guedes, some of them managed to mingle with more traditional economic elites, which paved the way for Bolsonaro's election in 2018 and contributes to keep him in power.

However, in contrast to other right-wing movements in Brazil's recent past (and Latin America as a whole), Bolsonarismo has a large number of foot soldiers. These are people willing to produce/distribute propaganda and disinformation, destroy reputations, alert fellow members about anti-patriotic activities, and support the president whenever he needs. Their ranks are made of people with multiple origins and various contradictions, but they tend to support a militarized form of government, a traditional conception of family, the maintenance of a hierarchical social class structure, looser gun laws, a larger involvement of Christian churches in politics, and the end of affirmative action policies.

Targets are multiple, encompassing social movements, universities, the press, trade unions, NGOs, social democrats and 'traitors', including people as different as the parliamentarian Joice Hasselmann, former minister of justice Sergio Moro, and YouTuber Felipe Neto. Some of these targets are picked by the 'office of hate', an informal group of advisers who orchestrate a system of disinformation and propaganda.

Empowered and legitimized, these green and yellow guards (the widespread display of the national colours is their most distinctive symbol) are the eyes and mouths of this 'cultural revolution'. They perform the role of what the literature calls a fire alarm system: instead of complex layers of bureaucratic control, political leaders use ordinary citizens to monitor the behaviour of people and institutions, who 'press an alarm button' (nowadays mainly through social media) whenever they come across something that the movement sees as deviant behaviour.

Social media is central as it facilitates the formation of networks and the emergence of a digital form of populism. As populists seek to communicate with people directly, social media both facilitates such communication and reinforces a narrative of the left's cultural hegemony on mainstream media (which would prevent Bolsonarists of voicing concerns of the 'true people'), multiplying the movement's reach at an extremely low cost. This is especially important because Bolsonarismo lacks a solid political party base, in sharp contrast to left-wing social movements, which are backed by the Workers' Party or smaller left-wing parties.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, such 'cultural wars' not only continued but also found a new stage. Ernesto Araújo argued that the 'new communism' is using the COVID-19 pandemic to build a world without nations, liberty and soul.

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Edir Macedo, one of the country's main religious leaders (and important ally of Bolsonaro), argued that the media and Satan were promoting panic. During the pandemic, adversaries are anyone opposing Bolsonaro's two main recommendations: ending strict social distancing policies and using hydroxychloroquine as treatment. Previous allies were converted into enemies after defending modern scientific medicine (Henrique Mandetta, former Minister of Health, for example) or the right of states and local governments to adopt social distancing measures (various state governors). Speeches by Bolsonaro about COVID-19 are extensively reproduced in social media, maintaining him and his ideas at the centre of debate and keeping a steady supply of new enemies.

These green and yellow guards have roles not fundamentally different from those of pro-government movements in authoritarian contexts. Differences are more of scale, organizational capacity and method than of essence. In Venezuela, the infamous *colectivos* have a symbiotic relationship with the state: while the government instrumentally uses them to fight against perceived enemies and remain in power, the *colectivos'* power depends on the survival of the government, which is for them a source of protection, legitimacy and resources.

This is not to say that material gains are not relevant. Leaders of the movement have access to influential people and groups both within and outside the state. People like Bernardo Küster, a pro-Bolsonaro digital influencer, gained a level of access to influential people in government that he could not even dream of a few years ago. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has opened its doors to him and other like-minded people, giving them a political platform to present their ideas and network with elites. However, what distinguishes Bolsonarismo from other right-wing groups in Brazil is a combination of grassroots mobilization, focus on cultural issues and the existence of a leader perceived by many as a messiah. Their mission is to somehow purifying state and society from 'communist' values, ideas, policies and practice.

Whether these green and yellow guards will remain in existence for the time being depends in part on Bolsonaro's capacity to maintain his reputation of strongman and produce political heirs, which he so far has managed to do.

About the author:

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