Jair Bolsonaro was elected President of Brazil with 55 per cent of the vote on 28th October, defeating the Workers’ Party candidate Fernando Haddad, and will take office on 1st January 2019. Bolsonaro and his political allies are already laying the groundwork for his ascension to power. It is clear that his election will have a devastating impact across society, with politics and policies which will target the most marginalised. He will also cement his own power base, which lies within the three right-wing blocs in National Congress of ‘Beef, Bible and Bullet’ – agribusiness, evangelical Christians and federal deputies aiming to ease legislation around firearms. Many of Bolsonaro’s hateful comments have been widely reported – that he would rather have a dead son than an openly gay son, telling a woman she was too ugly to rape, and advocating torture – and he has been referred to as the ‘Trump of the Tropics’. 

The Trump of the tropics
The wave of demonstrations calmed down and were even beaten up by other demonstrators. PT t-shirts were often met with hostility and referring to Brazil) as ‘o gigante acordou’ (‘the giant is awake’, education’ or ‘no corruption’, and slogans such parts of the political spectrum took part, and sparked up all over Brazil. People from various difficulties preventing the PT from implementing social democratic reforms without introducing a more progressive system ‘Bolsa Família’.

In 2013 demonstrations against rises in bus fares took place in São Paulo and were met with heavy police repression. In response to the state violence, and with global economic anti-PT and anti-corruption movement, led by ‘new’ right wing organisations such as the MBL (Free Brazil Movement). There was an association between the Workers’ Party and corruption (despite many right-wing parties leading in the number of investigated and convicted cases of corruption) and people from various parts of the political spectrum took part, and the message quickly became watered down to simplistic demands such as ‘better health and education’ or ‘no corruption’, and slogans such as ‘o gigante acordou’ (‘the giant is awake’, referring to Brazil). While the demonstrations lacked political direction, there was a shift to the right: demonstrators carrying red flags and wearing PT t-shirts were often met with hostility and were even beaten up by other demonstrators. The wave of demonstrations calmed down and some morphed into a much more moralistic, anti-PT and anti-corruption movement, led by ‘new’ right wing organisations such as the MBL (Free Brazil Movement). There was an association between the Workers’ Party and corruption (despite many right-wing parties leading in the number of investigated and convicted cases of corruption) and people carried a massive inflatable doll of Lula in prison clothes, and called for Dilma’s impeachment.

In August 2016 a parliamentary coup against Dilma Rousseff took place, and she was impeached for using a type of fiscal manoeuvring widely used in Brazil. When Congress voted to impeach Rousseff, resulting in her suspension as president, Michel Temer, Rousseff’s former vice-president and coalition partner and leader of centre-right party ‘Brazilian Democratic Movement’ (PMDB) became acting president. He had been a major player in the impeachment.

In January 2018 Lula was sent to prison. His trial, conviction and subsequent imprisonment has been a politically motivated affair. Investigations into Lula began in 2016 with allegations that he had accepted a bribe form groups implicated in Operation Car Wash. The injustices in Lula’s trial are enough to be the topic of a separate article, but as a result of a legal system inherited from Portugal (which is no longer in operation there), the judge Sergio Moro was also the investigator. As investigator, Moro authorised illegal wiretaps of Lula’s lawyers and his family and released them to the media, and ordered his property to be seized and his bank accounts scrutinised. As judge, Moro rejected motions requesting his recusal, and found Lula guilty of corruption, based on little compelling evidence.

The political motivation for the prosecution was clear – not only was it a symbolic victory for the right, in taking down one of Brazil’s most cherished public figures, but it had a particular practical effect: if convicted, and even more so if imprisoned, Lula would not be able to become president of Brazil again. Lula’s popularity is such that, even if there were allegations of corruption, he would be likely to win a presidential election, but the same could not be said for the Workers’ Party as a whole, and that many state companies will be privatised.

Further Bolsonaro has promised to ‘simplify’ the tax system by introducing a flat rate of 20 per cent for those earning above five times the minimum salary (minimum salary currently at R$ 954, approximately £200), down from an already insufficient 27.5 per cent maximum for an equivalent earner, with the assurance that those earning below five times minimum salary (below equivalent of £1000/month) will not have to pay federal income tax. Temer already introduced a freeze on fiscal spending, and it is clear that all areas of government spending will be cut significantly if these tax reforms proceed.

LGBT rights
One of Bolsonaro’s main points of attack against his opponent Fernando Haddad (PT candidate), and the topic of much ‘fake news’ spread during the electoral campaign, was the so-called ‘gay kit’ that many of his supporters alleged would teach young children how to have gay sex. The ‘gay kit’ refers to the School Without Homophobia project that Haddad presented while minister of education. It was unfortunately vetoed by president Dilma Rousseff. The traction that the story gained during the election shows the conservative and moralistic nature of Bolsonaro’s supporter base.

It is already clear that Bolsonaro’s presidency will aim to wind back rights already won by LGBT people in Brazil. Evangelical
Christianity is a powerful force, having grown from three per cent of the population in 1970 to nearly a third today, with the evangelical caucus making up a fifth of Congress. Bolsonaro and the evangelical bench share many aims, amongst them abolishing LGBT rights.

