

Brazilian democracy in the aftermath of 8 January

SUMMARY

On 8 January 2023, far-right supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro stormed the presidential palace, the Supreme Court and the Congress in Brasilia. The events, widely acknowledged as echoing the attack on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, took place only a week after the inauguration of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as President of Brazil for the third time; Bolsonaro, who did not concede defeat in the October 2022 election, was notably absent from the inauguration.

Brazil is one of the biggest democracies in the world, albeit a relatively young one, and the largest in Latin America. Yet, experts have pointed to a crisis of trust in democracy throughout the past decade, due – among other things – to corruption and failure by successive governments to provide public goods. The events have raised concerns about democracy in Brazil and globally, and have reinforced the risks born from a climate of heightened polarisation. They have also highlighted the inflammatory role of social media and the need to address societal divisions.

The European Union has condemned the anti-democratic acts of violence, reiterated its full support for President Lula Da Silva, and for the Brazilian democratic system, and expressed solidarity with the democratic institutions targeted by this attack. On 19 January 2023, the European Parliament adopted a resolution also expressing solidarity with the Lula government and Brazilian institutions and urging supporters of ex-President Bolsonaro to accept the democratic outcome of the elections. Parliament also welcomed the investigation to identify and prosecute those involved and highlighted a recent decision taken by the Brazilian Supreme Court to approve the federal prosecutors' request to investigate Bolsonaro.



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Introduction

In October 2022, [Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva](#) (Workers' Party), known to the world as Lula, beat his predecessor and opponent [Jair Bolsonaro](#) (Liberal Party) in the second round by a [narrow](#) 51 % - 49 % margin. On 1 January 2023, Lula was inaugurated as President of Brazil for the third time, having served in the same capacity for two terms between 2002 and 2011. In his inauguration speech, he [announced](#) that the rights of the people, the strengthening of democracy and the recovery of national sovereignty would be the pillars of his administration for the following term.

In a move without precedent in recent Brazilian history, Bolsonaro did [not participate](#) in his successor's inauguration; that same day, Brazilian police [detained](#) a man with an explosive device and a knife trying to enter Brasilia's esplanade for the event. A week later, on 8 January, almost two years to the day after [similar events](#) took place in Washington DC, [thousands](#) of Bolsonaro's far-right supporters stormed the presidential palace, the Supreme Court and the Congress in Brasilia, over false claims of electoral fraud. They vandalised buildings and injured members of the police, before the army restored order. Some 1 500 people were arrested in relation to the events, and military police subsequently evicted Bolsonaro supporters camping near the army headquarters.

In a [survey](#) of Brazilians conducted shortly after the events, three quarters of respondents disagreed with the attacks. Similarly, the political class [rallied](#) around President Lula. Federal Supreme Court judge [Alexandre de Moraes](#) ordered the removal of the governor of the Federal District of Brasilia, Ibaneis Rocha, for a period of 90 days, following [allegations](#) that Rocha ignored all requests to strengthen security made by various authorities.

The judiciary has been [active](#) in its defence of democracy: in the months leading up to the presidential elections, Supreme Court justices launched wide-ranging investigations into fake news about the election; authorised a raid against businessmen who had texted about a possible coup d'état; and ordered the arrest of a member of the Brazilian legislature who had advocated for a military dictatorship. The Court declared Lula the legitimate winner of the 2022 presidential elections on 14 November. At the same time, almost 40 % of respondents in the aforementioned survey said that they did not believe Lula won more votes than Bolsonaro in the elections. This number points to the growing ideological and political polarisation which [experts](#) have observed in the country and which, they say, may pose one of the biggest challenges to the new administration.

Challenges to democracy in a polarised country

By most expert accounts, the new Lula administration will face a number of [challenges](#), among which are the strengthening of democracy and the restoration of trust. The 2016 'Operation Car Wash' ([Operação Lava Jato](#)) – an extensive criminal investigation in Brazil which uncovered a corruption scandal involving politicians and Petrobras, the State-owned oil company – [sowed](#) great distrust in the Brazilian political system and, coupled with other factors, has led to increasing polarisation since. Lula himself was accused of involvement in the scheme and spent more than a year in detention before the Supreme Federal Court [quashed](#) his sentence in 2021, and before the investigation that resulted in his detention was annulled on grounds of impartiality; Lula's image has been [controversial](#) since then. Alarming, in the aftermath of the scandal, surveys indicated an increase in Brazilians' indifference to democracy, which peaked in late 2019 but has since recovered (Figure 1).

