

Brazil elections 2018: the five risks facing President Bolsonaro



Jair Bolsonaro's remarkable rise to the presidency has already caused a significant shake-up of Brazilian politics. But in the longer term, a looming fiscal catastrophe and sky-high expectations on crime and corruption could lead to political instability or even a constitutional crisis, writes [Mark S. Langevin](#) (George Mason University).

Jair Bolsonaro's victory in Brazil's 2018 presidential race and the wider success of his Social Liberal Party (PSL) serve to complete a remarkable political realignment in the country.



Bolsonaro looks certain to take the presidency in the second round on 28 October (detail of [Alessandro Dias](#), [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))

Their conservative-nationalist movement is expanding throughout South America's largest nation by promising to end corruption and fight crime.

Bolsonaro was able to take centre-stage thanks both to economic turmoil and to the political crisis around the [Operation Car Wash](#) corruption scandal, which together fed into the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff (of the Workers' Party, PT) in 2016.

Bolsonaro has articulated a popular narrative that blames the PT and the Brasilia establishment for all of the maladies of the Brazilian state. He has used a dense web of social-media channels and followers to take this message to millions of Brazilian citizens.

Today, Bolsonaro and his PSL are opening a new chapter in Brazilian political development, but they also face considerable risks.

The Bolsonaro surge

In 2014, [Bolsonaro](#) was elected to his seventh consecutive term as a federal deputy for the state of Rio de Janeiro with the largest vote total in the state. He switched party affiliation twice, ultimately landing with the diminutive PSL earlier this year. His affiliation with the PSL was a game changer for the party and served as the primary organisational vehicle for his conservative-nationalist [bandwagon](#).

The bandwagon [first surfaced](#) when the PSL fielded 1,260 candidates – more than any other party – for federal office, governor, and state representative in the 2018 elections. In 2014, the party sponsored 832 candidacies, including one for governor, but only elected 17 state representatives and one federal deputy. This year the PSL elected 52 federal deputies, or 10 percent of the lower house, second only to the PT. In 2014, the PSL did not elect a single senator or state governor. This year the party elected four senators and may ultimately elect up to three governors via the run-off.

The country's largest parties all suffered setbacks. The PT still retains the largest caucus in the Chamber of Deputies with 56 members, down from the party's record of 91 in 2002. Bolsonaro's former party, the Progressistas (PP), also saw a drop from 50 to 37, and the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) of current President Michel Temer stumbled from 61 to 34 deputies. The Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) contracted from 49 to 29 seats in the lower house. These setbacks were less pronounced in the senate, where there were modest gains for smaller conservative parties likely to align with the PSL (such as the Social Democratic Party and Democratas, DEM).

Bolsonaro and his PSL will need to count on allies to patch together a legislative majority in congress: this might include the PP, the Republic Party (PR), DEM, and possibly the MDB. Bolsonaro and his PSL are well positioned to lead a broader governing coalition within a highly fragmented congress: 30 parties are represented in the Chamber of Deputies and 21 in the Senate.

But the PSL is not strong enough to set the terms of any alliance. The party's president, Gustavo Bebbiano, has said that his party is ready to negotiate the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies with any party except the PT, which demonstrates the limits of the recent political realignment.

The election of Bolsonaro, the rapid rise of his PSL, and this ongoing realignment imply a significant set of five overlapping risks for the incoming administration.

1. High expectations

A majority of Brazilian voters will vote for Bolsonaro because he promises to end corruption and reduce violent crime. He has created high expectations around two of the most difficult policy issues in the country, but without offering detailed plans on how they will be addressed. Once in office, Bolsonaro may find he cannot clear the high bars that he himself has set.

His old party and new ally, the PP, has been [embroiled in Operation Car Wash investigations](#), which focus on the most recent iteration of a longstanding kickback scheme centred on public-procurement contracts. His campaign also faces accusations of benefiting from illegal campaign contributions related to social-media disinformation about rival Fernando Haddad (PT). Bolsonaro's principal economic policy adviser, Paulo Guedes, is the subject of a [federal investigation](#) into his management of public pension funds.

Serious allegations of corruption against Bolsonaro and those around him could undermine the credibility of his conservative-nationalist movement amongst those who joined the bandwagon late-on. The only way to mitigate this risk would be to redouble efforts to root out corruption, but with many of his allies being linked to kickback corruption and illegal campaign slush funds, this could contribute to further political instability in the short run.



There is no guarantee that Bolsonaro's "fire with fire" approach will have the intended effect ([Saulo Cruz, CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

2. Rising violence

Violent crime is a major problem and deserves the full attention of the federal government, even though states are largely responsible for law enforcement. [Brazil has](#) 30 homicides per 100,000 citizens, compared with five in the US and one in the United Kingdom. Criminality [is estimated to cost](#) about four percent of annual gross domestic product (GDP).

Bolsonaro proposes to use state-sanctioned violence to reduce violent crime. He seeks to reduce liability for law enforcement and military troops deployed to fight crime, as well as easing civilian restrictions on gun ownership. But his campaign does not point to any credible evidence that this two-pronged policy will work. Rather, his [published platform](#) concludes that gun ownership leads to fewer homicides, but without the serious evidence base needed to formulate public-policy responses.

