

Democracy around the world is down but not out. Test case: Brazil.

 [csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2020/0409/Democracy-around-the-world-is-down-but-not-out.-Test-case-Brazil](https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2020/0409/Democracy-around-the-world-is-down-but-not-out.-Test-case-Brazil)

By Sara Miller Llana

April 9, 2020

It's a muggy Saturday night in February, and a man arrives outside a home in a quiet, middle-class neighborhood in this Brazilian city at the center of South America. He takes out a black recorder from an instrument case and begins blowing the tune to "The Internationale," the 19th-century left-wing anthem.

This is the owners' cue to unlatch their gate. Each month the password changes, and visitors only receive the address after members scrutinize their social media to vet their political leanings.

Welcome to the Secret Bar, started late last year by a couple worried about Brazil's increasingly authoritarian and illiberal turn under President Jair Bolsonaro. "The first rule is you can't be fascist, misogynist, xenophobic, or share any of the intolerance of Bolsonaro," says Cristiana Vasconcelos, one of the founders.

It's a meeting of like minds, filled with former union leaders, writers, anarchists, teachers, and students who feel like a minority in this Bolsonaro stronghold. But the goals, on this pleasant, plant-filled patio decorated with paper lanterns and homemade art, aim higher than just a night out. This gathering is one of many efforts, small and large, aiming to organize resistance against the right-wing former army captain who is testing Brazil's young democracy.

Bolsonaro critics' more existential fears have been realized in his handling of the coronavirus. The president is one of the highest-profile skeptics of painful lockdown measures, prioritizing economic growth and dismissing COVID-19 as "a little cold." During protests against Brazil's other branches of government March 15, he shook supporters' hands, against public health guidelines, and he has downplayed the importance of physical distancing measures enforced around the globe. The country now has some 16,000 cases, and more than 800 people have died.

Concern over Mr. Bolsonaro's disdain for democratic norms, however, long predates the current crisis. In the past three years, Brazil has veered away from democracy more quickly than almost any other country in the world, says Staffan Lindberg, executive director of Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), which measures global democracy, at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. That paved the way for Mr. Bolsonaro's rise and has accelerated what he calls the "third wave of autocratization" washing over more than a third of the global population, from India, Turkey, and the United States to many Eastern European countries.

As Georgia reopens, is it creating a model for America?

Some countries on the list are still well in the democratic camp, including the U.S. Yet for the first time since 2001, autocracies rule a majority of the world – 54% of the global population – according to a report V-Dem released March 20.

The first wave arrived in the 1930s, as democracies broke down in the lead-up to World War II. The second hit in the 1960s and '70s, when many recently decolonized democracies reversed to strongman rule. Whereas sudden military coups often ushered in the first two, this third wave has built more gradually, with a media outlet closed down here, a court intimidated there, making it hard to know when to react and how.

But this era may offer more opportunities to mobilize to shore up faltering democracies. The V-Dem report shows that the share of countries with substantial pro-democracy protests, in which citizens took to the streets to demand clean elections or defend civil liberties and the rule of law, rose from 27% in 2009 to 44% in 2019, an all-time high.

"The fact that it goes relatively slowly and that there's still quite a strong international norm [for liberal democracy] provides a window of hope and opportunity," Dr. Lindberg says. "It's not inevitable that these processes we see happening now have to run their course into dictatorship."

The Secret Bar is closed for now, because of the coronavirus, but its founders are finally seeing the protests they aimed to generate. As many people around the world lean out their windows, banging on pots and pans to cheer on medical workers, Brazilians in major cities are banging theirs to call for Mr. Bolsonaro's resignation.

Bolsonaro's three B's

In much of Brazil, opposition has been quiet until now. In that silence, most see weariness from half a decade of political upheaval.

In 2014, when the Workers' Party was in power, one of the most complex corruption scandals in South American history broke. Called "Car Wash," for the site of the first investigation, it engulfed former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, known as Lula, and left political disillusionment in its wake.

Tall buildings dot the skyline of Cuiabá, which has a population of more than 600,000 people. Cuiabá is the capital of the central state of Mato Grosso.

