

Brazil's Ongoing Pursuit of Democracy Amidst Bicentennial Celebrations

Written by Carlos Frederico Pereira da Silva Gama

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CARLOS FREDERICO PEREIRA DA SILVA GAMA, SEP 11 2022

In September 2022 Brazil celebrates two centuries as a sovereign entity. The bicentennial of independence coincides with another landmark – it is two decades since Brazil's first presidential impeachment in September 1992. The overlapping of these historical markers provides additional stimulus for the October's presidential election, the first in Brazilian history contested by two different presidents (one former, one current).

Unfulfilled Promises of Redemocratization

Brazil's 1988 Constitution (CF88) was conceived as an instrument of compromise. It preserved a fragile pact between civilians and the military. In doing so, it became an ambivalent guardian of democracy. Within the confines of CF88, three tasks remained pivotal in the course of the New Republic:

- The institutionalization of a “slow, safe, gradual” transition to democracy, in terms close to those coined during the dictatorships of Ernesto Geisel and João Figueiredo
- Economic stabilization as an anchor of sustained growth (the yearly increase of GDP per capita, as achieved between 1984–1987 – the buildup to the Charter's approval)
- The cautious inclusion of new elites in the political process, assuring some kind of “social justice” (what, after 1988, became known as “fulfilling the Constitution”)

The new democratic Charter provided unequal safeguards for the fulfillment of the aforementioned major tasks. At the party system, a division of labor slowly took hold across the forthcoming decades. MDB[1] invested the most in institutionalizing transition. After a number of false starts, economic stabilization was duly achieved with Plano Real, during the PSDB[2] administrations. In the 21st century, PT[3] was responsible for promoting social justice and political inclusion. The arch of these three political achievements encompassed a whole generation, between CF88 and the 2013 street protests. The overlapping dynamics engendered a diachronic interdependence between those major parties, subjected to intense pressures. Until today, no single political force has been able to claim hegemony. Nevertheless, twice in the course of the new polity charismatic personalities with authoritarian traits, in spite of lacking the support of a major party or a functioning coalition, attempted the synchronic fulfillment of CF88's major tasks.

Fernando Collor de Mello (state governor from Alagoas) rose to power with an anti-system platform combining a troika of state reform, neoliberal shock therapy and populist rhetoric. His unlikely ascension in 1989 marked the first democratic elections held post 1961. In open conflict with Congress, his disruption was short-lived. In September 1992, he became the first Brazilian president to be impeached. Collor's downfall proved to be a pivotal event as since then, no other state governor has been elected president.

Looking back, for the better part of the 19th century, regional leaders, trailed by a rising army (especially after winning the War of the Triple Alliance in 1870), ruled the Brazilian Empire. The abolition of slavery and the institution of a

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republic were almost-simultaneous late-19th century events that highlighted the prominence of state governors and the Army. The first rulers of the Old Republic were two marshals (Deodoro da Fonseca, Floriano Peixoto) followed by two São Paulo governors (Prudente de Moraes Campos Salles). The 20th century started under the guise of the “politics of governors” (São Paulo and Minas Gerais), occasionally intertwined by military leaders (Hermes da Fonseca, Deodoro’s nephew, in 1910).

Different incarnations of Brazilian Republic followed in the steps of the “Old Republic”. For 55 years, the country was under the aegis of civil or military dictatorships, “provisional” governments or ruled under siege. The remaining 45 years of democratic experience unveiled under the spell of state governors. Across two World Wars, Brazil was mostly absent from the theater of operations. When the country joined the fight, it was in later stages and on the winning side. However, the continuous military relevance for the Brazilian polis was not extracted from present achievements – 19th century deeds (when democracy was not a choice) remained significant.

Under Jair Bolsonaro Brazil witnessed a repeat of the Collor attempt – this time, in a different context. Former army captain Bolsonaro’s nearly 30 years in the lower ebbs of Congress eventually turned him from a cult figure to one of the most popular figures in the Brazilian legislative. Playing the anti-system card in military clothes paid off in his first presidential attempt. Even though the uneasy amalgam of interest that converged to his 2018 triumph slowly crumbled, his presidential term was not abbreviated.

