

Authoritarian populism, neo-fascism and 2022 national elections: Agrarian implications from the advance of the extreme right in Brazil

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Abstract

Bolsonaro was elected in 2018 with a very conservative political agenda, promising neoliberal economic measures, and opposing to minority's rights. Bolsonaro has been well-known as a right-wing and authoritarian politician and his government is recognised as extreme right, conservative, and/or neo-fascist, with important setbacks in public policies. The "bolsonarismo" shall be defeated, but the electoral process will not be easy, with fake news and political violence. The open threats to democracy are leading to alliances of democratic and popular political forces, including agrarian and urban social movements. This article reflects critically about Bolsonaro administration, particularly the dismantling of public policies and programmes to the countryside, reflecting about the political actions of the agrarian movements in the 2022 electoral process.

Keywords: Land politics; land; public policies; social movements; environmental issues.

Populismo autoritário, neofascismo e eleições nacionais de 2022: implicações agrárias em consequência do avanço da extrema direita no Brasil

Resumo

Bolsonaro foi eleito em 2018 com uma agenda política muito conservadora, prometendo medidas econômicas neoliberais e se opondo aos direitos das minorias. Bolsonaro é conhecido como um político de direita e autoritário e seu governo é reconhecido como de extrema direita, conservador e/ou neofascista, com importantes retrocessos nas políticas públicas. O bolsonarismo será derrotado, mas o processo eleitoral não será fácil, com 'fake news' e violência política. As ameaças abertas à democracia estão levando a alianças de forças políticas democráticas e populares, incluindo movimentos sociais agrários e urbanos. Este artigo reflete criticamente sobre o governo Bolsonaro, particularmente o desmonte das políticas públicas e dos programas governamentais para o campo, refletindo sobre as ações políticas dos movimentos agrários no processo eleitoral de 2022.

Palavras-chave: Política fundiária; terra; políticas públicas; movimentos sociais; questão ambiental.

Populismo autoritario, neofascismo y elecciones nacionales de 2022: implicaciones agrarias del avance de la extrema derecha en Brasil

Resumen

Bolsonaro fue elegido en 2018 con una agenda política muy conservadora, prometiendo medidas económicas neoliberales y oponiéndose a los derechos de las minorías. Bolsonaro se ha caracterizado por ser un político de derecha y autoritario y su gobierno es reconocido como de extrema derecha, conservador y/o neofascista, con importantes retrocesos en las políticas públicas. El “bolsonarismo” será derrotado, pero el proceso electoral no será fácil, con ‘fake news’ y violencia política. Las amenazas abiertas a la democracia están dando lugar a alianzas de fuerzas políticas democráticas y populares, incluidos los movimientos sociales agrarios y urbanos. Este artículo reflexiona críticamente sobre la gestión de Bolsonaro, particularmente el desmantelamiento de las políticas públicas y de los programas gubernamentales para el campo, reflexionando sobre el accionar político de los movimientos agrarios en el proceso electoral de 2022.

Palabras clave: política de tierras; tierra; políticas públicas; movimientos sociales; problema medioambiental.

Introduction

The world has been rocked in recent years, most notably by the challenges of climate change, the 2020 pandemic, and the 2021 invasion of Ukraine. Despite these global challenges, 2022 is a pivotal year for political change in Brazil. At the very least, the presidential and state elections in October offer concrete opportunities to overcome the authoritarian populism (SCOONES et al, 2018) and neo-fascist administration that has been ruling the country since 2019. This is no easy task, as President Bolsonaro repeatedly plays the coup card, permanently challenging the already shaken foundations of Brazilian liberal democracy (RODRIGUES, 2022).

Firstly, it is important to state that authoritarianism – and consequently right-wing populism – is historical in Brazil. According to Reis (2021), the Brazilian “right-wing authoritarian traditions” are results and based on racism – the heritage of a long and bloody history of slavery –, social inequalities, patrimonialism and “mandonism” – a colonial inheritance of political power through land ownership. They are also based on a continuous misleading anti-communism idea – which goes back to the military coups of the early and mid-20th century –, gender discrimination, and populist and elitist democratic regimes. Hidden in a “neoliberal formal democracy”, the combination of these traditions structured a society marked by inequalities, hierarchy, violence, intolerance, and discrimination, being the reasons for explaining the rise of a “Brazilian neo-fascism” and the election of Bolsonaro (REIS, 2021). Related to the long-term authoritarian traditions, the reasons for the electoral

victory of the extreme right in 2018 were the international influences – rising of the extreme right in several countries –, and “...the erosion of the political system in the medium term; and the (opponents’) mistakes and (own) successes of the electoral campaign” (REIS, 2021, p. 3).

There are many political discussions, academic studies, and theoretical reflections on the main characteristics of the Bolsonaro’s administration (2019-2022) or how to define it. There is no consensus on whether it is a neo-fascist ideology (Boito 2019; Rodrigues 2022), an extreme right populism (LÖWY, 2019), a conservative and “ultra-neoliberal” regime (ROSÁRIO, 2020), a “neo-extreme right military” regime (REIS, 2021), a fascist neoliberal government (Barros 2021; Nowak 2022), and/or some kind of “extreme right movement” (AVRITZER, KERCHÉ & MARONA, 2021). For contemporary analyses of the 2022 electoral processes, this political debate is not so crucial, but it is fundamental to win the elections (RODRIGUES, 2022) and create conditions to overcome the so-called “bolsonarismo” (REIS, 2021), a neo-fascist ideology and an authoritarian populism, that goes deeper than the current administration (SUZUKI, 2022).