Like U.S. President Donald Trump, with his call to “drain the swamp,” Mr. Bolsonaro promised in his 2018 campaign an anti-establishment approach to crack down on corruption and crime and turn the economy around. It won him 55% of the vote.

He is often dubbed “Trump of the Tropics,” and like every byname it’s overly simplistic. But like his American counterpart, Mr. Bolsonaro tests all conventions, and often with gusto. As a national legislator, he once told a congresswoman she wasn’t worth raping, and that he’d rather a son be killed than be gay.

About these ads

Three “B’s” are said to have won him the presidency: Bible, bullet, and beef. And in Cuiabá, the state capital of Mato Grosso, lies the beef vote. The once sleepy capital, considered a gate to the Amazon, has grown rapidly alongside growth in agribusiness, from cattle ranching to commodity exports like soy and corn.

Rafael Yonekubo runs a state grassroots campaign called Direita Mato Grosso, whose WhatsApp groups have attracted young voters concerned about corruption and crime. A jeweler who was once assaulted at gunpoint inside his store, he was drawn to Mr. Bolsonaro’s early speeches about “good guys” like himself, who should be able to carry guns to protect themselves from the “bandits.”

“We were all sick of a lack of security, while the level of corruption was mounting,” Mr. Yonekubo says.

For Edson Arruda, a young pastor at a tiny storefront evangelical church in downtown Cuiabá, it’s about “Bibles.” On a recent Monday, two dozen members show up for noon service. Music blares as the bishop enters the room, apologizing for being late. He fires up Christian YouTube songs on his laptop, as the congregation belts out words by heart.

“Bolsonaro embraces family values, and the family is the base of our society,” says Mr. Arruda. “That’s why 90% of the people here support him.”

Defending democracy?

That support has dipped since the election. But from the streets, it’s often hard to perceive.

There have been some protests, especially over environmental policies. Dozens of demonstrations took place this summer, when Amazon fires drew international attention, after the president decried them as a left-wing conspiracy. There have been growing calls for impeachment from intellectuals and, increasingly, the political opposition.

But as the rest of Latin America erupted in protest last year, Brazil was eerily quiet, says Carlos Sanches, co-founder of the Secret Bar. Hoping to invigorate the opposition, he and Ms. Vasconcelos began their gatherings, modeling them on Prohibition-era speak-easies in the U.S. About 70 people turned up to monthly meetings, and they plan to seed the movement in other cities, though that has been stymied by COVID-19.

Similar fears about democracy’s fragility extend beyond Brazil. According to the latest Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University, which has tracked regional attitudes since 2004, support for democracy is at an all-time low. Amid corruption, crime, and weakened economies that followed the commodities boom in the 2000s, many voters decided strongman leadership is needed. Only 60% of Brazilians say that democracy is the best form of government.

Luiz Inácio Almeida, a retired engineer, sits on a patio in the historic center of Cuiabá, where colonial facades are splashed with vibrant street art. He says he supports democracy, freedom of expression, and personal choice, and admires former U.S. President Barack Obama. But he welcomes Mr. Bolsonaro’s new style and army background. “The country needs military discipline, after so many years of corruption and lies,” Mr. Almeida says.

But for others it’s an ominous turn. Mr. Bolsonaro has often voiced nostalgia for Brazil’s military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. He has filled his cabinet with military men and attacked democratic institutions like the free press, Supreme Court, and Congress.

“I think left to his own devices, he is a threat to democracy,” says Thomas Trebat, director of Columbia University’s Global Center in Rio de Janeiro. While the Brazilian media and opposition have proved a formidable defense, he says, “as long as you’ve got a guy lighting matches near a room full of gasoline cans, you’ve got to worry.”

Today, amid the coronavirus crisis, just 34% of Brazilians support the president, according to a Datafolha poll, and 15% of respondents who voted for him now say they regret it. The pots-and-pans protests may mark a turn, as well. Governors who once supported Mr. Bolsonaro have since publicly condemned his policies on the coronavirus, and a divided opposition has united, increasing calls for the president’s impeachment.

Still, 59% of Brazilians don't want to see him resign, according to another Datafolha poll released last week.

