

WHY BRAZILIANS ARE LOOKING FOR THEIR OWN 'BREXIT' FROM A CORRUPT AND DECAYING ORDER

It has become standard fare to read countless articles and hear innumerable pundits put forth the view that Brazil's eighth presidential election is the most important since the return of democracy. In all fairness, this is more than just the spouting forth of journalistic hyperbole. A great deal is at stake, not just for the future of Brazil, but for the future of South America and indeed the world.

The crisis facing Brazil is at once economic, institutional, political, moral and social, and that list is by no means exhaustive. The question is: how did we get here and where are we going? The second part of that question is fraught with danger.

One cannot underestimate the societal shocks caused by Brazil's longest and deepest recession in history and the imposition by the neoliberal Temer government of a 20-year programme of austerity, thought to be the harshest of any in world history, which threatens to not only erase the social gains made during the Lula years, but also jeopardises the cherished 13th salary established under the deposed reformist President Joao Goulart in 1962. The esteemed medical journal *The Lancet*, the world's oldest and most well-known peer-reviewed publication, published an open letter in its September issue 10149, with the title '*Brazil's health catastrophe in the making*,' in which it warns against increases in child mortality and morbidity as a result of cuts to an anti-poverty programme. The Vice-Presidential candidate of far-right extremist Jair Bolsonaro, retired General Antonio Hamilton Mourao, has already spoken of his desire to revoke the constitution of 1988 that stipulates protections of civil liberties and guarantees rights such as the 13th salary. If rights can just be torn up at the whim of a retired General, the constitutional democratic order that supposedly prevails in Brazil is arguably a sham.

The looming threat of an abrupt break with democratic constitutionality, either through the election of far-right Bolsonaro or a classic coup d'état designed to depose Workers' Party (PT) candidate Fernando Haddad, cannot be swept aside as a mere figment of a paranoid imagination. Not only Mourao, but military chief General Villas Boas has also raised the dire prospect of military intervention should jailed former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva ever be allowed to return to power in an election. The threat is real enough, even if it isn't always spelled out explicitly.

It is against this festering backdrop that the triumphs, tribulations and abject failures of the Workers' Party and the Lula—Dilma years have become evermore apparent. The biggest corruption scandal in world history happened under left-wing presidents, and many Brazilians find it difficult to accept that President Lula and Dilma Rousseff are somehow exempt from overall blame. The failure of the Workers' Party to properly apologize to the public for its involvement in billions of dollars' worth of kickbacks betrays a certain kind of arrogance. On top of its failures to effectively nip corruption in the bud, the PT is guilty by its omission to invest in the diversification of the economy and its infrastructure during the boom years in commodity prices. Its reliance on a coalition with religious centre-right parties in Congress stymied its efforts to reform abortion laws and create a separate category of LGBT hate crimes. But for the vast majority of Brazilians, what really sticks in the craw is the lack of progress in improving education and removing inequalities in the system, and the deteriorating situation regarding law and order in certain states, with an average homicide rate of 60,000 per annum.

All of this leaves Brazil teetering on the precipice of an abyss. Years of pent-up frustration with a decaying system has led many to question whether democracy is worthwhile as it appears unresponsive and out of touch. With the authentic voice of

Bolsonaro, the temptation for a violent rupture — an ‘exit’ or ‘Brexit’ from the system associated with the corrupt past — can only build up and reach a tipping point. Even if he loses to Haddad in the elections, Bolsonaro is far from finished. He has tapped into, and channelled, a wave of fury that can no longer be suppressed. A new Brazil is emerging, but it is by no means clear how predictable, open, tolerant, democratic or nationalistic and authoritarian it will be.

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