According to Boito (2019), the ideology of the Bolsonaro government is neo-fascist, with a sort of “Brazilian features” based on an elitist and authoritarian political culture. This neo-fascist ideology does not rely on massive support (hardly a populist perspective), but it is deeply conservative in terms of moral values – well expressed in Bolsonaro’s 2018 campaign slogan “Brazil above everything; God above everyone” – and in open opposition to liberal democracy. It relies mainly on an ultra-neoliberal discourse on the economy, defending capitalism as the “natural economics” of nationalism. It uses a narrative against corruption and the “old politics”, and presents itself as an “outsider”, but this “apolitical” narrative is the basis for the defence of a centralised and authoritarian order (LÖWY, 2019), openly justifying the 1960s-1980s military dictatorship and presenting the military as “guarantors of Brazilian democracy” (STARGARDTER & PARAGUASSU, 2021).

As stated by Nowak (2022), “no one holds any illusions the campaign will be an easy one. There is much to expect in terms of fake news, verbal and actual threats, and all kinds of mudslinging”. The attacks against the Supreme Court and Bolsonaro’s frequent criticism of the electronic voting system have shown that the 2022 electoral process is in jeopardy. Considering that Bolsonaro and his allies chose an Army general (the former Minister of Defence) – over an agribusiness representative (the former Minister of Agriculture), but receiving the sector’s full support – as vice presidential candidates in the election, this analyses will focus on agrarian and rural issues, and some political implications for rural population of the Bolsonaro’s administration, concluding with some perspectives on the upcoming 2023-2026 national administration.

After three years of “misrule” and atrocities – which were thoroughly investigated by a Parliamentary Commission of Enquiry (CPI) in the National Congress in 2021 –, it is difficult to say anything new about Brazil’s social, economic, and political situation. Moreover, it is crucial to understand that this is a very complex political process and one of the largest elections in the world. Thus, comprehensive political analyses should not be restricted to the dispute for the presidency, since it will involve campaigns and elections of 27 states governors, 27 states legislative assemblies, 27 senators (1/3 of the Senate), and the entire Chamber of Deputies, with the dispute of 513 representative seats.

This political analysis shares the view that the “...peasant and landless workers” movements in Latin America are not anachronistic but dynamic, modern classes, which in many contexts play a major role in opposing the dominant neoliberal agenda” (PETRAS & VELTMEYER, 2001, p. 83). Therefore, the aim is to discuss the political and electoral processes based on the recent decision of the agrarian movements, which are officially and directly involved in the 2022 partisan-electoral process, with the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST) nominating its leaders for candidacies in different states and participating as a member of the Lula’s national electoral committee (MST, 2022).

2018 electoral promises and Bolsonaro’s neofascist administration

Besides the long historical heritage of authoritarianism, two key elements are fundamental for understanding recent political events in Brazil: (1) Bolsonaro’s election in 2018 was the continuity and a direct consequence of the political events started with anti-corruption investigation of “Lava Jato” – for an analyses of negative impacts of anti-corruption campaign, see Mészáros (2020) –, the rallies in 2013,¹ the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, as well as the ultra-neoliberal Temer’s administration 2016-2018 (WOLFORD & SAUER, 2018); (2) Bolsonaro was elected based in a fake “apolitical discourse” and as an “outsider” (despite being a professional politician for more than 30 years). He openly espoused a very conservative political agenda² that opposed minority’s rights and promised to block or destroy agrarian, indigenous, and social

¹ It was the upper middle class that hitched a ride on the rallies started by the Movimento Passe Livre (Free Bus Ride Movement) in June 2013, and that took the initiative to organise the mobilizations to impeach Rousseff in 2016 (BOITO, 2019). The neo-fascist movement emerged and gained strength in the context of these popular mobilisations advocating for more public services (health, education, and transport), but the right was able to use the protests to its advantage (Wolford & Sauer 2018). The Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL, Free Brazil Movement), Vem pra Rua (Come to the Streets), Revoltados online (Online Revolted people), and other groups created in 2013 – with narratives of “apolitical and non-partisan mobilisations” – started to rally supporting the candidacy and are an important social base of the Bolsonaro’s administration (BOITO, 2019).

² “Several historians, since the early years of this century, have drawn attention to the “complex relationships” that were established between dictatorships and [Brazilian] society, showing how they were not just a product of the will of the ruling classes and repression (emphasizing the fundamental role of the latter), but they relied, under the hegemony of large financial capital, on transversal support at all levels of society” (REIS, 2021, p. 3).

movements (LEITE, TUBINO & SAUER, 2019), being defined as “right-wing authoritarian populist government” (ANDRADE, 2020, p. 1).

In the second half of 2018, the presidential elections polarised the candidacies of Fernando Haddad of the Workers’ Party (PT) – which replaced Lula’s candidacy after a decision on his arrest – and of Jair Bolsonaro (now the defunct Social Liberal Party – PSL). The PT’s candidacy presented several proposals for changes to the agricultural production model (including proposals and mechanisms for regulating the use of pesticides and changes in land taxation) and was supported by rural social movements, traditional communities, indigenous groups, and environmentalists (LEITE, TUBINO & SAUER, 2019).

Bolsonaro, on the other hand, was elected as an “outsider” or an “apolitical option” to fight corruption (LÖWY, 2019).³ Alongside this anti-corruption narrative, he openly attacked rights of indigenous peoples, landless families, and railed against environmentalists, stating that “crooks from Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement (MST) were terrorists...” (PHILLIPS, 2018). Accusing popular movements, groups and leaders of being “communists” – “these red outlaws will be banished from our homeland”, as he threateningly said (PHILLIPS, 2018) –, Bolsonaro received political support of most agribusiness’ representative organizations, like the Ruralist Democratic Union (UDR), the Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock of Brazil (CNA) and the Brazilian Rural Society (SRB). His candidacy was also supported by three conservative parliamentary blocs, popularly known as “BBB blocs”. These stand for “bullet” (the bloc supporting gun liberalisation), “bible” (the evangelical or neo-Pentecostal bloc), and “boi” (ox in Portuguese), the ruralist bloc and representative of agribusiness’ interests (LEITE, TUBINO & SAUER, 2019).

