

# Quo vadis, Lula?

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The Bolsonarist demonstrations of September 7 concretely placed the coup against the established institutions of the Brazilian state and the 2022 elections as an ongoing process. This was immediately noticed by the liberal opposition, which until then refused to take on impeachment and is now moving in that direction. The first reactions on the left reflect the strategic impasses that we need to discuss and overcome, in particular the positioning of former president Lula on impeachment and the unity of the left with the anti-Bolsonaro right for this purpose. If these two Gordian knots are not cut, the campaign for Out Bolsonaro can never become a broad civic movement necessary for the defense of Brazil's weak democracy, as the movement for "Direta Já" was in the outcome of the struggle against the military dictatorship in 1984.

1. The coup as a process. The Bolsonarist demonstrations of September 7 in Brasilia, São Paulo and Rio and in small rural towns showed that the ex-captain president has the capacity to mobilize a far-right, neo-fascist, minority but important militant sector in Brazilian society. The Bolsonaro government still has the approval of 24% of the population, and part of it is willing to mobilize for the anti-democratic and reactionary banners of the president, his children and supporters. He is the expression of a broader conservative movement, rooted among sectors of agribusiness, in the security apparatus, in religious fundamentalism (especially the neo-Pentecostal churches, but not only), and that has the majority support or connivance of the House of Representatives (of which the Centrists has control).

2. The exasperation of the elites. The policy of the hegemonic sectors of the dominant classes and the liberal parties linked to the great globalized financial capital, was, until now, to

let the crisis bleed Bolsonaro, while subjecting him to a growing institutional political siege – by portions of the business class (the “market”), STF and STE, media, portions of the legislature (especially in the Senate) and the majority of governors. But the Brazilian society entered, in 2020, in a phase of recession, anomie, and misgovernment, very unfavorable to the business environment of the big bourgeoisie. The pandemic crisis, approaching 600,000 official deaths, has evolved into a multiform crisis (besides the pandemic, unresolved, stagflation, hunger, despair and attack on the rights of the poorest and most vulnerable, water and energy crisis, the impact on the country of the disorganization of global production chains...). Bolsonaro is not able to deliver what he promised to his broader electorate and the business community; Paulo Guedes has become a pathetic figure. The broad bourgeois coalition that brought Bolsonaro to power is broken and his popularity has been slowly fading. And with Biden’s victory, the environmental policy of Bolsonaro and the military, especially for the Amazon, has become a major risk for Brazilian mega-exporters operating in the US and European markets.

3. The emergency rescue operation. When Bolsonaro’s process of tension with the Judiciary, the media, and big business reached almost a point of no return, former President Michel Temer, a central figure in the coup against Rousseff, stepped in on September 8 and orchestrated a letter of retreat and apology from Bolsonaro, recognizing the authority of the STF. Of course, this does not represent a retreat from the ongoing coup strategy, but only the realization that the September 7 operation had gone beyond what was acceptable to the “markets,” the mainstream media, and the STF – an operation of which the truckers’ strike, which also had to retreat, was a part. For now, a definitive confrontation has been avoided, although it remains on the horizon.

4. The liberal opposition takes to the streets. The liberal

right-wing movements Movimento Brasil Livre and Vem para a Rua called this September 12 demonstrations for Out Bolsonaro in 18 capitals and in Brasilia – with tensions between them, with Vem para a Rua insisting on simultaneously rejecting Bolsonaro and Lula. They attracted sectors of the non-Bolsonaro right, from the center of the political spectrum, and even from the left, but they rivaled neither the demonstrations called by Bolsonaro nor those the left called after May; numerically they were small. Their relevance is not, however, in the street mobilization, but in the weight that these sectors can offer on the institutional terrain. No less than six presidential candidates were at the events: Ciro Gomes (PDT), João Dória (PSDB), Henrique Mandetta (DEM), Simone Tebet (MDB), Alessandro Vieira (Citizenship) and, in Porto Alegre, Eduardo Leite (PSDB). This shift, added to the institutional weight of the left, begins to make the impeachment dispute (which needs 342 votes from 513 members of the Federal Chamber to approve the impeachment – with the left having just over a hundred deputies) viable.