Same-sex marriage became legal in Brazil in 2013 through the judiciary rather than through legislation, which means that some marital protections will likely remain, at least for a period of time. The Brazilian Order of Lawyers has recommended that LGBT couples get married before Bolsonaro takes power to avoid losing the right to do so; for LGBT people, the right to marry, and indeed, general freedom from persecution by the state, may be lost. Further, federal deputy Jesse Faria Lopes from Bolsonaro’s party PSL has asked on social media whether Brazil should have a law against gay kissing in public (as in Russia) in order to protect the innocence of children.

Even without a political programme to abolish LGBT protections, the rise of the right has already empowered a hostile environment towards LGBT people, itself strengthened by Bolsonaro’s campaign and victory. There was a reported 30 per cent increase in LGBT hate crime from 2016 to 2017, which has likely increased exponentially in the last few months. Some examples include a number of videos of football fans chanting “Bolsonaro will kill queers”, and a number of high-profile attacks on LGBT people by Bolsonaro supporters (including a swastika carved into a woman holding an LGBT flag), and a trans woman was murdered in Sao Paulo on 16th October, with the attackers shouting “Bolsonaro” as they stabbed her.

Early government attacks on LGBT people may appear in the form of cuts to HIV treatment funding. The public health network currently provides free treatment for all Brazilians, but during the election campaign Bolsonaro said that government money should not be spent to treat people who get sexually transmitted diseases. As a policy which removes spending on those most despised by the conservative and religious right, it would likely be a popular move.

Ideological battle

Shortly before the second vote Bolsonaro made the extent of his intolerance to political opposition clear, saying of his political opponents “either they go overseas, or they go to jail”. He has made it clear that he will vastly increase the powers of the military police, which will have significant impact on working class, predominantly black, communities. And a few days after his election one of his political allies in the chamber of deputies proposed amendments to anti-terrorism laws, openly saying they want to criminalise social and political movements such as the Movement of Landless Agrarian Workers (MST).

The amendments would include in the definition of terrorist activity any acts done to ‘coerce the government’ to ‘do or stop doing something, by political, ideological or social motivations’, and would include in the list of terrorist acts ‘setting fire, stoning, stealing from, destroying or exploding any means of transportation or any public or private property’. The inclusion of these terms in the definition of ‘terrorism’ had been previously vetoed by president Dilma Rousseff as she feared the law could be used to shut down political demonstrations. However, it is worth noticing here that the existing anti-terror laws have already been used to penalise activists in the 2013 demonstrations.

Firearms

Two of Bolsonaro’s main campaign pledges were to allow the possession of firearms by civilians without the need to get a license under the pretext of ‘effective necessity’ and to lower the minimum age for gun possession from 25 to 21 years.

Bolsonaro has also promised to exclude any punishment for the military police if they kill someone by gunshot in order to protect public or private property, saying “I will give the police carte blanche to kill” and “police who kill thugs will be decorated”. Currently, it is only legal for the police to shoot someone if they are defending the lives of someone else or themselves, and Brazil has among the highest rates of police violence and minimal rates of investigation into police violence, all in the context of an average of 14 people killed by Brazilian police per day.

Environment

Bolsonaro’s election marks a huge threat to the Amazon rainforest. He has previously said that environmental protections are hampering Brazil’s development, and has announced plans to merge Brazil’s agriculture and environment ministries so that ecological concerns about deforestation will no longer have to concern the government, allowing the Amazon to be commodified more effectively. He has also promised to ban meddling international NGOs such as Greenpeace and WWF from Brazil, and said that there “must not be radicalisation of the left in Brazil”. Bolsonaro confirmed that the agriculture minister in his government will be Tereza Cristina, current leader of the ruralist (or ‘beef’) bench of the chamber of deputies.

The Amazon is already being deforested at a rate of 52,000 square kilometres per year; an increased rate of deforestation would not only reduce the capacity to re-absorb CO2 but would mean the release of the CO2 already stored in the trees, which would have devastating environmental impact.

Indigenous Rights

Bolsonaro presents not only a threat to the way of life of Brazil’s 900,000 indigenous people, but in many cases, a threat to their lives themselves. The 1988 Brazilian Constitution recognised the rights of indigenous people to their traditional ways of life and possession of their territories, and that was reaffirmed in a 2017 Supreme Court case. He has also been described as a “threat to humanity” by Dinâmá Tuxá, coordinator of Brazil’s Association of Indigenous Peoples. Bolsonaro has also said that he will not recognise protections on indigenous lands: “not one centimetre will be demarcated for indigenous reserves”. There are currently 690 indigenous territories, covering about 13 per cent of Brazil, and it is thought that there are about 80 uncontacted groups living in the Amazon. According to statistics from Brazil’s Indigenous Missionary Council, 110 indigenous people were killed in 2017, and this will only worsen under Bolsonaro’s leadership. He once said “it’s a shame that the Brazilian cavalry wasn’t as efficient as the Americans, who exterminated their Indians”. It’s worth noting, however, that the upcoming assault on indigenous rights is not a new trend, and one that worsened after Temer took office in 2016, when a rolling back of protections for indigenous people was instituted and limits on recognising indigenous land put in place. Indeed, it has been going on much longer, including in the ‘Workers’ Party governments of Lula and of Dilma; with lands stolen for cattle ranches and soya fields over the past 100 years, and exploitation of indigenous people since early Portuguese and Spanish colonialism in 1500.
Friday 13th July 2018  Defiance and jubilation as 250,000 people poured into central London to protest against Donald Trump’s visit.  

Picture: Jess Hurd / reportdigital.co.uk
NOT WALLS