"It seems people are just waiting for [Mr. Bolsonaro] to fall," Mr. Sanches said at a gathering of friends.

And he says that could be too late.

Us versus them

Cândido Moreira Rodrigues, a history professor at the Federal University of Mato Grosso, spends a good deal of his time trying to dissect Mr. Bolsonaro's support. His desk is littered with books about democracy and its decline: Robert Paxton's "The Anatomy of Fascism," or Manuel Castells' "Rupture: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy."

Like many analysts studying democracy's demise worldwide, the professor believes that the electorate no longer trusts politicians to address their problems, against the backdrop of rising inequalities and a globalized economy. At the same time, cultural wars have upended values systems in ways radicals across the spectrum have seized upon.

About these ads

"The far-right in Brazil has used the opportunity of this fracture to say, 'We are the only option,'" Dr. Rodrigues says. He doesn't believe an old-style military coup is likely, but warns that "a new form, like Donald Trump has used to subvert democracy, is possible."

In Brazil, such fractures have led to toxic polarization – a fundamental feature of autocratization, according to V-Dem.

Henrique Lopes do Nascimento, who works at the teachers union of Mato Gross, stands in a classroom Feb. 3, 2020, in Cuiabá. He says teachers are afraid to teach history amid Brazil's polarization since Jair Bolsonaro came to office.

Henrique Lopes do Nascimento, who works at the teachers union of Mato Grosso, says that some teachers have been scared about reports of parents complaining lessons about the fall of the military dictatorship were communist propaganda. "Teachers complain about being afraid to express their opinions in the school space, for fear of being labeled, and watched," he says.

The same is true in the streets. "If you don't support Bolsonaro, you are called thieves, jerks," and, of course, "a communist," says Secret Bar founder Ms. Vasconcelos, although it cuts both ways. The Secret Bar doesn't allow in people who voted for Mr. Bolsonaro, even if they now regret it.

"Us versus them" is inherent in the "good versus bad" talk that Mr. Yonekubo references, and the discourse about family values and who has them. When Brazilian filmmaker Petra Costa was nominated for an Oscar this year for her documentary "The Edge of Democracy" – which takes a decidedly left-wing stance on the politics leading up to Mr. Bolsonaro's victory – the government issued a statement calling her an "anti-Brazil activist."

"Polarization becomes dangerous to democracy and becomes a useful tool for 'wannabe dictators' when that means that you no longer have a dialogue with the other side," says Dr. Lindberg, of V-Dem. "The other side is seen as an enemy and it becomes more like a war. You either win or you lose. And if the other side wins, then they're going to take everything from you or take all the things from you that you cherish. So it becomes an issue of life and death. That creates fear."

Edna Mahnic admits to feeling some of that fear, but it doesn't show. A local politician for the opposition Workers' Party in Primavera do Leste, three hours east of Cuiabá, she is not hiding her allegiances this morning: Her blouse, big beaded necklace, and fingernails are all red, the international symbol of socialism.

Edna Mahnic, a city councilwoman from a nearby town, speaks about the political climate in Brazil. Ms. Mahnic was harassed online and on the street as an opposition leader in a city with strong support for President Jair Bolsonaro. She wears red to represent the Workers' Party.

But she has been shaken since last spring. The problem started after Mr. Bolsonaro railed against Brazil's becoming a haven for gay sex tourism. "If you want to come here and have sex with a woman, go for your life," he added – angering many, including Ms. Mahnic, who said his comments were misogynistic, implicitly putting out a welcome mat for straight sex tourism and prostitution.

"I'm a woman, I'm a mother, I'm a daughter," she says. "I'm also a representative. And the only one who represents the other side," she says. "I had to take a stand."

She became an immediate target. Online critics accused her of calling all Brazilian women prostitutes, and the vitriol continues. Sometimes she wonders if the attacks online could turn into a real attack on the street. Still, she is running for reelection in municipal elections this fall – the first major test for Mr. Bolsonaro's strength.

“We have to defend democracy, and we cannot lose the right of democratic choice, even if it is weakened,” she says. “For Brazilians, we’ve only been able to vote for a short time. We cannot lose the right to say what we think and choose what we want.”