



## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

# How Brazil Can Prevent an Authoritarian Resurgence

## A Robust Civil Society Can Stop the Far Right

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Seven days after the inauguration of Brazilian President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, thousands of far-right rioters staged an invasion of the country’s federal representative institutions. In acts reminiscent of the attack on the U.S. Capitol two years prior, the assailants claimed that Brazil’s 2022 elections were “stolen” and “rigged.” Entering buildings that were empty—it was a Sunday—assailants tore through the halls of Brazil’s Congress, rampaged inside the presidential palace, and ransacked the country’s Supreme Court. They fought with police officers guarding the buildings and attacked journalists covering the event. They vandalized millions of dollars’

worth of art, some of it dating back centuries. It is still unclear who organized the attack, or how it was planned. But they were clearly inspired by the man Lula defeated: former president, Jair Bolsonaro.

The riot should not have come as a surprise. Bolsonaro, who had smeared the 2022 election as fraudulent, has a long track record of denigrating Brazilian democracy. As a candidate in 2018, he threatened to arrest and execute leftists. As president, he pledged to not follow Supreme Court decisions from a justice he disliked. And yet throughout his presidency, many commentators insisted that Bolsonaro did not pose a serious risk because the country's political institutions—the same ones that his supporters physically trashed on Sunday—were strong enough to withstand his attacks. When Bolsonaro was first elected, U.S. political commentator Ian Bremmer wrote in *Time* that the president posed little threat to democracy, arguing that Brazil “is a country with strong political institutions.” In 2019, Brazilian political scientist Fernando Schüller said in an interview that “no institution was threatened and there was no risk to fundamental rights” under Bolsonaro. After all, Bolsonaro was elected as a self-styled political outsider who aimed to clean up what many Brazilians saw as the rotten corruption produced by 13 years of rule under the center-left Worker's Party, known by its Portuguese initials, PT. Whatever the excesses the Bolsonaro administration, the institutions of Brazil's young democracy would hold firm.

Brazilian democracy, of course, did survive Bolsonaro (and the January 8 ex post facto insurrection, which was eventually stopped by government forces). But Brazil's institutions were not the primary reason its democracy persevered. Bolsonaro found many ways to work around the formal administrative apparatus of the state, including by using the public budget to pay off members of Congress to get their votes. He helped promote

paramilitary governance in Rio de Janeiro, his family's home base, by asking the lower ranks of security forces to act outside their institutional limits. And he made it difficult for the health ministry to procure stocks of COVID-19 vaccines. State governments then had to work around Bolsonaro to combat the pandemic, ratcheting up intergovernmental tensions.

Instead, Brazilian democracy survived Bolsonaro thanks to something else: the country's vibrant civil society. It has a long history of promoting liberal and social rights. Civic organizations and movements were critical to the country's transition away from autocracy in the mid-1980s, and they have been central to keeping the country free in the decades since, including in 2022. It would have been impossible for Lula to defeat Bolsonaro were it not for health, human rights, and housing advocacy groups. Indeed, such organizations are critical to democratic transitions and the endurance of popular governance not just in Brazil but around the world. And as Lula fights to prevent his country from sliding back into autocratic rule, he will have to rely on this wide, organized social base of support to again strengthen the institutional basis of Brazilian democracy.

## **PEOPLE POWER**

It is impossible to talk about Brazil's democratization, from the 1980s onward, without mentioning the country's dense network of trade unions, urban movements, peasant movements, church groups, cultural organizations, and intellectuals. Despite repeated and often violent repression, each flourished and grew throughout the military dictatorship of the 1970s and early 1980s. This wide array of movements was critical in creating a unified fight for ending the dictatorship, which culminated in a series of massive street protests that helped prompt the end of military rule. And as the country eventually opened up in the middle of the 1980s, these

movements gave birth to the organizations and leaders that consolidated democratic gains. They were responsible, for example, for the broad range of socioeconomic rights featured in the country's 1988 federal constitution. That constitution, in turn, prompted Brazil's 1989 presidential election—the country's first direct election with a universal franchise.