According to official statistics, the evangelical or neo-Pentecostal electorate already represents 1/3 of the national electorate in Brazil. Almost 60% of the evangelical audience is women, 59% are black or brown, and most of them are young between 14 and 44 years old. In 2018 election, “almost 70% of evangelicals voted for Jair Bolsonaro in the second round”, because of his support for the church and conservative social values under the banner of “God, homeland, and family” (PASSARINHO, 2022, p. 1). The neo-Pentecostal ideology is openly anti-communist, echoing the historic aversion to these ideas (REIS, 2021), making possible for turning a blind eye to his misogynistic and racist comments and speeches about women and black people (PASSARINHO, 2022).

When political support for Tamer’s administration continued after 2016 (LEITE, CASTRO & SAUER, 2018; WOLFORD & SAUER, 2018), the ruralist bloc – representing

³ According to Löwy (2019), the narrative against corruption “is an old tradition” of conservative politics in Brazil. The fight against corruption has historically justified “...the power of traditional oligarchies and, as the case may be, legitimised military coups. Bolsonaro has managed to manipulate this legitimate sense of outrage against corrupt politicians to gain acceptance and win the public opinion by (falsely) identifying the PT as the core of the Brazilian state’s political system and as the main culprit of corruption”.

forces opposed to the democratisation of Brazilian rural areas and to the rights of rural people – unconditionally supported the PSL candidate at the time. This parliamentary support very much represented agribusiness interests, as a study showed that there was almost a geographical overlap between where Bolsonaro was elected in 2018 and agribusiness-dominated municipalities (VITAGLIANO, 2019).

Elected in a process marked by the spread of fake news and “halter votes” – among the neo-Pentecostal and other conservative religious bases many pastors and religious leaders exerted strong pressure on the faithful to vote for the “messiah against communism” and for the preservation of tradition and family values⁴ – the government is characterised by the defence of the military dictatorship and an ideology against communism (SAUER, 2020). According to this ideology, communists are “internal enemies” allocated in the public universities, and amidst agrarian and environmentalist movements. Bolsonaro himself participated in several street demonstrations organised by his supporters, calling for a return to military dictatorship⁵ and accusing the Supreme Court of being partisan and acting politically (GENRO, 2020).

These political positions are not surprising as his opinions have been public and very clear during his 30 years as a professional politician and during the 2018 electoral campaign. Bolsonaro, then a candidate, made several statements showing disrespect for agrarian reform policies and territorial rights of indigenous peoples and traditional communities, and condemning the struggle for land and the demands of rural workers and family farmers. He promised to expand actions that criminalise struggles in the countryside and had an electoral agenda that accommodated the interests of exporting agribusiness and the agrarian elite (LEITE, TUBINO & SAUER, 2019).

In addition to political opposition to social struggles and demands, the campaign was characterised by prejudice and aversion to the demands and historical claims of organised civil society. Before taking office, the president-elect publicly declared his refusal to negotiate with agrarian representatives and social forces. In an interview at the end of October 2018, he stated that “there is no dialogue with the MST” and that he had no intention of negotiating with the agrarian and urban social movements, which are framed as “acts of terrorism” (FONSECA, 2018; SAUER, 2020).

⁴ Much of the fake news against PT in 2018 related to issues of gender and sexual diversity, and spread messages of discrimination and homophobia, mainly via WhatsApp and Telegram, such as the story “...that Haddad had created a “gay kit” which he planned to introduce in primary schools so that children from the age of six “would be encouraged to become gay”. In fact, as Brazil’s former Minister for Education, Haddad among other politicians – had promoted an educational programme for primary school students to understand sexual diversity and fight homophobia” (BRACHO-POLANCO, 2019).

⁵ Bolsonaro’s militarism is not reduced to a nostalgia as it is a truly “military administration” (FISHMAN, 2022), with ten generals, lieutenant-colonels, and colonels as ministers and more than 6,000 soldiers, occupying civilian positions, including his own cabinet (BOADLE, 2020) and the presidencies of the National Foundation for Indigenous Affairs (FUNAI) and the National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA). These numbers are higher than the positions held by the military during the 1960-1980 dictatorship (MOTTA, 2021; FISHMAN, 2022).

The burden of prejudice against traditional communities and indigenous peoples was no different, which led the then Attorney General to charge Bolsonaro with the crime of racism. During a speech at a private club in Rio de Janeiro in 2017, the then federal deputy used racist language insulting the rural black or “Quilombola” communities (SALOMÃO, 2018). In the same speech, he promised not to allocate funds to non-governmental organisations and not to recognise or demarcate indigenous lands or Quilombolas territories because they are people “who don’t work, are vagabonds and produce nothing” (ROUVENAT, 2017, p. 01).

Shortly after the end of the electoral campaign, already elected in 2018, Bolsonaro re-emphasized a position that runs counter to the historic struggle of indigenous peoples. He promised, “treating indigenous peoples as Brazilians” to “provide the means for integrating them into society”. He reiterated his commitment to freeing leases of indigenous lands for large monocrops and mining. Right after taking office, he restated to “...made the identification and demarcation of indigenous tribes’ lands all but impossible” (SAVARESE, 2019).

