

The Security Foundations of Jair Bolsonaro's Electoral Breakthrough

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ABSTRACT

The “triumphant” election to the post of President of the Republic of Brazil of candidate Jair Bolsonaro, a retired army captain who espouses a very hard line in matters of security, corruption, and state authority, is more than a coincidence. As Brazil has become increasingly wealthy, internationally successful, and regionally influential, and as inequality has begun to diminish significantly, the country has experienced an explosion of violence. The murder statistics are relentless and staggering: from fewer than 20,000 deaths per year in the early 1980s, they reached the record level of 62,500 deaths in 2017. The annual cost of violence in Brazil is between 2.3 and 2.5 percent of annual GNP.

Keywords: Brazil, Bolsonaro, murders, police, Russia

Los fundamentos de seguridad del avance electoral de Jair Bolsonaro

RESUMEN

La elección “triumfante” al puesto de presidente de la República de Brasil del candidato Jair Bolsonaro, un capitán retirado del ejército que defiende una línea muy dura en materia de seguridad, corrupción y autoridad estatal, es más que una coincidencia. A medida que Brasil se ha vuelto cada vez más rico, exitoso internacional y regionalmente influyente, y la desigualdad ha comenzado a disminuir significativamente, el país ha experimentado una explosión de violencia. Las estadísticas de asesinatos son implacables y asombrosas: desde menos de 20,000 muertes por año a principios de la década de 1980, alcanzaron el nivel récord de 62,500 muertes en

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2017. El costo anual de la violencia en Brasil es entre 2.3 y 2.5 por ciento del PNB anual.

Palabras clave: Brasil, Bosonaro, asesinatos, policía, Rusia

雅伊尔·博索纳罗获得选举突破的安全基础

摘要

作为一名对安全、腐败、国家权威采取强硬态度的前陆军上尉，巴西联邦共和国总统职位候选人雅伊尔·博索纳罗在选举上的“大获成功”不仅仅是一个巧合。随着巴西变得日益富有，在国际上取得成功、在区域上具有影响力，并且随着不平等开始显著减少，该国已经历了暴力事件的爆发。谋杀统计数据十分无情可怕：从20世纪80年代早期每年死亡人数不到20,000人，到2017年创纪录的62,500人。巴西每年的暴力成本相当于国民生产总值的2.3%到2.5%。

关键词：巴西，博索纳罗，谋杀，警察，俄罗斯

The “triumphant” election to the post of President of the Republic of Brazil of candidate Jair Bolsonaro, a retired army captain who espouses a very hard line in matters of security, corruption, and state authority, is more than a coincidence.

Elected and reelected as a federal representative with very comfortable margins since 1990, Jair Bolsonaro has never been tainted by the slightest suspicion of corruption. This longevity, which is quite unique in Brazil, has given him real legitimacy to criticize the political class and to call for it to be replaced. His military past and the express support of a large portion of Brazil’s high-ranking military officers have also made his rhetoric of love for the Flag and the Nation particularly credible. Finally, his avowed belief in God and his frankness of speech, often bordering on the excessive, are particularly meaningful to the middle and working classes, who recognize in his words their own values and colorful language. However, his success is due in large part, and perhaps primarily, to the endemic violence that has prevailed in the country up to now.

The Dichotomy Between Standard of Living and Crime

As citizens of a nation that is now the world’s eighth largest economic power, where the average standard of living is infinitely better than it was twenty years ago, Brazilians can no longer tolerate the feeling of fear that they

experience on a daily basis. This is one of the biggest paradoxes in the country. As Brazil has become increasingly wealthy, internationally successful, and regionally influential, and as inequality has begun to diminish significantly, the country has experienced an explosion of violence. Excluding homicides, crimes and offences have fallen drastically throughout Brazil over the past ten years, but, ultimately, we are unaware of how many cases are not reported to the police, those that are the subject of a more or less private justice, or the extent to which these statistics are rigged to appear acceptable.

The statistics for murder alone are stark and staggering: from fewer than 20,000 deaths per year in the early 1980s, they reached the record level of 62,500 deaths in 2017. In spite of real disparities between regions, which have fluctuated over time (currently over-represented in the north and in medium-sized cities), the annual cost of violence in Brazil is between 2.3 and 2.5 percent of annual GNP.