Lula performed well in that contest, advancing to the runoff and ultimately losing by just six percentage points. Both he and his party, the PT, were a direct outgrowth of Brazil's flourishing civil society. The party was founded in 1980 by trade union leaders, including Lula, who came from the auto factories in the suburbs of São Paulo. And even though they lost Brazil's first post-dictatorship nationwide elections, the PT and its allies in civil society spent the decade after liberalization advancing a variety of progressive, democratic policies in the places where they did win office. They created participatory budgeting systems at the municipal and state levels; participatory councils in sectors such as health, water, and housing; programs for upgrading slums; and programs to improve health and education. These policies laid the foundation for significant improvements in life expectancy and drops in poverty and hunger.

Eventually, in 2002, Lula won the presidency, and he made nurturing these gains one of his primary goals. Upon taking office in January 2003, Lula established a new Ministry of Cities to roll out investments in infrastructure in the poor peripheries of the country's urban areas. He brought environmental activists into the Ministry of Environment to reduce deforestation. He got health activists to join the Ministry of Health, where they worked to improve the country's national health-care system and fought against the HIV epidemic (at which they largely succeeded). Lula's government established a national cash-transfer program, known as the "Family Wallet," or Bolsa Familia in Portuguese. This brought Brazil closer

to having a system of universal basic income, a dream of many policy intellectuals affiliated with the PT.

Lula served for eight years, until he was term limited, and his administration was extraordinarily popular. But his chosen successor, Dilma Rousseff, did not have as much luck. In 2016, halfway through her second term, Rousseff was removed from office by Congress as Brazil was rocked by corruption scandals and suffering from economic malaise. Her vice president completed her term, but continued discontent helped pave the way for Bolsonaro to comfortably win office two years later.

Once in power, Bolsonaro quickly began attacking programs and institutions that Brazil's civil society had worked so hard for. He closed, for instance, many of the country's participatory councils. He attacked civil society activists who were working in key bureaucratic agencies, such as in the health and environment ministries. He ended Bolsa Familia. He spoke wistfully of Brazil's brutal dictatorship, sometimes calling on the military to again intervene in domestic politics. By the end of the 2010s, three decades of democracy and social progress—hard fought and hard won—were at great risk.

## **THE GOOD FIGHT**

Brazil's formal institutions struggled to contain Bolsonaro. Sergio Moro, the judge who led the corruption investigations that paved the way for Bolsonaro's victory and that imprisoned Lula (making it impossible for him to run for president in 2018) became Bolsonaro's justice minister. Moro's successor, Anderson Torres, was in charge of public security in Brasilia on the day of the riots. The Supreme Court has ordered his arrest under suspicion that he had security forces assist in the invasion of the federal government's buildings.

But while the country's formal institutions struggled, Brazil's civil society organized to protect the country's social programs and democratic system. Consider, for example, how Brazilian activists handled COVID-19. As president, Bolsonaro made it as hard as possible for the country to mount an effective response to the pandemic, denying that COVID-19 posed a serious public health and economic threat and refusing to entertain any measures that would make it easier for states to lock down, require masks, and for people to work remotely. In response, a coalition of health organizations, grassroots movements, and academics lobbied Congress to pass an emergency social grant to protect the millions of Brazilians at risk of economic ruin if they could not work because of illness or lockdowns. Bolsonaro vigorously opposed the grant program, but when it became clear that it had a majority in Congress, he agreed to sign it into law and tried to pass it off as his own idea. The program proved to be a success, effectively replacing Bolsa Familia. Thanks to this infusion of cash to the poorest Brazilians, poverty rates in Brazil actually decreased in the first year of the pandemic.

Activists also helped surmount Bolsonaro's effort to prevent Brazil from acquiring COVID-19 shots. Even as Bolsonaro ignored offers by vaccine makers to deliver the injections to the country, bureaucrats in the Ministry of Health who came out of the famous 1970s and 1980s *sanitarista* movement—which successfully agitated to get the government to provide public access to health care—saw to it that Brazil procured and administered shots. By the middle of 2021, even with a delayed start, Brazil's vaccination rate surpassed that of the United States.