Since 2019, segments of the armed forces, the judiciary, evangelical pentecostalism, neoliberal economists, agribusiness leaders and right-wing public figures have shunned his government – which acquiesced to a prolonged recession, experienced recurrent cabinet changes, and became increasingly dependent on the political stewardship of the lower ebb of Congress (“Centrão”). The pandemic provided the impetus for resilience as it brought state governors back to the forefront when Bolsonaro adopted a negationist stance. Brazil became a hotspot of infirmity with nearly 700,000 casualties. Belatedly, Brazil managed to vaccinate 80% of its population after concerted action by state governors and mayors of major cities. Brazil has experienced only a moderate recovery amidst a return of inflation and broadened food insecurity. In that light, Bolsonaro approached his 2022 presidential campaign with promises of diminishing returns.

On a global scale, Brazilian redemocratization coincided with similar moves in Latin America. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War left undeniable imprints in the first ballots of New Republic – with Collor adopting a modernist, liberal account of Brazilian future vis-à-vis the more traditional Labor approach of Lula. By then, liberal democracy spurred by post-WWI capitalist reforms seemed unquestionable. In contrast, Bolsonaro benefited from the ongoing crises of liberal democracies across the second decade of the 21st century by joining a list of right-wing populists rising on the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. If Collor (at least for a while) successfully raised the globalization banner, Bolsonaro became a prominent anti-globalist (Harris, 2019).

Bolsonaro has failed to accomplish any of the New Republic’s major tasks – but that does not mean his government refrained from attempting any number of major moves. Instead of unfinished institutional frameworks of military-civil transition, his government invested in military supervision of civil activities. Since 2019, the military have been disproportionately represented in executive posts (surpassing even the numbers of dictatorships), safeguarded by constitutional changes. Neoliberal shockwaves in the Brazilian economy arrived decades after stabilization had already been achieved and liberal traits have marked different governments afterwards, between Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB) and Dilma Rousseff (PT). In order to be fulfilled, the CF88 needed additional juridical protection – something the judiciary resolutely set in to provide after the lengthy *Mensalão*[4] and *Car Wash*[5] trials.

Bolsonaro’s strategy to approach the major goals of the polity radicalized the political conflicts at the onset of the New Republic – to which CF88 provided accommodation and safety valves. A hyper-charged executive occasionally backed by legislative and judiciary forces operating beyond their bounds permitted the completion of the former captain’s adventure. The ramshackle ship stood still in recurrent turbulent waters, augmented by the pandemic.

Taking into account the inception of Brazil’s New Republic, Bolsonaro’s term was a rude awakening of liabilities of a young democratic polity at the Global South, which ebbed from a military dictatorship almost by chance.

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Democracy by Chance: New Republic, Traditional Elites

The political transition that ended two decades of authoritarianism begun unexpectedly in August 11 1984 as the official party of the military dictatorship, ARENA[6], chose a civilian for the indirect succession of General Figueiredo – former São Paulo governor Paulo Maluf. After supplanting Colonel Mario Andreazza within the regime's machinery, Maluf cut short the sequence of military candidates to Palácio do Planalto since the 1964 coup. This move would eventually be decisive across the crumbling dictatorship's party spectrum.

MDB had already adopted a conciliatory approach. After 1974 – when the party launched the civilian “anti-candidate” Ulysses Guimarães – it acquiesced to the current rules of the game, choosing a general (Euler Bentes) as Figueiredo's adversary. After a political amnesty and the return of a multiparty system, MDB incorporated the Popular Party of two former Minas Gerais governors – Magalhães Pinto and Tancredo Neves (a former minister of Getúlio Vargas and Brazil's first prime minister in 1961, during the brief experiment with parliamentarism). The moderate Neves was MDB's candidate against Maluf. The latter's victory in primaries broke down ARENA ranks. The Liberal Front (lead by former Maranhão governor José Sarney) became an increasingly polarized dissidence, until its departure from ARENA. Sarney (now PFL[7]'s leader) would join Neves as opposition candidate for vice-president. The cohabitation of Neves and Sarney won by a large margin, favored by massive street demonstrations calling for direct elections. Even though Neves never ruled – victim of a degenerative disease in April 21 1985 – Sarney would fulfill a 5-year mandate of democratic transition, including a new Constitution and the promotion of direct presidential elections.