In summary, the so-called “Bolsonaro phenomenon”, although elected through the manipulation of social media and fake news, is the result of recent political processes that began with rallies in 2013, but are deeply rooted in the history of slavery, racism, elitism, and inequality in Brazilian society (AVRITZER, KERCHE & MARONA, 2021). The events from 2013 onwards were a combination of economic crisis and anti-corruption narratives associated only with the PT’s administrations (LÖWY, 2019). Bolsonaro is therefore not a “novelty” and his government’s actions should not come as a surprise. His ultra-conservative, homophobic, and anti-democratic positions, based on a sort of “military heritage” (BOADLE, 2020; FISHMAN, 2022), were widely known, and publicly declared in his 2018 election campaign (ROSÁRIO, 2020; BOITO, 2019).

Bolsonaro’s necropolitics and his “non-administration” of agrarian policies

Besides being defined as a neo-fascist-populist administration, Bolsonaro’s government should be understood as a case of “administrative sociopathy” – lack of social empathy combined with a “refusal of being president” but asserting his power as the “Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces”⁶ –, which fully materializes the necropolitics (MBEMBE, 2003). The political power based on death (or necropolitics) has not been limited to Bolsonaro’s public verbal debacle and lack of social empathy (Granada 2020). Faced with

⁶ Bolsonaro’s *modus operate* is based on an “anti-government” narrative making responsible the “political other”. He acts as an “outsider”, blaming enemies or others for his own management incompetence. For example, governors are to blame for the health crisis that cost hundreds of thousands lives; Petrobras is to blame for high oil prices; the Ukraine invasion is to blame for the economic crisis and inflation, rising food prices and hunger in Brazil.

the worsening of the pandemic in 2020, public statements such as “So what? I am sorry, but I’m not a gravedigger” or “What do you want from me? I am the Messiah, but I do not perform miracles”, are the verbal expressions of his politics of death (GRANADA, 2020; PORTO *et al.*, 2021).

Necropower did not just emerge with the Bolsonaro’s government, for it has been historically present in the criminalisation of poverty, especially of poor black people, and in the naturalisation of social and economic inequalities. Discrimination and violence were historical social phenomena, but they were potentiated in the Bolsonaro’s government.⁷ Necropolitics has been evident in the government’s denialism and non-management of the pandemic (OLIVEIRA, 2021), but also in its militarization (FISHMAN, 2022; BOADLE, 2020). In denying the pandemic – which was propagated as a “minor flu” –, Bolsonaro and the Ministries of Health did not enforce preventive measures but encouraged the contamination (“to naturally generate antibodies”) and the use of the so-called “preventive medicine”. Public resources were spent on purchasing and promoting chloroquine, a drug against malaria, which had already proven ineffective against Covid-19. The government also spent no budget on healthcare (GRANADA, 2020) and Bolsonaro personally doubted science, lying that “the vaccine would sterilise girls” and that “it causes AIDS”, and prevention methods, saying that “masks were proved ineffective” (BARROS, 2021).

In addition to the inertia, inefficiency, and accusations of corruption within the Ministry of Health, necropolitics has been quite evident in several government actions, such as Bolsonaro’s vetoes of the programme that should provide protection to indigenous and Quilombola communities in times of pandemic. Among the fifteen vetoes over Law 14,021 of 2020, Bolsonaro excluded provisions and budget that should facilitate access to the emergency aid and provide access to drinking water, hygiene materials and hospital beds in indigenous communities (CHADE, 2020). Bolsonaro also vetoed all articles of Law 14.048 of 2020, which were supposed to provide emergency aid to family farming, peasants, and rural workers during the pandemic (PORTO *et al.*, 2022).

Thus, necropolitics has been taking place in several areas, with changes in the administration, the dismantling of social public policies, and liberalisation of gun ownership, as part of the government’s public security policy (PORTO *et al.*, 2021). The abolition of the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA), initiated by Temer, the transfer of the defund MDA’s programmes for family farming and agrarian policies to the Ministry of Agriculture (MAPA), and appointing the former president of the União Democrática Ruralista – UDR, a conservative rural organization that stands for unconditional armed defence of private

⁷ Bolsonaro publicly stated that “the mistake of the [military] dictatorship was to torture and not to kill”. The apology of death, as an instrument of power, has been updated because, according to Bolsonaro “[The policeman] comes in, solves the problem and, if he kills 10, 15 or 20 people with 10 or 30 shots each, he must be decorated, and not prosecuted”, because the “[...] Brazilian police must kill more” (CARTA CAPITAL, 2018).

properties – as Secretary of Agrarian Affairs and Family Farming Policies of MAPA are among Bolsonaro's main destructive administrative measures. His necro-politics has dismantled public policies supporting the rural population (PORTO *et al.*, 2021) and weakened or ended governmental programmes against hunger and for food security (SABOURIN, 2022).

In the context of MDA's abolition and other administrative changes, it is important to note that the National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) has not created a single agrarian reform settlement and did not recognise a single Quilombola territory after 2019 (LEITE, TUBINO & SAUER 2019). The INCRA's programmes for settling landless families had a cut of more than 90% in their budget for 2021 (BRAGON, 2020). With public funds getting smaller each year, "...the desapropriation of land and family settlements almost no longer exist, and the focus is reduced to a marathon of handing over [provisional] titles [of concession for use] to former beneficiaries" (PORCELLA, 2022, p. 1).⁸ The president of the National Foundation for Indigenous Affairs (FUNAI) has not only cut public funding and reduced administrative capacity (SANTOS *et al.*, 2021), but has also taken legal action against several indigenous leaders, accusing them of being criminals for defending territorial rights and opposing mining in indigenous territories.