The Extreme Case of the State of Rio de Janeiro

The state of Rio de Janeiro is particularly representative of the build-up of incompetence and embezzlement that led to its bankruptcy in 2017, then to its budgetary takeover by the authorities of Brasília. Its capital, the “Marvelous City” of Rio de Janeiro, is experiencing an anarchic urban development and a criminal sociology linked to the favelas. The latter have long been dominated by organized crime: barons of the “jogo do bicho” (an illegal gambling game) from the 1940s, and currently drug and arms traffickers. The most notorious traffickers belong to the famous Comando Vermelho (Red Command), which was said to control up to 60 percent of the most violent areas in the mid-2000s. Many police officers, underpaid or rarely paid both before and after the state’s bankruptcy, simply became racketeers in the neighborhoods they patrolled, ensuring their “protection” while the gangs continued their customary “taxation” of working-class neighborhoods.

On February 16, 2018, President Michel Temer responded to carioca and national public opinion by declaring a state of emergency after the Carnaval festivities, which had given rise to unacceptable excesses. General Braga Netto, previously the security coordinator of the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, stripped the state governor of Rio de Janeiro of all public security powers, assuming sole management of law enforcement in a very broad sense: command of general police operations, if necessary under the supervision or direct intervention of the armed forces; direction of the Civil Police; and coordination with the Federal Police. This presidential intervention, unprecedented in Brazil, seemed inevitable. Yet it was, as is too often the case, merely a reaction to a dramatic situation that could have been avoided.

A Violent New World Country

From the *Bandeirantes*—the Portuguese bandits who conquered the interior of Brazil in the seventeenth century in search of riches that they only rarely found—to the *Cangaceiros* of Sertão (an arid region in the northeast) at the beginning of the twentieth century—a breed of cowboys and bandits who stole from the rich but ultimately gave little to the poor—, Brazil has always been a violent country. It is an enormous country that, for a long time, the central imperial and then federal power tried to bring under control via local potentates. The consolidation of the doctrine of the Brazilian Army from the 1920s, however, fostered the reconquest of national territories by the central government, in particular through various colonization projects (Pantanal, the Amazon, etc.) and the uncompromising control of the country's land, sea, and air borders. It was also with a view to centralization that the Military Police of each federated state, hitherto heterogeneous militias in the service of the governors, took on the form of standardized police forces from 1946.

Until the end of the military dictatorship in 1985, in any case, it cannot be said that the Brazilian police lacked authority, or that they posed no effective means of deterring and preventing delinquency. It should be recalled, for example, that, in 1936, the head of the famous *Cangaceiro* Lampião, a Brazilian Robin Hood in the popular imagination, ended up on public exhibition along with those of his accomplices. Since the late 1980s, however, the authority of the state has been damaged, the image of the police is unflattering, and a cynicism toward these has pervaded the general population.

Failed Security Policies

There are, of course, socioeconomic, demographic, and even cultural factors behind Brazil's astonishing violence. The army's decline in prestige, or even the ground lost by Christianity (in particular Catholicism), the most traditional mechanisms for the social control of Brazilian youth, exacerbate the desires and models of hyperconsumption promoted to excess by the media and social networks.

However, the overall failure of security policies can be traced back to the 1988 constitution. Extraordinarily precise and detailed in terms of social and political rights, establishing a unified and relatively functional social security system with long-term objectives, it is nonetheless completely silent regarding security issues. Since 2000, almost all Brazilian presidents have tried to launch their own security reforms, without much success. Each of these plans has had an average lifespan of two years, generally disrupted by political agendas or the emotion of the crisis of the moment.

There is also the subject of financing. 80 percent of the 81 billion BRL (just under 20 billion euros) spent annually on the Civil and Military Police, whose powers are limited to state borders, are provided by the federated states alone. The federal state in no way guarantees these budgets (unlike the budgets for health and education), and they often end up being the poor relation of local budgets. Faced with real problems concerning functioning, armament, recruitment, and salaries, many local police forces sink into negligence at best and racketeering, corruption, and deference (or even complicity) with regard to criminal groups at worst.