Paradoxically, for a regime called the “New Republic”, the restoration of civilian power arrived through the hands of traditional elites. The first president of this new democratic regime was also a former state governor who managed to increase the legislative representation and the number of state governors of its small party PRN[8] with incendiary anti-Sarney rhetoric. Even though he was the youngest occupant of Planalto, Collor's trajectory bore striking similarities with those of Maluf, Sarney and Neves.

The presidential impeachment of September 1992 put an end to the era of state governors. It provided a convergence point for the great majority of political forces in Brazil, after the collapse of liberal reforms spearheaded during the Collor administration, augmented by massive corruption accusations and street contestation. Shortly thereafter, the country experienced the dawn of a new political era.

The Rise and Fall of Reluctant Democracy

Brazil has since been ruled by complex personalities that were not local leaders. Between Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB) and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (PT) Brazil experienced 16 years of social change in which economic growth (economic stabilization and robust federal income transfer programs) fuelled the inclusion of new elites with broadened rights and opportunities. GDP per capita saw yearly increases above 2.5% between 1993–1997 (the inception of Plano Real). Figures rose again between 2004–2008 (3.9%) during the commodity boom. Cardoso and Lula managed to reduce the inflationary basis of their predecessors. Expansion of the domestic market coincided with Brazil figuring among the most prominent FDI destinations.

The strength of those administrations stemmed from a finely tuned coalition presidentialism. A complex division of labor between Planalto and regions was matched by institutional accommodation between Republican powers. PSDB ruled with PFL and PT brought MDB back, alliances which were as retrospective as they were future-oriented. Therefore, public policies emanating from Brasília and local leadership coexisted in a plateau dependent on prosperity. This era provided a prototypical example of a Global South polity seeking international prominence through the institutional route – as either a “global trader” or a “global player”.

This short-lived golden era did not survive the second Lula administration – which coincided with the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. After a string of megaevents during Rousseff's first administration, economic growth vanished from sight – and, in 2022, Brazilian GDP remains close to 2016 figures). The PT-PMDB coalition reached a breaking point with the rise of PSDB under Aécio Neves (Tancredo's grandson) and the non-recognition of the brittle 2014 election.

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A palace coup triggered by vice-president Michel Temer (MDB) was the New Republic's second impeachment in a generation. It unfolded under the tutelage of a politicized judiciary and amidst corruption charges and broad street manifestations (the most significant since 1984) and – like in 1992 – with decisive legislative participation.

2016 marked another tectonic shift. Instead of state governors or public personalities, the prominence of Congress (and “Centrão”) ushered in by Temer's interim mandate was consolidated by Bolsonaro and his coalition. Neither Temer nor Bolsonaro were regional leaders and their mandates concentrated decisions in Brasilia, increasing turbulence in the Brazilian polity during the buildup to the coronavirus pandemic.

The 2022 Elections

With 700,000 casualties and huge material losses, the pandemic left its mark across the Brazilian political psyche. Large sections of the party system and constituencies developed a growing perception that Bolsonaro was incompatible with democratic standards. Even though widespread economic aid tempered presidential unpopularity, the slow descent into skepticism over the current government was marked by a cautious rapprochement between opposition forces. Economic emergency aid provided a fragile common ground for conversations between federal and local authorities. This said, economic aid empowered the federal government over local authorities, which resorted to the Supreme Court in order to disobey Planalto (successfully). The implosion of budgetary restraint through the pandemic has also created a disquieting legacy for the 2023 government.

The New Republic's multiplicity of political sites often dilutes the actualization of public policies between Brasilia and local leadership. Difficulties in arriving at a future-oriented national plan stem from the situation of simultaneous fragmentation and overlapping. Insofar as the Brazilian New Republic remains a composite system, imbalances between executive aspirations and legislative steering will provide impetus for forceful attempts of ultimate resolution. Nevertheless, accommodation between clashing forces and institutional flexibility remains a key feature of the Brazilian polity. Every major crisis of the Republic was followed by dilated periods of ambivalent coexistence. Operating out of bounds for decades, the judiciary, executive and legislature gradually developed norms of informal accommodation which remain gold standards amidst unexpected outcomes.