In addition to failed agrarian policies, legislative measures to deregulate and make environmental laws and standards more flexible have weakened the work of environmental control agencies, or made them unworkable (SANTOS *et al.*, 2021). Such dismantling of enforcing control measures is responsible for ongoing deforestation and land appropriation, especially in the Amazon and Cerrado (PORTO *et al.*, 2021). Data from the National Institute for Space Research (INPE) show that deforestation in the Amazon reached 2,254.9 km in June 2019, an increase of 278% compared to the same period in 2018. In response to international criticism, Bolsonaro issued Decree No. 9.985 in August 2019, authorizing the Army to fight forest fires and environmental crimes such as illegal deforestation in the Amazon (PORTO *et al.*, 2021). This militarisation of the environmental issue has had no effect, with deforestation in the Amazon in 2021 being the worst in 10 years (COSTA, 2022).⁹

In 2019, Bolsonaro abolished several councils – which were spaces for social participation in government spheres, such as the National Council for Food Security and Nutrition (CONSEA) –, and destroyed government programmes, such as the National Plan

⁸ On May 14, 2022, INCRA published a note to explain the suspension of the handing over of the titles due to lack of resources. In the very same day, Bolsonaro openly admitted that the main goal has been to coopt the settler families to support the government. "We, from the beginning (of the government), had a firm policy against the actions of the MST leaders with these titles. The MST member, the settler, upon receiving a property title, became a citizen and took our side" (BRAGON & HOLANDA, 2022, p. 1).

⁹ According to Fishman (2022, p. 01), "One of the more long-term initiatives in Bolsonaro's pro-military agenda includes a push to incentivize state and local public schools to "militarize". In exchange for federal funding and logistical support, the schools adopt a military-style curriculum and create a minimum number of jobs for police and military reservists, who also take over the school's administration".

for Agroecology (PLANAPO) (SABOURIN, 2022; LEITE, TUBINO & SAUER, 2019). The dismantling or destruction of public policies is also due to budget cuts, as in the case of the Programme for Food Acquisition (PAA), which has not been funded for the last three years (SANTOS *et al.*, 2021; SABOURIN, 2022).

In addition to dismantling agrarian public policies, Bolsonaro supported the expansion of agricultural frontier and monocrops by strengthening a political alliance with the agribusiness' sector (LEITE, TUBINO & SAUER, 2019). Contrary to a constitutional restriction, he publicly defends the lease of indigenous lands for the cultivation of monocrops, falsely claiming that it would "...doubling production in Brazil and significantly reducing production costs" (GAYER & AGUIAR, 2021).

The Bolsonaro government has broad support in the agribusiness sector, but this political support is not unanimous (POMPEIA, 2022). There are agreements on several agendas, such as the abolition of agrarian claims (no expropriation and no recognition of territorial rights), the reduction of taxes (the few that the sector pays), the forgiveness of rural debts and the flexibilisation of environmental and labour regulations (POMPEIA, 2022). The agribusiness' support is due to substantial economic gains made in recent years, especially by the agro-industrial export sector (soybeans, meats, etc.), because of the devaluation of the Real and the spike in commodity prices (PORTO *et al.*, 2021). This support is based on economic gains that also result from the relaxation of environmental regulations and "greenwashing" measures (MORAES & NOWAK, 2021). The government has not only allowed mining in indigenous territories, but also offered protected areas for "adoption" by transnational companies to finance environmental services in these areas (MORAES & NOWAK, 2021).

However, there are differences and resistance in the agribusiness sector, especially with regards to environmental issues. On the one hand, the differences are based on radicalised anti-environmental positions,¹⁰ calling for the abolition of the Ministry of Environment in 2019 and rejecting any measure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (POMPEIA, 2022). On the other hand, the agro-industrial exporting elites fear international retaliation due to Bolsonaro's anti-environmental measures or lack of enforcement. Despite this uneasiness, which leads to divergence within the sector, these groups have not opposed "...the government's anti-environmental agendas, including reducing the inspection of environmental crimes, challenging conservation units, weakening participatory spaces on environmental policies, and attempting to discredit the National Institute for Space Research (INPE), which monitors deforestation in the Amazon" (POMPEIA, 2022, p. 3).¹¹

¹⁰ Bolsonaro himself and his government has been classified and worldly known as "climate deniers" for stating that environment issues were designed to bloc developing countries. For further discussion see Sauer (2022).

¹¹ According to Pompeia (2022, p. 3), "...the demonstration 'The agro and people for democracy'" on May 15 [2021] was led by large soy farmers, with the main support of cattle ranchers and sugarcane producers, and the

Bolsonaro has also been very active in legalising and authorising large-scale mining in indigenous territories, which is seen as a reason for the agribusiness’ support. In February 2022, Bolsonaro issued Decree No. 10.966, which establishes a governmental programme to promote “artisanal mining”. Although the main objective of the programme is to “promote the development of artisanal and small-scale mining”, it is an unsustainable and populist measure aimed at convincing voters from a highly predatory activity (PINHEIRO, 2022). Despite using terms such as “artisanal” and “small-scale”, gold mining in the Amazon is mostly illegal and dominated by a few powerful groups, including drug cartels – as a money laundering activity –, and based on the over-exploitation of labour.

After issuing Decree No. 10.966, using the Russian invasion as a pretext since Brazilian agribusiness is highly dependent on imported inputs such as fertilizers, Bolsonaro reiterated his support for a law allowing mining in indigenous territories. The main argument is that this is necessary to meet the potash shortage caused by the invasion of Ukraine. Brazilian agribusiness depends on agrochemicals imports, which account for 85% of annual fertilizer consumption. However, Russia accounts for 23% of these imports. Brazil has reserves that guarantee the supply of potash until 2100, two-thirds of which are concentrated in the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais (STRICKLAND & NOBERTO, 2022). Of the reserves in the Amazon, only 11% overlap with indigenous territories, showing that a lack of supply is a pretext to allow mineral extraction, especially gold mining, on indigenous lands, materializing his necropolitics.