Civil society found other ways to help Brazil survive the pandemic. Urban housing movements, for example, protested against evictions, successfully getting the Supreme Court to institute a long-term freeze on them for poor

families. Community groups organized to provide emergency aid for residents in poor, favela neighborhoods in the country's large cities. These wins, which took place amid the circus-like atmosphere of Bolsonaro's presidency, helped expose the president's raw incompetence. In doing so, they dragged down his approval rating and laid the groundwork for Lula's campaign by reigniting the same constellation of civil society groups that made it possible to oust the junta in the 1980s. Trade unions, health-care employees, and other associations made up of workers and the poor created an essential counterbalance to the right-wing, religious grassroots social coalition that helped propel Bolsonaro to his 2018 victory. Bolsonaro and Lula, for example, spent significant parts of televised debates and campaign speeches competing over who could be better trusted to protect the cash-transfer scheme that had been inspired by civil society activists.

When it came time to vote, the progressive and working-class coalition put Lula over the top. In some of the largest cities in the country's southeast, which had gone for Bolsonaro in his first presidential campaign, the working-class peripheral neighborhoods swung back to Lula. The PT also made gains in metropolitan São Paulo. The two million-vote gain in this region alone was equal to Lula's entire margin of victory in the election's second round.

Lula has continued to marshal civil society since taking office, again in service of promoting Brazil's inclusive democracy. He has appointed people who come from organizations of Indigenous people, antiracist organizers, and politicians with strong links to agricultural cooperatives to lead ministries dedicated to these causes. His strong social base has also enabled him to broker deals with other parties in order to build a governing majority in a tightly divided Congress. Although this parliamentary horse-trading has prompted some grumbling on the left, Lula entered the presidential

“Alvorada” palace with a governing coalition that includes many of the pork-barrel, center-right parties that had previously allied with Bolsonaro. Critically, Lula has been able to create such a governing coalition while still maintaining a policy platform that includes extending cash transfers, increased funding for the national health system, and building more houses for the homeless and the housing insecure. And unlike after the January 6 riots in the United States, Lula was able to get every state governor—including right-wing Bolsonaro supporters—to meet in Brasilia and publicly condemn the recent invasion.

### **KEEPING THE FAITH**

Brazil is not the only state in which civil society has been an essential part of democratization. In *Popular Politics and the Path to Durable Democracy*, one of us (Kadivar) examined 112 democratic transitions in 80 countries between 1960 and 2010. The book found that durable democratization results from lengthy episodes of unarmed political mobilization, which requires organization building, coalition formation, and the development of a democratic discourse. A 2020 research article by both of us and the sociologist Adaner Usmani showed that a mobilized civil society not only helps foster democratization but also results in democracies that grow more participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian over time.

The way that civil society resisted Bolsonaro’s autocratic tendencies and bad policies suggests that organization building and mobilization have another critical function: keeping existing democracies from degenerating into authoritarianism. Civil society is clearly essential to pressuring incumbents who undermine democratic institutions. Political and worker groups have also proven to be tools through which pro-democracy forces can fight back against strongmen. And critically, civil society can help democrats make the kind of concessions necessary to build workable coalitions once in power.



Lula would not be in such a strong political position, with a workable governing majority, had civil society organizations long affiliated with the PT not enabled him to negotiate and make concessions. For example, Brazil Union, a party that includes now Senator Moro, has agreed not to oppose the Lula administration in Brazil's Congress. In fact, it even holds three ministries in his cabinet.

That does not mean Brazilian democracy is secure. The country's far right is backed by significant financial resources, and small entrepreneurs and people with connections to the lower ranks of the military give it meaningful social roots. But it is smaller than Brazil's civic grassroots; there is a reason Bolsonaro's base could not marshal the strength to attack until a weekend after Lula's inauguration. And civic groups have made it clear that another effort to undermine the country's electoral institutions will face fierce resistance. Since the attack on Brasilia, tens of thousands of people have joined pro-democracy protests in cities across the country. Sure enough, the protests were organized by civil society coalitions.

As long as Lula is in office, civic groups will have a leader who can marshal a broad front against attacks on Brazilian democracy. Their challenge will be to construct a basis for strength that can thrive even without Lula's extraordinary leadership and charisma. The president is 77, and when he again steps down, Brazil's civil society needs to be better prepared to fight for democracy than they were under Rousseff and her successor. Brazil's social organizations have done tremendous work, but they must find more ways to buttress the country's still young representative institutions.

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