Corruption and Decline of State Authority

However, the general image and authority of the state are also at stake, in a broader sense. Even before the “Mensalão” and “Lava Jato” scandals revealed industrial-scale political corruption, leading to the incarceration of former president “Lula” Da Silva and the dismissal of his heir apparent, Dilma Rousseff, Brazilians had an image of their country that was tarnished, to say the least. Politics was already widely perceived as a business, but the level of embezzlement of funds from public and private companies, the sense of impunity among the political class, and the depth of state mismanagement were completely unanticipated. Virtually all political staff were involved in scandals far beyond any partisan bickering, and many incumbent politicians remain under investigation today.

Political correctness, a phenomenon stemming from North American academia, is also behind Brazilians’ lack of esteem for their country. This guilty conscience, cultivated by a certain intellectual class, has consequences that extend even to certain choices regarding the management of public security and criminal and prison policy. Excuses for criminal behavior linked to belonging to a minority or a certain class, or the idea that a bandit can display a “social conscience,” for example, deeply disgust the man in the street.

The Gangs in Power

Despite judges who are often considered too lax and a police force whose effectiveness is sometimes questioned, Brazilian prisons are highly overcrowded. Since 1969 and the creation of the Comando Vermelho (CV) in a carioca jail, which brought together political prisoners and common-law inmates in an ideological struggle against the military regime, Brazilian criminals have developed a marked taste for gangs originating in the prison world. The Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) (First Commando of the Capital) of São Paulo, the country’s biggest gang, was thus founded in 1993 in Taubaté prison and has now become an international organization that is attempting to stifle its main competitor (the Comando Vermelho) by controlling the Amazon’s drug supply routes. The

north of the country, not to be outdone, has seen the emergence of many other groups, such as the Família do Norte in the Amazon or the Sindicato do Crime in Rio Grande do Norte, often affiliated with the PCC or the CV and participating in the ongoing wars.

The increase in the number of prisoners from 232,000 in 2000 to 727,000 in 2016 has only exacerbated the problem and the violence. Struggles for influence have led to unspeakable massacres within prisons, where mutilations and decapitations are common among inmates. The guards, who are poorly paid and often less well armed than the prisoners themselves, are resigned, sometimes corrupt, and they often end up allowing the violence to happen. In the streets, the collateral victims of territorial disputes are the inhabitants of working-class neighborhoods and, indirectly, because of massive drug and arms trafficking, the entire Brazilian population.

The Pragmatism of the Tropical Trump

Dubbed the “Tropical Trump,” Jair Bolsonaro was never the preferred candidate of the United States, which was no doubt troubled by his sovereignism and what it may imply in terms of a decline in the influence of the American deep state in Brazil. Bolsonaro in fact favors an approach similar to that of his primary inspiration, President Ernesto Geisel (the fourth president of the military dictatorship), whose program of “responsible pragmatism” was the foundation of Brazil’s ambitions to become a global power. As a realist who is very conscious of the instinctive social cohesion of working-class neighborhoods, he knows that to copy US criminal policies to the letter—for example, New York’s “zero tolerance” policy—would undoubtedly be a mistake. Although we cannot predict the future and the path that Bolsonaro will take, there is nevertheless another country from which the new president could draw a successful security policy model: Russia.

The Russian Example

Brazil already has excellent international strategic and diplomatic relations with Russia, notably through the BRICS and the UN institutions. Despite their very different cultural backgrounds, the two countries have much in common: huge territories that are difficult to control; hyperviolent organized street crime; an “emerging” economy with an “average” income level; and a federal state structure. During the period from the 1990s to the end of the 2000s, Russia too was confronted with a spectacular rise in delinquency and the explosion of small street mafias with an unprecedented level of violent behavior. In 2018, even though the situation varies across Russia, the crime rate now falls within the low European average.

The Russians employed several medium-term mechanisms to achieve these results. They actually went a little further than the Brazilians in strengthening the authority of the central state, since it is the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Moscow which controls all the police forces. With the tightening of this control and waves of appointments of trusted men in the most remote provinces, it managed to reduce in a rather clear-cut manner the level of police corruption that often prevailed in the provinces.

The FSB, Russia's famous internal intelligence agency, also saw its missions extended in the early 2000s to cover many common-law crimes, provided that they were considered to constitute an attack on the authority and security of the state. The investigators and intervention forces of the local branches of the FSB are heavily involved in combating drug and arms trafficking and all smuggling activities. They also provide assistance to the traditional police forces upon request. Moscow has of course provided the FSB with a budget and human resources commensurate with its missions.

