

The Bolsonaro government's neoliberal economic and its nationalist rhetoric

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Starting point and aims

- Given the neoliberal agenda implemented by the Paulo Guedes' Ministry of Economy, the Bolsonaro government's nationalist stance has been prompting academic debates over its rationales.
- According to Bresser-Pereira (2019a), Bolsonaro's government has "a strange marriage between an extreme right-wing nationalism and neoliberalism".
- Our paper explores the contradictions between the Bolsonaro's neoliberal economic policy and its nationalist rhetoric.
- This apparent contradiction can be understood seeing Bolsonaro driven by right-wing populist behaviour, that includes nationalist rhetoric, anti-globalist speech, and cultivation of a direct connection with "the people" (their supporters).

Nationalism

- Nationalism can be broadly defined in terms of people's understanding deriving from their belonging to groups, which have their own history, tradition and culture expressed through the nation, and national identity as the cement that gives individuals existential meaning (Vincent, 2002;2013).
- Nationalism can be present in left-wing, post-colonial movements, and also to the right of the political spectrum.
- As it is proper to conservatism to value order and authority, this strand of nationalism tends to discredit individuals' capacity for self-government, which in turn tends to produce mistrust of the democratic model itself.

Economic nationalism

- Helleiner (2002) coined a widely accepted definition of economic nationalism, according to which it hinges on the imperative of serving national interests and protecting national identity; it works to promote national unity, identity and autonomy, which are to be achieved through a variety of economically nationalist policies.
- Bresser-Pereira (2019b) defined economic nationalism as “an ideology that emerged with the formation of nation-States and only gained substance in the nineteenth century” and which presupposes “the existence of a nation able to form a coalition of nationalist and developmentalist classes and specify a national development project” (p. 856).
- As the nation is the chief agent of economic development and nationalism is the ideology of the nation-State, developmentalism and nationalism are regarded as nearly synonymous expressions (p. 853).

Populism

- Populism has been associated recently by the literature with developments from globalisation. In that context, populist political movements have instrumentalised grassroots disillusionment with politics to their electoral benefit.
- Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) proposed to explain populisms in terms of an ideology mobilised for electoral gains, that comprises three basic concepts: a “people”, deliberately treated as homogeneous, which is portrayed as having a “general will” thwarted by the action of a “corrupt elite”, which acts only in its own interests.
- This alienation of the establishment from the rest of the people allows institutional channels of democratic representation to be discredited, warranting direct channels of communication between populist leaders and their supporters.

Bolsonaro's government economic nationalism

- Although there seems to be no doubt of Bolsonaro's conservative nationalism, the same is not true of his economic nationalism.
- In this regard, the evidence points to a deep-rooted antinationalism, which extends also to foreign policy, given the government's slavish alignment with United States interests (during the Trump administration) and its adoption of neoliberal economic policies leaning strongly towards denationalisation.
- Paradigmatic examples in this regard include the change in the oil exploration regime applied to Brazil's pre-salt deposits at the request of foreign oil corporations, and Bolsonaro's decision, right at the start of his government, not to exercise his veto power (the golden share clause) over Embraer's aircraft manufacturer incorporation by the American company Boeing.
- Bolsonaro government forms part of a wave of conservative nationalist experiments around the world, but contrasts with them in its antinationalist economic policy agenda. Bluhm and Varga (2019) noted that, although governments in Eastern Europe and Russia may be authoritarian and conservative, the State can be seen to be conservatively developmentalist and leaning away from the neoliberal approach by financing specific sectors and controlling key sectors of the economy.

Neoliberal economic policy under Bolsonaro

- The Bolsonaro government is continuing with the neoliberal economic agenda implemented since the Temer government – a series of policies that can be termed a “Brazilian Thatcherism”, comprising conventional deployment of macroeconomic policies – monetary policy directed to inflation targets, austerity in fiscal policy, and a floating exchange rate policy.
- Besides the implementation of orthodox policies, Temer and Bolsonaro’ governments approved (i) a labour reform in late 2016, introducing a series of measures to bring greater flexibility to the labour market; (ii) a spending cap, which implemented a 20-year freeze on real government expenditures by stipulating that public spending would be adjusted by the prior year’s inflation; and (iii) a social security reform approved in the end of 2019.
- In addition to liberal reforms, at the start of his administration, the Minister of the Economy Paulo Guedes promised an ambitious programme of privatisations of state-owned enterprises which would raise some R\$ 1.2 trillion, an amount sufficient to repay the public debt at the time. After some delay in privatisation programme, in June 2021 National Congress approved the privatization of Eletrobras, a state-owned enterprise and major Brazilian electric utilities company, and announced the intention to privatize “Correios”, a state-owned Post company.

Bolsonarist populism: some speeches/statements

Brazil needs to elect a man or woman who is honest, has God in the heart and is a patriot

Brazil above everything; God above everyone

I promise to sweep Brazil's red bandits from the map!

Brazilian military is "my army"

It is a fallacy to say that Amazon is a heritage of humankind
(UN General Assembly)

September 7th, 2021 mass rally with Bolsonaro in Sao Paulo



Bolsonaro's populism: conservative nationalist agenda

- The populism practised by Bolsonaro ends up being instrumental to the government's ostentatious nationalism.
- On the one hand, the rhetoric appealing to national values and symbols, such as the colours of the flag, national sovereignty and the armed forces, acts in this direction in the discursive dimension.
- On the other hand, his claim to be the only legitimate representative of "the people", which is constructed by fuelling conflict between the population and the establishment, is designed to dissociate the President from other politicians and thus grant him the prerogative of speaking on behalf of the nation – which is reinforced by direct communication with his voters, particularly through the social media.

Conclusion

- Our analysis has shown that there is no contradiction between the economic policy agenda pursued by the Bolsonaro government and the conservative nationalism. From the economic standpoint, the Bolsonaro government, by implementing an agenda that is neoliberal and - at least until Trump presidency - subservient to the interests of the United States, has applied policies at odds with the aims of achieving full national sovereignty and defending national interests.
- This has combined with a conservative type of nationalism, driven by populist behaviour, including anti-system discourse, cultivation of a direct connection with “the people”, and an exaltation of national symbols.
- The combination of neoliberal policy and nationalist rhetoric in Brazil seems to have no parallel in other recent experiences of far-right governments.

Thank you!

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