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Brazil: Where to now?

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In October the Brazilian people elected Jair Bolsonaro as President for the four-year term beginning on 1 January 2019. This is a result that many feared, but that few would have expected a year, or even six months, ago.

This election was the most unpredictable since the end of the Military Dictatorship in Brazil in 1985. After 8 years of President Lula – which started off rockily, but ended up in a self-proclaimed Golden Age, as the economy rode the global commodities boom, hardly noticing the Global Financial Crisis, and looked forward to new off-shore oil wealth to fund future development – things started falling apart under Lula’s chosen successor Dilma Rousseff. The economy went into a deep recession, partly as a result of mistaken policy; a huge corruption scandal was unearthed involving all the major political parties and many senior businessmen; and widespread social unrest erupted, demanding an end to corruption and crime, reform of the political system, and better public services. As result, Rousseff was impeached; her successor Michel Temer only escaped impeachment by expending almost all his political capital, despite somewhat better policy; and all the major political parties lost credibility and support.

Unhappily, this maelstrom did not lead to reform of the parties, or of the venal nature of politics, nor throw up a new generation of leaders determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past. It left a political vacuum, into which stepped Jair Bolsonaro, a former Army Colonel, and long-time member of Congress, unnoticed except for his extreme misogynist, racist and homophobic utterings. His election campaign was marked by more of the same, plus a hankering after a return to the “discipline” of the Military Dictatorship (his Vice-President is a recently retired senior officer), and support for giving the police free rein to shoot criminals. More positively, he has promised to end corruption (and has now appointed the judge who oversaw the continuing investigations into the huge corruption scandal as the new Justice Minister); and “evolved” to support more traditional, liberal, economic policies. Not surprisingly, Bolsonaro has been dubbed the Tropical Trump.
The election of Bolsonaro is a massive change for Brazil – from an alternation in power between two largely centrist parties, the PSDB and the PT (each founded as the Military Dictatorship gave way to a democratic pluralism), to a potentially anti-democratic and authoritarian right-wing regime facing a fractured and weak opposition. The centre has not held. The PSDB is now a shadow of itself; the PT is bitter at its demise and defeat, and reinforced in its belief that the impeachment of Rousseff, the Lava Jato corruption investigation, and the imprisonment of Lula, are all part of an elitist, right-wing coup. It is difficult to predict how events will turn out.

The economy is recovering; Bolsonaro has the support of business, and he and his team are saying the correct things about necessary reforms – taxation, pensions, privatisations, red-tape. However, rather less may be achieved – he has significant support in Congress, but no experience of running the “presidential coalitionism” necessary to govern in Brazil; and is unlikely to want to reduce the egregiously generous pensions of the military and public service. Similarly, elimination of corruption from the political system is more easily said than done; Brazilian politics is still about status, influence and money at all levels.

There may well, however, be some rollback of socially liberal legislation – not least to please his supporters in the growing evangelical church; and disregard for environmental concerns, in favour of the powerful agroindustry sector.

A President Bolsonaro will doubtless try to fulfil his promises to bring discipline and to reduce crime. The danger is that he will give the Military Police (organised at State level, and already violent and corrupt), perhaps supported by the Army, greater rein. Extrajudicial killings would increase further, but not reduce crime.

The wider danger is that Bolsonaro’s authoritarian tendencies will be stimulated by the likely continued bitterness of the political debate, as the country remains deeply divided, socially, politically and economically; and by the usual frustration when change proves difficult, and support begins to slip. States of emergency, let alone a return to military rule, are unlikely; erosion of personal freedoms, the accountability of public bodies, including the police, and the independence of the judiciary, all too likely. The rule of law, and the institutions necessary to preserve democracy, would be undermined.

Bolsonaro’s views on foreign policy are almost unknown. However, with his visceral hatred of left-wing politics, he is unlikely to be as tolerant of Venezuela and Cuba as previous Presidents, and is likely to move away from Brazil’s previous focus on relations with the global South, and to look for closer relations with the US and other countries ruled by strongmen whom he admires.

The election of Bolsonaro certainly represents a return to the marriage of economic liberalism and political illiberalism which has not served Latin America well. It has some elements in common with the populism in other parts of the world. There is the same despair that the system is not producing the goods the people expected, and that the only solution is to impose “the will of the people” from above. In Brazil, it is not external factors – immigration, the EU, globalisation etc – that are dominant; but a feeling that the system is corrupt, and incapable of reform, so something more radical must be tried. However, unlike Trump,
Bolsonaro’s “base” is not the working class – those who have missed out – but the middle class and the elites who fear corruption and crime, and want “order and progress” (the slogan on the Brazilian flag) more than “liberté, égalité, fraternité”. The hope has to be that democratic institutions built up since 1985 are strong enough to withstand the strains of populism, and to generate real reform within the liberal democratic system before it is too late. Brazil is not alone in needing this.

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