In situations deemed out of control, as was the case in early 2018 in Dagestan, the central government employs federal emergency legislation and appoints an emissary with wide-ranging powers to undertake a "clear-out" of local political and administrative authorities. This emissary, Vladimir Vasilyev in the case of Dagestan, takes his orders and directives from Moscow until order is fully restored. He is supported by an extensive administrative team and an ad hoc force consisting of a mix of police officers specialized in maintaining public order (the OMON) and FSB special forces (the Alpha and Beta Groups of the Spetsnaz).

Russian prison policy also took a particularly repressive and deterrent-focused turn during the 2000s. The most violent offenders and repeat offenders are thus systematically assigned to penal colonies in the most isolated areas of Russia. Discipline there is more than draconian, and the cells are never shared by more than two inmates, with no contact with the rest of the prison. Guards' salaries have been substantially increased in order to discourage any potential bullying or racketeering of prisoners and to attract high-quality staff.

In cities, especially larger ones, the police can rely on private security companies, with whom they cooperate extensively. Since the end of the 2000s, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has made a point of encouraging the consolidation of these private companies and revoking the operating licenses of those it considers unreliable. Most of the staff of these companies are now former military or police officers, which facilitates interactions.

Possible Applications in Brazil

Without going so far as to demand the centralization of the command of the Military or Civil Police of the Brazilian federated states, it must be pointed out that the Russian model provides some excellent avenues

for the future occupant of Brasília's Planalto. The Brazilian Federal Police has done remarkable work in the fight against political corruption, but its role and resources must now, like those of the Russian FSB, be broadly extended to the areas of drug and arms trafficking, which pay little heed to the boundaries and jurisdictions of the federated states. It must also coordinate intelligence between the various federal and state agencies in order to maximize their results, which at present are largely inadequate in this area. It would also be very appropriate to involve the army in eliminating the transit routes used by traffickers in the Amazon area, considered to be strategic by military doctrine. Finally, the Federal Police must spearhead the major clear-out needed within the country's security forces.

In any event, the operation under way in Rio de Janeiro demonstrates that the use of emergency regimes and a strong ancillary force in the event of a more or less one-off crisis is possible in Brazil. Without being asked to take the place of the police on a long-term basis, the Brazilian army has real expertise in the management of urban violence, acquired during the MINUSTAH operation in Haiti (led by Brazil from 2004 to 2017) and the successful provision of security in the country for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games. As this expertise is further enriched, one could therefore envision a permanent operational organization at the service of the federal executive, ready to intervene rapidly in the event of repeated failures by local authorities to comply with public security requirements.

With regard to prison policy, the Russian example also strikes us as extremely relevant, since the proliferation of gangs and their active recruitment in Brazilian prisons must be stopped as quickly as possible. It is also necessary to restore resources and power to prison guards, who are completely helpless in the face of overcrowding and the extreme violence of common-law prisoners. The four federal penitentiaries that Lula established in remote and underdeveloped areas of the country, which currently receive very few prisoners (fewer than 500), are likely to be the model for the redevelopment of prisons in Brazil.

Reviewing the licenses of private security operators also seems highly appropriate, and it could allow the same degree of public-private cooperation that exists in Russia. More generally, although it is difficult to say how this can be achieved, restoring the image of the security forces and the army and winning back the Brazilian population's trust in them is an essential prerequisite for reestablishing the authority of the state. A new start is still possible, but it will require a strict reassertion of control by the federal authorities, the firm and non-negotiable allocation of very substantial budgets, and most likely the amendment of many laws, and even perhaps constitutional reform.

Further Reading:

- To follow Nicolas Dolo's works on Stratpol, go to <https://stratpol.com/nicolas-dolo/>
- Nicholas Dolo, "Brésil: luttes de puissance et d'influence ... Qui est vraiment Jair Bolsonaro? Le décryptage de Nicolas Dolo," *Communication & Influence* 98 (November 2018). Interview by Bruno Racouchot. Download at http://www.comes-communication.com/files/newsletter/Communication&Influence_novembre_2018_Nicolas_Dolo.pdf