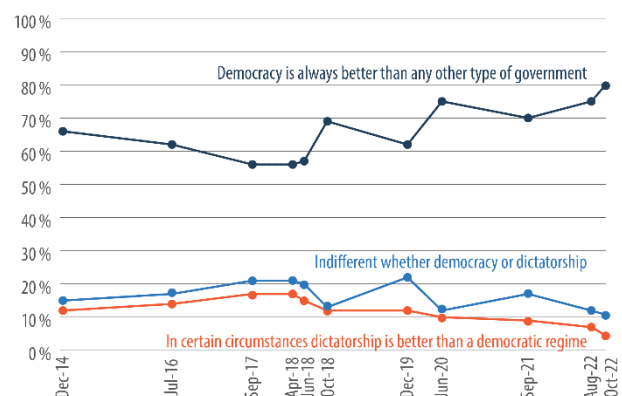
The crisis of democracy is compounded by political polarisation, which has been [on the rise](#) since 2013, after almost 20 years of healthy partisanship. Longstanding structural causes, such as inadequate [social services](#) and [social](#) and [income inequality](#), are at the root of the growing societal and political divides, but politics – including Bolsonaro's polarising rhetoric and mode of governing, as well as the Workers' Party's perceived refusal to carry out deep reform following the tumultuous end to its 13 years in power – are also to blame. Some experts also [credit](#) the inflammatory influence of the US movement of '[Trumpism](#)' on segments of Brazilian society.

The parallel with the US experience of 6 January 2021 can also be detected in the manipulation of social media and the use of [disinformation](#) with – experts suggest – the implicit support of the executive, as in the [US](#) case. Researchers point to the fact that the Bolsonaro administration regularly [encouraged distrust](#) in political institutions and [made use of the possibilities](#) offered by traditional networks (e.g. the [Evangelical church](#)), but also by [online networking platforms](#), to promote misguided narratives.

With regard to the state of Brazilian democracy – and despite Brazil being home to a vibrant [civil society](#) (e.g. trade unions, advocacy groups, cultural organisations) – concerns have arisen in recent years over the [challenges](#) faced by Brazilian civil society, which is seen by some as a key vehicle to counter authoritarianism.

[Disinformation](#) is a [key threat](#) to social [trust](#) and democracy. To counter disinformation spread through social networks and digital platforms, the EU has adopted the [Digital Service Act](#) and the [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#). Observers [note](#) a worrying trend of using dis- and mis-information as a political weapon, including by some national leaders who tacitly or overtly encourage such practices. They note that the trend became particularly alarming during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1 – Brazilian public opinion: Democracy vs dictatorship (2017-2022)



Source: [Folha de Sao Paulo](#), 2022.

Following a visit to Brazil, in 2022 the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to peaceful assembly and of association, Clément Nyaletsossi Voulethe, [expressed](#) deep concern about the state of restrictions on Brazilians' rights to social and political participation and about violence against human rights defenders. He specifically referred to plans for laws which, if adopted, 'would effectively criminalize social movements' activities under the guise of national security and the fight against terrorism'.

In their [2020-2025 EU Country Roadmap for engagement with civil society in Brazil](#), EU Heads of Missions in Brazil considered 'strengthening civil society and promoting an enabling environment' to be one of the most urgent common challenges for cooperation.

Outlook

By all analyses, the Lula government faces additional challenges in the future if it is to achieve the strengthening of democracy as announced. The events of 8 January accentuate those challenges. Firstly, the administration will need to deal with those who participated actively in the events, to [show](#) that law and democracy will prevail in Brazil, and punish the guilty, without alienating entire institutions or appearing to accuse all of the 49% of Brazilians who voted for Bolsonaro of potentially supporting a coup.