5. The need for a broad civic movement for Out Bolsonaro. But the impeachment or disqualification of Bolsonaro, if he crosses the boundaries drawn by the STF (which is not ruled out – but with Temer's advisory, he may be more cautious), is not solved only in the Legislative or in the Judiciary. The Bolsonaro Out campaign needs to become a broad civic movement in defense of Brazil's weak democracy in the streets and in all terrains of society, as was the "Direta Já" movement at the end of the struggle against the dictatorship in 1984 (which, let's remember, was defeated but led to the transition to the New Republic with the indirect election of the Tancredo-Sarney ticket and the agreement to push for the Constituent Assembly).

### **The two Gordian knots of the conjuncture**

6. The left is not united on Bolsonaro Out. Almost all of the activism of the left, progressivism, and the Brazilian center-

left is convinced of the need for Bolsonaro's impeachment. But there is one decisive actor who does not seem to share this conviction, the former PT president. Lula seems to prefer that Bolsonaro "bleed" until the October 2022 election. Unlike much of the left, he shows signs of not sharing the idea that it is a huge risk even for the elections to leave Bolsonaro operating in the government. If this is really Lula's policy, it means that the whole of the PT as a political machine, with its governors, mayors, and thousands of deputies and councilmen, will not move, and the movements of the petist camp, which have by far the largest material structure and capillarity throughout the left, will have a protocol presence in the process. Without this structure resolutely engaging in a broader campaign for impeachment, it will not be viable.

This likely electoral calculation by Lula is not officially assumed by the PT bench, which has signed several of the more than 130 impeachment petitions presented in Congress and stalled in the drawers of Arthur Lira, the president of the House and exponent of the Centrists. And it did not express itself, at least not until September 7th, in the decisive action of the popular movements of the PT camp, which co-directed the anti-government acts of July and August. Now, after September 7th, and with the call to the streets by right-wing movements (that were coup plotters), Lula and the PT are taking advantage of the distrust of the vanguard in this liberal right wing, to prevent a broader unity from materializing, a real democratic front for impeachment.

7. Quo vadis Lula? Quo vadis? means "Where are you going" in Latin. It refers to a passage in the apocryphal gospel "Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul", in which Peter, fleeing from Rome on the Appian Way, meets Jesus carrying a cross and asks him: Quo vadis? Jesus answers: Romam vado iterum crucifigi ("I am going to Rome to be crucified again"). Peter then gains courage to return to Rome to continue his ministry, but ends up crucified. Perhaps it is doubts like the ones

Peter had fleeing Rome that are in Lula's mind. But whatever his questions about impeachment, this central banner for Brazilian society will not advance unless he takes it up. And that should be charged to him. Will he allow the elections of October 2, 2022 to be a repeat, this time perhaps successful, of what Trump attempted in the US on January 6, 2021? Will he play a statesmanlike role, or will he let Brazil fall apart for another 16 months – assuming that there are elections, that Bolsonaro is defeated, and that the victor takes over in January 2023?

8. Single front as a dispute. The Fora Bolsonaro Campaign is structured around the Frente Povo Sem Medo (People Without Fear Front), pulled by the MTST, the Frente Brasil Popular (Popular Brazil Front), pulled by the organizations of the petist camp, and the Coalizão Negra por Direitos (Black Coalition for Rights). It would represent a large single front of the left in its goal of calling for street mobilization for Bolsonaro's impeachment. Its polemics would apparently be with divisive leftists. In fact, it is strongly structured – and nationally, in a federal country – around organized movements and, over the last decade, these movements have lost strength, advocacy capacity and capillarity.

However a campaign with the objective of weighing on the mood and consciousness of large portions of the population to overthrow the president-elect in 2018 should be strongly decentralized, capillarized, and organized from the base (as was the Campaign against the FTAA in 2001 and 2002). But this hierarchization reflects the great regression in the understanding of mass democracy of the Brazilian left in recent decades and it is naive to think that these directions will become more democratic, dialogical and more transparent without a popular explosion in the country.