For example, the insertion of federal army troops last year into the city of Rio de Janeiro did not lower levels of violence and crime, with homicides actually rising to [their highest level](#) since 2009. Bolsonaro's platform also cites the US experience as proof that guns reduce violence, but [in reality](#) the US has a very high proportion of gun related deaths compared to Canada and the United Kingdom, whereas states with more guns also have far higher rates of accidental death. Greater access to firearms naturally leads to higher levels of accidents, suicides, and murders, not less.

To make matters worse, Bolsonaro's trademark two-gun salute is now one of the most visible political symbols in Brazil. This is all the more shocking given the assassination of Rio councilwoman [Marielle Franco](#) and her driver earlier this year. Despite this, Bolsonaro has gone so far as to [pretend to mow down](#) Haddad supporters using a tripod as a machine gun.

Such violent rhetoric and symbolism has unleashed a spate of attacks and reprisals amongst supporters and opponents alike, not least the stabbing of Bolsonaro himself. Between 30 September and 10 October, [there were](#) 70 documented acts of political violence, at least 50 of which were initiated by Bolsonaro supporters.

This wave may subside after the election, but it is more likely that the country is entering a longer period of political violence.

3. Political instability

The current political realignment is far from consolidated. Bolsonaro's campaign offers a vague set of policy statements that buy a lot of policy latitude, but Brazilians are growing impatient. As noted, well-intentioned but poorly formulated efforts to curb corruption could limit legislative support, and using violence to fight crime could ultimately beget more violence and drive presidential approval ratings into the ground.

Brazil needs a stable, popular presidency to carry out critical fiscal and economic reforms, calm the markets, and reassure citizens. Bolsonaro has demonstrated little inclination or capacity to work toward such outcomes during his 27 years representing Rio de Janeiro. If he fails to produce results that matter to most Brazilians, he will be lucky to enjoy 27 months as president before his congressional coalition begins to fall apart.

4. Fiscal crisis

Brazil's recurrent expenditures far outpace revenues, which could strip federal and state governments of their capacity to enhance productivity through investment in infrastructure, research, and education.

The fiscal deficit is significant (over USD\$25 billion) and could push public debt up to 100 per cent of GDP by the end of Bolsonaro's four-year term. Without sensible spending cuts and tax reform, a fiscal crisis will be "inevitable".

Bolsonaro and his economic adviser Paulo Guedes prefer supply-side solutions to the country's economic downturn and fiscal challenges. The candidate promises lower business taxes but has not addressed their likely impact on the budget deficit.



Bolsonaro will find it hard to pass unpopular but necessary fiscal reforms in Congress ([Senado Federal, CC BY 2.0](#))

Guedes suggests that privatisation of state enterprises could be used to pay down the public debt, but these non-recurrent revenue sources would only delay the necessary fiscal adjustment and trimming of social-security benefits. Neither has the campaign addressed the fiscal crises of states like Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, or Rio Grande do Sul.

The next president will need to act fast to push through spending reforms at the federal and state levels while also making every effort to mitigate their recessionary effects.

Bombast may win elections, but Bolsonaro will need much more in his armoury than a two-gun salute to win congressional support for fiscal reforms that undermine short-term approval.

5. Constitutional crisis

Brazil's constitutional order divides the haves from the have nots, but recent crackdowns on political corruption now challenge the legitimacy of the courts. Some deputies and ministers evade prosecution, whereas others – not least former president Lula and former President of the Chamber of Deputies [Eduardo Cunha](#) – are convicted and imprisoned. In any normal democratic regime these outcomes might spill over into a constitutional crisis.

But then comes Bolsonaro. Since 1990 Bolsonaro has regularly praised the military dictatorship (1964-1985) and its use of torture. He has made references to shutting down Congress and the Supreme Court if necessary. And earlier this year he threatened to reject the results of the election unless he won. His democratic conviction is suspect, but more importantly he has convinced ever more Brazilians to distrust their democratic institutions.

As president Bolsonaro will face unprecedented media scrutiny and congressional oversight. So far Bolsonaro has survived congressional ethics charges and petty corruption allegations, but will he allow the Public Ministry, federal prosecutors, and the Federal Police to investigate crimes alleged to have been committed by his family or close associates? Will he allow a thorough investigation of illegal donations to social-media campaigns that favoured his candidacy?

Bolsonaro has the most to gain from supporting principled efforts to quash corruption and rein in unethical privileges in Brasilia, but if he opts instead to protect those around him, he risks a constitutional crisis that could send Brazil into a tailspin.

Political realignments come with many risks, but democratic institutions mitigate these risks through majoritarian elections, constitutional protections for political opposition and vulnerable social groups, checks and balances between branches of government, a free press, and potentially even the constitutional removal of an elected representative from office.

The election of Jair Bolsonaro amplifies Brazil's country risks and will certainly test the institutions of democratic rule. Majoritarian elections often moderate extreme candidates, but this has not been the case in Brazil in 2018.

Bolsonaro has emerged victorious, but it is far from clear that Brazil will win in the long run.

Notes:

- *The views expressed here are of the authors and do not reflect the position of the Centre or of the LSE*
- *This article was modified on 29 October 2018 to reflect rather than predict Bolsonaro's victory*
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