In addition to dismantling social policies and destroying state institutions of control, Bolsonaro’s necropolitics also lead to violence in urban and rural areas. According to the Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT), “The number of deaths due to conflicts in rural areas increased more than 1000%” in 2021 (LACERDA, 2022). The CPT’s annual report points out a considerable rise in human rights violations, with a 75% increase in killings (35 murders), mostly in the Amazon region. Once again “...the victims were indigenous individuals, landless workers, land squatters, quilombo people, rural settlers, small landowners, babassu coconut breakers, leaders, and supporters of the struggle for land” (LACERDA, 2022).

Former president and renewed candidate of PT, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, who openly opposed and criticised Bolsonaro’s administration, promised while visiting the annual indigenous mobilisation “Acampamento Terra Livre” (Free Land Camp), attended by over seven thousand leaders and members of 200 indigenous ethnic groups, that he would stop illegal mining on indigenous territories, and recognise land claims (SAVARESE, 2022). Lula

participation of evangelical groups. The protesters’ positions were then completely absorbed by the government’s agendas: questioning the Legislative and Judiciary powers – especially the Supreme Court – and criticism of electronic voting; in addition to attacking governors and mayors over pandemic measures. In a speech during the protest, Bolsonaro emphasised these claims and invited the Minister of Defence, retired General Walter Braga Netto, to speak. In a short, blunt speech, the general [now vice-president candidate] assured the farmers that ‘the Armed Forces were ready to protect them’.

promised if he won the presidential election in October 2022, he would not only revoke decisions or incentives to allow commercial agriculture, mining, and oil exploitation on indigenous lands, but also create a Ministry of Indigenous Affairs (SAVARESE, 2022).

In summary, the countryside is highly divided as it strongly polarises the electoral process. The agribusiness sector, despite internal divisions and some doubts, fully supports Bolsonaro's re-election in 2022, which is strongly opposed by agrarian and indigenous groups. On the one hand, social organizations are threatened and social or political demands such as new agrarian settlements, and/or the recognition of territorial rights of indigenous peoples, are not met by Bolsonaro's government. On the other hand, there is a memory of the creation and implementation of public policies and social programmes for the countryside – albeit limited, with criticisms and demands for major advances (see SAUER & MÉSZÁROS 2017), by the PT's administrations. Consequently, support for Lula's candidacy is almost unanimous among agrarian social movements, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, and traditional communities, an open political stand against Bolsonaro's necropolitics.

2022 elections, the movements' political support, and perspectives

Political leaders have operated with a notion of legal or constitutional normality, i.e. the Constitution shall be respected and democracy preserved, hence there will be general elections in Brazil in 2022. However, there is a constant threat to democracy, especially due to Bolsonaro's statements sowing doubts about the "security of electronic voting machines", and possible fraud in the electoral system (STARGARDTER & PARAGUASSU, 2021).¹² Critics allege that Bolsonaro is sowing electoral doubts to pave the way for him not to accept defeat in October (DUVOISIN & STÉDILE, 2022; NOWAK, 2022).

The electoral process is already underway. Despite statements of the upper middle class and businessmen "neither Bolsonaro nor PT", the much desired "third way" is practically non-existent. All other presidency's candidates are having less than 12% of popular support altogether. The absence of a "third option" consolidated a polarised national election between Lula and Bolsonaro (DUVOISIN & STÉDILE, 2022; NOWAK, 2022).

Before analysing the 2022 electoral perspectives, two remarks on the notion of populism and about political polarization as a threat to the Brazilian democracy. As recently stated by Reis and Schargel (2022), the "theory" of a dangerous polarization of the two political extremes normalizes the barbarism represented by the Brazilian neo-fascism. According to them, the problem in repeating *ad infinitum* that the country is polarized

¹² Taking a political stand reacting to the Supreme Court's invitation for the Army to oversee the 2022 electoral process, avoiding any doubt about its legitimacy, Bolsonaro advocated that the Armed Forces carry out a vote count in parallel with the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE), and questioned the exemption of the Judiciary body, which is responsible for the entire electoral process (GAYER, 2022).

between right-wing (Bolsonaro) and left-wing (Lula) populism is reproducing “...a false equivalence between authoritarian reactionaryism and the left. In short, the rhetoric of polarization offers people the idea that choosing between democracy and authoritarianism, between the democratic left and a Brazilian version of fascism, is a very difficult choice” (REIS & SCHARGEL, 2022, p. 01).

According to Reis and Schargel (2022), such rhetoric of polarization threatening democracy is based on the notion of populism. Since the beginning of twenty century, there is a “theory” interpreting fascism and bolshevism as synonymous of authoritarian regimes. Thus, “the classic horseshoe theory for almost a century has placed liberalism as the democratic and moderate centre, in opposition to the extremes...” or authoritarian regimes. Thus, “...the term populism has become a tool to disqualify any attempt to question liberalism, whether on the right or on the left” (REIS & SCHARGEL, 2022, p. 01).¹³ Based on this historical critique, it is very difficult to sustain that the current political, economic, and social situation has been paved and originated in the PT administrations, which were based on “a populist ambiguity” (See ANDRADE, 2022).

