Conspiracy nightmares and millennial dreams

Large swathes of opinion in Brazil during the years going back perhaps to the first election of Dilma Roussef, have been prey to a surprising, shocking, degree of paranoia and conspiratorial obsession. Already then there were internet-based campaigns warning that the PT was going to place the country under the boot of communism, that the Bolsa Família programme was a vote-getting exercise (how could it not be?) cynically designed to make the impoverished and ignorant masses of the North and Northeast forever dependent on the state (less convincing).

After Dilma’s second election in 2014 this hostility sharpened and poisoned the political atmosphere, helped of course by the corruption scandals that first broke in Petrobras earlier that year and then came to the surface across the political spectrum (save among the parties to the left of the PT). As soon as Dilma had been elected the defeated PSDB candidate Aecio Neves cried foul, with no evidence, and claimed her election had been fixed. Although not a very substantial figure in his own right, he set in motion a process which suited the interests to all sorts of people who saw a chance of getting at Lula and thwarting his chances of returning in 2018.

The atmosphere of conspiracy, fed by endless reporting from an impenetrable, labyrinthine legal system, has, like elsewhere, grown ever thicker with the suspicion surrounding social media and their manipulation. But it has also been fed by the left with its attacks on the media, accusing TV Globo and the *Folha de São Paulo* of bias in their reporting, and in television interviewers’ treatment of politicians. As the Petrobras scandal, known for reasons no longer of any importance as *Lava Jato*, cast its ever-expanding poisoned web, PT sympathizers and others further to the left began to accuse the judiciary also of bias. Readers can find the details elsewhere, but that did seem to me to be a mistake since the PT was so deeply involved itself in this and in the earlier *mensalão* scandal during Lula’s first term. Furthermore for a party aiming to govern the country, to attack the judiciary is playing with fire. Confidence in the legislative and executive branches is already low, so if confidence in the judiciary is weakened obstacles to dictatorship are also weakened. For that reason I did not sign the international call to allow Lula to stand in these elections, which was in effect a call on the judiciary to substitute a judicial decision with a political one - even though I have to admit that his trial and appeal have not merited my full confidence.

Lava Jato created the climate in which Dilma could be impeached by Congress in which anti-PT sentiment grew and grew far more than sentiment against other parties whose politicians were no less involved in corruption cases. The Supreme Court itself intervened in 2016 to [remove the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies](http://g1.globo.com/politica/operacao-lava-jato/noticia/2016/05/maioria-do-stf-confirma-afastamento-de-eduardo-cunha-da-camara.html) who had masterminded the impeachment and now sits in prison, but the anti-PT bias in opinion remains.

In 2013 a massive wave of demonstrations sparked by repression of a protest against a rise in São Paulo transport prices gave an appearance of a left-wing shift in opinion, but despite the appearance e of an ad hoc protest movement demanding free bus and train passes (*movimento passé livre*) and involvement of shadowy anarchists known as *ninjas*  some of whom may well have been provocateurs, this turned out to be wrong: it was the birth of an equally shadowy strictly free market outfit called *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL) which sponsored demonstrations calling for the ousting of the government, and even for a military coup. The accompanying slogans became ever more shrill, offensive and even scatological, as the world could see when Dilma was pitilessly mocked by well-healed World Cup spectators. I am sure Dilma was the more harshly treated on account of being a single woman and my intuition also tells me that her status fed into the development of moral panics about gender and the intensification of culture wars from which the country had previously - at least on the surface – been immune.

Two topics came to prominence in Dilma’s time – gender and same-sex marriage. These were capitalized by the well organized Congressional evangelical caucus(some 80 members) who campaigned insistently on these themes, peppering their harsh rhetoric with poisonous slogans against gay people, Indians and blacks. The Pope’s campaign against ‘gender ideology’ has let a genie out of a bottle, propelling for example a myth that a law is under way in Congress to permit sex with three-year old children. Mix in a dose of millenarianism and continued conspiratorial fixations and you get the rise of a previously obscure Congressman from Rio, Jair Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro has been a Federal Deputy for Rio since 1991, and gets a massive vote from this the most evangelical of Brazil’s cities. During the impeachment he gained notoriety for [incendiary statements](https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/especial/noticias/as-frases-polemicas-de-jair-bolsonaro/), quips and slogans which would make even the most fervent Tea Party supporter blush. He seems to have the instinct of a person creating their own personality cult, by putting himself physically centre stage and advocating the free circulation of weaponry as a response to the country’s appalling homicide rate: his hostility to homosexuality and declared contempt for blacks are expressed in terms of what he would himself do if one of his sons (both elected politicians in Rio) were to become one of the former or marry one of the latter. Not only did he get away with such things – they have promoted him to the point where he stands to gain about a quarter of the votes in the first round of the Presidential election on October 7th – and many of those voters must themselves be dark-skinned. The knife attack which almost killed him on September 7th, while he was being carried on the shoulders of supporters, followed by pictures of him in his hospital bed, have further accentuated the central role of his physical persona.

Bolsonaro’s eventful biography can be found [elsewhere](https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/especial/noticias/tudo-o-que-voce-sempre-quis-saber-sobre-bolsonaro-mas-tinha-medo-de-perguntar/). As in other cases we know, his misdeeds, failings and outrageous or near-criminal behaviour as an Army officer and as a politician, do nothing to hold him back; it takes a particular kind of personality for which there is no training or rehearsing to create a cult and a mystique: a very few people just ‘have it’. In this case we see some extra ingredients: the appeal to evangelicals supported by a personal visit to Israel where a fellow Congressman/pastor baptized him by full immersion in the river Jordan (like thousands of other Brazilians), goes with his plan to move Brazil’s Embassy to Jerusalem. His number on the ballot paper is 17, so I have seen an exalted group of people send him a video reciting a long series of Biblical ‘chapter 17, verse 17’ verses from Exodus, Chronicles, Revelation, Isaiah etc. Their millenarianism feeds his cult and their belief that if he loses the election that will be proof that it has been fixed.