PT's downfall in 2016 was spearheaded by the Supreme Court's recently acquired political prominence. Since 2012, the judiciary has emerged as a broker between fragile political constellations. Five years on, the same tribunal nullified all sentences on former president Lula on grounds of former judge Sergio Moro's partiality. Unexpectedly, a politicized judiciary favored the return of PT to the epicenter of the political scene. Lula's return also coincided with Bolsonaro's falling popularity and belated vaccination campaigns. As state governors and mayors collided with Planalto, traditional parties upped the ante. In this sense, the courts provided a prelude to the 2022 election. A second alert stemmed from 2020 municipal elections – which reduced the scope of all traditional parties. Pulverization was a major driver for a renewed assault on Planalto on the part of aspiring national and local forces. A third element was the near absence of Bolsonaro ministers with expertise in local government – an anomaly in the Brazilian Republic. Negationism across the pandemic and disjunctures in public policy pitted *Brasilia* against *Brazil*. Some states, like São Paulo, experienced a quick economic recovery as others lagged behind.

The 2022 contest between Bolsonaro and Lula re-enacts structural features of the New Republic, actualized in hyper-charged fashion. The confrontation of legacies transcends the realm of nostalgia, impinging on future possibilities. This said, different mobilizations of the past amount to contrasting trajectories for the polity. On the one hand, the reiteration of military tutelage over civilian affairs via the Praetorian moves of Bolsonaro and his coalition have long-standing precedents in Republican history, which remain in sight. The uneasy amalgam of former president Lula and former São Paulo governor Geraldo Alckmin, on the other hand, delves in different strands of Brazilian redemocratization. Its mixed composition – involving national and regional leadership – appeals to a broad constituency and provides a newfound synthesis of 30 years of socio-political transformation. The coalition that faces Bolsonaro also have precedents – echoing the New Republic's foundational moment when Tancredo Neves and José Sarney joined forces.

Closing Curtains: From Emerging Power to Conservatism by Default

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Since 2020, shortcomings in international cooperation have increased and have become more palpable. Multilateral delusions coincided with nationalistic impulses in many states – and Brazil was no exception. Nationalism was on the rise in Brazil well before populism took the world by storm during 2016's twin shocks of Brexit and Donald Trump's election (Gama 2021). The 21st century in Brazil has been a time of overlapping crises. Lacking a structured vision of the future, the country coped with recurrent turbulence. As in other systems beset by authoritarian compromises, the New Republic's inner contradictions (limited democracy with gradual inclusion of new elites conditioned by economic growth) paved the way for this retreat into nostalgia.

Against this background of global crisis and domestic exhaustion, the redefinition of the roles of traditional elites in Brazil, under the aegis of major political parties, opened the gates for a moderate conservatism coexisting with constituencies that brought antipolitics to power. A conservatism by default, arrived at by radicalism's malfunctions. In the equation of Brazilian politics, nostalgic restorations may be running out of time as decades-old contradictions are coming to a head amidst the bicentennial celebrations. Once labelled as the "country of the future", Brazilian possibilities remain at a crossroads. In such a situation, preserving archaisms is a privilege that the Brazilian polity cannot afford.

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Notes

[1]*Brazilian Democratic Movement*, founded in 1965 as a tolerated opposition party during the military dictatorship. Between 1979 and 2017, known as PMDB (*Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement*).

[2]*Party of Brazilian Social Democracy*, created after CF88 as a dissidence of MDB.

[3]*Workers' Party*, founded in 1980.

[4]A governmental-sponsored scheme for assuring legislative support through mensal payments to representatives that led to the resignation of ministers, representatives, and a rearrangement of PT's administration in 2005. It was the first trial that impinged on elected politicians in Brazil.

[5]A judicial investigation of corruption schemes in Brazilian firms involving prominent politicians. It began in 2014 as an investigation of money laundering schemes by *Petrobrás* employees. It led to the imprisonment of several Brazilian representatives and businesspersons before its abrupt end in 2021.

[6]*National Renovation Alliance*, founded in 1965 comprising civil and military leaders of 1964's *coup*

[7]*Liberal Front Party*, founded in 1984 as an ARENA dissidence. After 2002, known as *Democrats*.

[8]*National Reconstruction Party*, founded in 1989 just before the presidential campaign.

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