Bolsonaro doubts the electoral system, is sure of impunity¹⁴ and benefits from the vote churn of Sérgio Moro (former judge of “Car Wash Operation” and Minister of Justice in 2019) and pushes his authoritarian electoral plans. Publicly threatening the electoral system, his strategy is to reject any accusation of corruption, to focus on polarisation with Lula – based on an anti-PT and anti-communist discourse –, and on winning back the female votes (DUVOISIN & STÉDILE, 2022). The last one is relying on the fact that majority of neo-Pentecostal population is women. He is also targeting the votes of the middle-class, which is traditionally sensitive to economic losses, by offering economic incentives, which creates resistance among neoliberal supporters. While maintaining broad support from agribusiness, his main strategy is to strengthen his military base – to choose a general as his vice-president is crucial (FISHMAN, 2022) – and to maintain neo-Pentecostals’ support¹⁵ (DUVOISIN & STÉDILE, 2022).

¹³ For a further discussion, see Akram-Lodhi (2021) on authoritarian populism. See also Laclau’s book “On populist reason” (2018), where the author traced a genealogy of the concept and identified anti-elitism and mass base, or how “the people” emerges as a collective actor, as the most basic characteristics of populism.

¹⁴ Even with so many accusations of corruption, and other crimes – notably the attempts to sell/buy non-existent vaccines at double the market price during the pandemic, involving the then Minister of Health, a general, which the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission considered “crime against humanity” – Bolsonaro remains untouchable. Traumann (2022) claims that the Brazilian institutions are to blame, as Federal Deputy Ciro Nogueira (Secretary of State) controls the National Congress in alliance with the President of the Chamber of Deputies Arthur Lira, and is supported by the Attorney General Augusto Aras, who conceals all evidence of the crimes committed by the President.

¹⁵ Bolsonaro was hailed in a worship in the Church of Assembly of God, one of the largest neo-Pentecostal churches, as its official candidate for another term in office. The support of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God demanded heavier negotiation involving the Party Republicanos. This electoral arm of the Universal Church demanded the nomination of its current president for a seat on the Supreme Court but is fully supporting the re-election.

One of the major challenges is the economic crisis and the resulting unemployment. According to previous assessments, this is the “Achilles’ heel” of the Bolsonaro government, especially given the rise in inflation, interest rates and the indebtedness of families and businesses. “While unemployment fell recently to 11 per cent, the lowest since 2016, salaries fell by 8.8 per cent in 2021, and inflation is currently at 11 per cent” (NOWAK, 2022). The Ministry of Economy has no political measure or economic adjustments to curb inflation and fight unemployment. It also repeats that it “will privatise everything”, including Petrobras in a second mandate, in the expectation that the market/competition will resolve the crisis (DUVOISIN & STÉDILE, 2022).

According to Nowak (2022), “the general economic and social situation in Brazil is dire, and this might favour Lula”. Food prices have risen by about 30 per cent, severely affecting the working-class economy, and the 40 per cent rise in oil prices by 40 percent has also hit the middle class (NOWAK, 2022). Inflation for the month of April was the highest since 1995, and in addition to oil prices – cooking gas has reached the highest price of the century –, the increase in electricity tariffs will push up all prices for consumers in 2022. Inflation affects heavily more than half of Brazilians, considered poor or extremely poor, especially in spending their low incomes mainly on food (DUVOISIN & STÉDILE, 2022).

Ironically though, the worsening of the international crisis due to the invasion of Ukraine and the embargoes against Russia may favour Brazil (RODRIGUES, 2022). Although the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts a decline in world growth, projections for Brazil have improved slightly due to the rise in commodity prices, which does not solve the economic crisis, but gives some political encouragement to the Bolsonaro government. However, public opinion is still heavily critical to the current administration, since “...in late March 2022, 40 per cent of Brazilians thought that the economic situation will deteriorate, this against the 20 per cent who thought so in December 2021” (NOWAK, 2022).

In parallel with promises to review Bolsonaro’s regressive economic measures (Savarese 2022), Lula’s candidacy is presented as a movement and a front standing for democracy. Aware that “the greatest challenge for the left, for the popular and democratic sectors is to live up to this war against neo-fascism” (RODRIGUES, 2022), Lula and PT seek broad alliances with parties and leaders of the centre and moderate right and therefore tend towards a possible government of centre and populism (DUVOISIN & STÉDILE, 2022). The alliance of PT, PSB (Brazilian Socialist Party), PV (Green Party), and PCdoB (Brazilian Communist Party) is called “Federação Brasil Esperança” (Brazilian Federation of Hope), where the acronym “FE Brasil”, also stands for “faith”, in order to win votes and support of religious groups (RODRIGUES, 2022).

Above all, there is an understanding – even among the most critical scholars and movements - that “it is up to the PT and Lula not only to lead the elections, but above all to

prepare the people politically and ideologically to create the best conditions for the clash against neoliberalism and ‘Bolsonarism’” (RODRIGUES, 2022, p. 01). Such political position, which has been joined by radical scholars and some left-wing parties, is not only due to a lack of alternatives, but also to the urgency of removing “neo-fascist Bolsonaroism” from power before it carries out its threats against liberal democracy (AVRITZER, KERCHÉ & MARONA, 2021).

In addition to the trade union federations that support Lula’s candidacy (LOPES & NOGUEIRA, 2022),¹⁶ the agrarian and indigenous movements are also fully behind him. According to the MST (2022, p. 01), unlike previous electoral processes, public participation and coordinated efforts are crucial because “...this year’s presidential elections are of strategic importance for the reorganisation of the left, for the mass struggle, and for Brazil’s position in the Americas”. Thus, the MST, in collaboration with the Workers’ Party (PT), is organising “...popular committees throughout the country to debate which agendas should be included in Lula’s programme”. It is also “...strengthening the electoral candidates [who run for public office] and campaigns both of the MST and supported by the MST” (MST, 2022, p. 01).¹⁷

As previously stated, there is no doubt about which political and economic forces have been supportive of Bolsonaro. To win the 2022 elections, the democratic and popular groups must unite and join forces to convince the political centre to join Lula’s campaign (MST, 2022). The urgency of joining forces to overcome neo-fascism is quite clear to both some centre and left parties, as well as indigenous and agrarian leaders, and environmentalists. The remaining question relates to the results for the social movements in the post-election process and a possible – and welcomed – Lula’s new government in 2023.