Another challenge will be figuring out a way to work with Bolsonaro supporters who occupy prominent positions, from Congress to regional governors. [Since the events](#), at least three electrical transmission towers have been [brought down](#), and three others damaged, in the states of Rondônia and Paraná, in what authorities said appeared to be incidents of 'sabotage' and 'vandalism'. Pro-Bolsonaro groups [still call on](#) supporters to block access to refineries across the nation, and thus provoke fuel shortages, to destabilise the government (police were deployed, apparently hindering the plan). Given that, in Brazil, the military police depend on the governors of the individual states – and that many of them, including major states such as Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo,

are led by allies of Bolsonaro – similar events could pose a danger to the [governability](#) of the country if they persist.

[Civil-military relations](#) and the involvement of the military in politics in Brazil remain an open question. Following the end of the military regime in 1985, by the early 2000s the Brazilian military was [less visibly involved](#) in politics. Starting with the Rousseff administration (2011-2016), there were progressively higher levels of tension between the executive and the armed forces. This [continued](#) under her successor, President Temer, and [culminated](#) with Bolsonaro, who raised the number of former and current military officers in government to a level not seen since the dictatorship. Overall, during the last decade, it is [estimated](#) that around 6 000 active military personnel were given jobs in non-military positions in government.

Popular perceptions of the role of the military in politics diverge across political lines: surveys indicate that, for a part of the public, military intervention can be justified in specific cases. In the survey conducted following the January events, 36.8% of respondents [said](#) that they were in favour of military intervention to annul the result of the presidential election; however, only 10% said they would support a military dictatorship. This has raised some [concerns](#) about the potential role that the armed forces could take on in an environment of protracted instability and about the blurring between civilian governance and the military establishment more widely.

Reducing polarisation will also hinge on the economic environment and on growth, which could form a robust backdrop for new policies to reduce inequality. With the Brazilian [economy](#) currently experiencing both high inflation and interest rates and [forecasts](#) that growth in 2023 may be tepid (according to the Economist Intelligence Unit), and with an [unstable](#) global economic environment signalling a potential drop in commodity prices, the administration may struggle to find revenues to pursue its policies. Lula's pledge to reverse many of his predecessor's policies, especially those related to the Amazon, to possession of weapons and to privatisations (e.g. [Petrobras](#)), while [welcomed](#) by the international community, may also increase polarisation by provoking reactions from specific [economic interests](#), such as cattle ranching, agriculture (e.g. soya), logging or mining, for which such policies proved advantageous.

At the heart of the vulnerabilities of Brazil's democracy lies its failure so far to end rising poverty and inequality. While various international [institutions](#) have [published several studies](#) with proposals on how to close the inequality gaps, and while the new government claims to have prioritised this goal, achieving it in the current international and national economic context will be a considerable task. In addition, following the events of January, experts expect the country to face a [continuous risk](#) of domestic terror and disruptions to daily life, in the short term at least. To deal with divisions in Brazil, they argue, social and economic policy will need to be supported by additional action, including combating disinformation and protecting the country's civil society.

EU and European Parliament response

The European Union has [condemned](#) the anti-democratic acts of violence, reiterated its full support for President Lula Da Silva, and for the Brazilian democratic system, and expressed solidarity with the democratic institutions targeted by this attack. Following a debate in plenary on 18 January, on 19 January 2023 the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) also expressing its solidarity with the Lula government and Brazilian institutions and urging supporters of ex-President Bolsonaro to accept the democratic outcome of the elections.

Parliament also welcomed the investigation to identify and prosecute those involved and highlighted a recent decision taken by the Brazilian Supreme Court to approve federal prosecutors' request to investigate Bolsonaro. MEPs deplored the attempts by Bolsonaro and some of his political supporters to discredit the voting system and the electoral authorities, despite there being no evidence of electoral fraud, and condemned in the strongest terms the criminal actions perpetrated on 8 January.

In addition, MEPs noted the connection between the events in Brasilia, the assault on the US Capitol in 2021 and the planned attack on Germany's Bundestag in December 2022, and warned that violent attacks on democratic institutions by the far right are a global phenomenon. In that context, they criticised social media platforms for amplifying aggressive rhetoric and violence and facilitating mobilisation and the spread of disinformation, instead of constraining the diffusion of anti-democratic campaigns, fascism and extremism. They stressed, in this context, the importance of legislative frameworks such as the Digital Services Act, to effectively combat and prevent the online spread of hate speech and misinformation and thereby avoid further radicalisation.

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