According to Petras’ analysis (2008, p. 480), “...after 2003, in most countries where significant social movements existed, there was a sharp decline in movement activity, membership and social power”. However, the rural and agrarian movements in Brazil remained an important social and political force in the last decade.¹⁸ The main mobilisations – both in the rallies against the impeachment of then-President Dilma in 2016, and in the protests against Bolsonaro’s genocidal measures in the pandemic in 2021 – were led by the agrarian, rural-union and indigenous movements.

¹⁶ The 2022 1st of May celebrations were marked by protests by the Trade Union Confederations in São Paulo, but also by a pro-Bolsonaro demonstration in Rio de Janeiro. At the labours’ demonstration in São Paulo labelled “Employment, Rights, Democracy and Life”, Union leaders spoke out in support of Lula’s candidacy and against the Bolsonaro’s administration (LOPES & NOGUEIRA, 2022), and Lula himself participated in the demonstration speaking as candidate.

¹⁷ According to the MST (2022, p. 01), “...for the first time, we have a slightly more organized agenda for the election of candidates. We have between ten and twelve states with our own candidacies... people living on encampments and settlements will run, and there are others from the grassroots that the MST supports”.

¹⁸ The labour movement has lost much of its ability to mobilise, both due to a weakening of its social-labour base – mainly because of the decrease in the number of jobs in strategic sectors – and due to an institutionalisation and professionalisation (bureaucratisation) of the trade unions’ organisation.

First, such engagement is crucial for rural people, especially to empower them as political actors and strengthen their capacity for social mobilisation and agency. The "...agency of whom is affected as much by the economic and political structures which constrain them as by the forms of their own consciousness" (PETRAS & VELTMEYER 2001, p. 92). As part of modern social class and dynamic forces, this political engagement is also the struggle "for systemic changes", and resistance to the ongoing processes of exploitation and expropriation (PETRAS & VELTMEYER, 2001).

Second, the formal and public political participation in the electoral-partisan processes is not part of the so-called cycle of the rise and fall of social movements (PETRAS, 2008). The empirical context, especially the economic and political crises in Brazil, demands "...changing forms of leadership and, above all, policies, alliances, tactics and strategies" (PETRAS, 2008, p. 481). On the other hand, the challenge is to be able to influence the [agrarian] agenda of Lula's platform (MST 2022), since "...none of the social movements, even the largest and most influential, succeeded in imposing their programs on any regime" in Latin America in the XXI Century (PETRAS, 2008, p. 480). Therefore, the inclusion of an agrarian and environmental agenda in a possible new government/administration is key, because in addition to marking a difference from the Bolsonaro government, it creates the political foundations for a strategic alliance that overcomes mere popular support (SAUER & MÉSZÁROS, 2017).

Third, the political-electoral engagement of the MST and other agrarian movements does not fundamentally mean a decline or bureaucratisation of the struggle for land and for territorial rights. This engagement, however, will have internal consequences, for example, through the election of key leaders to political positions and the retention of their leadership within the movements. The key questions or challenges are, firstly, which forces will have real influence in a new government, considering the need for a broad alliance, including sectors opposed to the agrarian agenda. Secondly, the challenge will be to maintain the movements' agency and capacities for mobilisation in the post-election processes, even in the face of a "friendly government" (SAUER & MÉSZÁROS, 2017).

Notes for a prospective conclusion

Since 2019, result of historical processes, Brazil has been administrated based on necro-politics, not just because of the hundreds of thousands of lives lost in 2020-2021 pandemic. This death policy is structured around the power of fear. Thus, Bolsonaro's administrative sociopathy uses fear as a political instrument. Narratives against communism and/or alleged threats (assaults, robberies) generate fear, leading people to support the liberalization of the purchase and use of weapons, for individual defence and personal

security. The exercise of power through fear is based on individual solutions. Threats and dangers must be resolved individually, as public safety is not a state problem, nor is health or education, which would be family problems. The necropolitics threats live and the solutions are individual.

Bolsonaro will be defeated in the October elections, but not the necropolitics and 'bolsonarism', or this 'like-Brazilian fascism'. To overcome the necropolitics and fascism will require longer political and cultural processes, far beyond this electoral dispute, and struggles against social, economic, political, and cultural inequality.

For the new administration, it is crucial to understand that the threats are real, expressed especially in hunger and unemployment. Therefore, a challenge for the new administration is to face the economic crisis with programmes and structural solutions. To get out of the current economic and social crisis, the privileges of the large farmers' sector – do not pay taxes; do not comply with environmental rules, increasing deforestation, water pollution, soil contamination; easily register grabbed public and common lands, among other privileges and facilities – must be addressed. Besides facing rural inequality, it will be necessary to invest effectively in the energy transition and Agroecology. These governmental actions and policies will demand a strong capacity for political negotiation and economic articulation. It should also aim at a new land structure, particularly with recognition and expansion of territorial rights and new land programs for poor families in the countryside.

For social movements, the challenge is equally difficult. The year 2023 onwards will require a renewal of the capacity to articulate and mobilize the social base. New struggles for land and territories will be crucial to put social demands on the political agenda of the new government. The broad pro-democracy electoral alliance will pose many barriers to social demands and possible structural changes. Therefore, renewing the capacity for organization and mobilization - an issue posed in the face of the broad support of the agrarian movements to party candidates - will be fundamental. In conclusion, the main challenges are beyond the electoral victory and the inauguration on January 1, 2023.

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