

Brazilian Democracy Is at a Stalemate

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With Jair Bolsonaro at the helm, Brazil's democracy is in crisis. Veteran of the Brazilian left and the armed struggle against the dictatorship, and a principal strategist of the Workers' Party, José "Zé" Dirceu spoke to Jacobin about the need for a broad front coalition to defeat Bolsonarismo.

José "Zé" Dirceu de Oliveira e Silva, born in Passa Quatro in the state of Minas Gerais, has been one of the leading political figures in Brazilian history for at least four decades. A left-wing revolutionary and student leader in his youth, he fled to Cuba under the dictatorship, later returning to form the Workers' Party (PT) and eventually served as chief of staff under Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Dirceu remains a polarizing figure in Brazilian politics — friends and foes alike know him as the "Iron Man."

At an early age, Dirceu joined the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB).

Inspired by the Cuban Revolution and the Vietnamese anti-imperialist struggle, he soon found himself in the dissident wing of the party calling for more direct confrontation with the military dictatorship. It was there he met communist dissidents like legendary guerilla fighter [Carlos Marighella](#) and Olavo de Carvalho, today known as the ideologue behind Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power.

Throughout the early 1970s, Dirceu sought to organize the armed resistance to the dictatorship, undertaking military training in Cuba. After being pushed back into exile after repression against dissidents intensified, he returned to Brazil in 1975 and underwent plastic surgery to assume a new identity. He lived underground until 1979, and joined the founding line of the PT, along with trade unionists, intellectuals, activists, social movements, and left-wing ecclesiastical groups associated with liberation theology.

As an elected member of the Constituent Assembly, Dirceu took an active part in drafting the country's progressive 1988 Constitution. He was one of the main architects behind the PT's transformation into a mass party and acted as a key electoral strategist in Lula's victory in the 2002 presidential elections. Although appointed chief of staff in Lula's first administration, his term would prove short-lived: ensnared in the famous 2005 "Mensalão Scandal," Dirceu was brought down by present-day Bolsonaro supporter Roberto Jefferson. Accused of vote-buying, he was convicted for bribery under an obscure and widely contested legal clause and was imprisoned until 2018. Dirceu's supporters argue that the proceedings were the opening gambit of the Right's use of "lawfare" — the same judicial tactic that would eventually lead to the parliamentary putsch against Dilma and the imprisonment of Lula.

A political survivor and living legend of the Brazilian left, the always-controversial Dirceu spoke with Jacobin Brasil editors Cauê Seignemartin Ameni and Hugo Albuquerque about past struggles and the political impasse in which the country finds itself.

CSAHA

You met Brazil's famous guerilla leader [Carlos Marighella](#) in the 1960s.

Together with him and many others you adopted a strategy of armed confrontation with the dictatorship — despite the opposition of large parts of the organized left. What did it mean to take up that position, and what does the figure of Marighella mean today?

JD

Marighella is a historic fighter for the rights of the Brazilian people and a defender of Brazilian sovereignty. He comes from a black, Bahian, and Northeastern background, emerging from the national struggles against the Getúlio Vargas dictatorship that began in the 1930s.

Just imagine: I was young — less than twenty years old — when I met Marighella, who by that time in the '60s was an icon and a legend. Marighella emerged from a particular tradition within the Brazilian Communist Party that I also identified with.

I joined the Communist Party of Brazil (PCB) in 1965, but I shared with others an understanding of the 1964 coup that put us at odds with the Party Central Committee. In our understanding, the dictatorship would lead to a restructuring of Brazilian capitalism. The coup was not just a military putsch against democratic freedoms; it was also a break with a certain nationalist line that supported development and industrialization.

When Marighella began to openly oppose the decisions of the PCB, he was looking at the Cuban Revolution, which was a beacon for us as well. I was invited to a meeting where Marighella was outlining a strategic battle plan based on autonomous tactics. He insisted that “a revolutionary’s duty is to make revolution.” At that time he was reacting against the bureaucratization of the party and their inaction in the face of the dictatorship.

Marighella was assassinated in an ambush. I was in Cuba at the time, and the news hit hard. It was difficult to deal with his death, because he was the leader of the armed resistance against the dictatorship, the one who had created the first revolutionary group in São Paulo after breaking with the Party Central Committee and founding the National Liberation Action (ALN). We had our differences: his group defended “national liberation” whereas we insisted on a socialist strategy.

Although I was never affiliated with the ALN, I had done my military training in Cuba with the “Casa dos 28” which was part of that organization.

I remember Marighella as a patriot, as someone who defended the very same concept of sovereignty that today is under direct threat.

By the way, [General Augusto Heleno](#) (currently leading the call for an “auto-coup” within Bolsonaro’s government) was assistant to General Sylvio Frota during the dictatorship. Heleno and Frota — the hard-line anticommunist wing — attempted a coup in 1977 against the more moderate [Ernesto Geisel](#). That fraction of the military government attacked Geisel as a “communist” because he attempted to distance himself from the United States. This part of the military now finds expression through Bolsonaro’s government. The Brazilian military has for a long time wanted to place itself under North American hegemony. In a word, Marighella the patriot and defender of sovereignty remains a relevant figure today.

CSAHA

General Augusto Heleno is a central figure in the Bolsonaro administration. It’s hard to understand why the PT deployed him and others during the UN’s 2004 MINUSTAH operation in Haiti. The PT didn’t even do anything when the [American media](#) criticized Heleno for massacring community leaders in Haitian shantytowns. Heleno and other military generals, like current vice president Hamilton Mourão, reemerged on the political scene in that period and began to build relations with the United States, which for its part was interested in preventing Haiti, under [Jean-Bertrand Aristide](#), from forming alliances with Venezuela and Cuba. Was it a mistake for the PT government to send troops to Haiti?

JD

In part, yes, but it was inevitable. You have to understand the correlation of forces, the historical conditions in which we took power. Among all the progressive governments at the time — in the electoral wave that ran from the late 1990s to early 2000s — we were the only

government without a majority in congress. The reasons for that have to do with the legacy of the dictatorship and the nature of Brazilian democracy.

The Ministry of Defense, which runs the daily operations of the armed forces in Brazil, is unable to regulate the promotion of generals. The different branches of the military control that process. In that sense, civil authority is not sovereign. Military authority is a historical feature of Brazil — there is a long history of the military in politics.

It's been like this since the beginning of the Republic in 1889, and the [1930 Revolution](#) was largely a civilian-military alliance. In 1932 in São Paulo, troops were marshaled in an attempt to lead a separatist movement against the provisional government of Getúlio Vargas. The year 1935 saw the revolt of the lieutenants, a movement led by the Communist Party that ended like most others: brutally crushed. And, of course, there was the 1937 coup. Led by then president Vargas, this was also a military putsch: General Pedro Aurélio de Góis Monteiro asked the drafter of the new constitution, Francisco Campos, to copy the Polish constitution of Józef Piłsudski.

I recall this history to remind us that between 1937 and 1945 there was a military dictatorship in Brazil: the protofascist “Estado Novo.” After World War II the military forced Vargas out — the Brazilian Expeditionary Force had returned from Europe with the blessing of the United States to launch a coup. The government of Eurico Gaspar Dutra, elected the following year, was openly pro-American. It drove the Communist Party underground and basically inaugurated the Cold War. The only reason we didn't send troops to Korea in 1953–54 was because there was sufficient popular, democratic opposition — although following the 1964 coup, Brazil would send troops to invade the Dominican Republic.

The military again attempted a coup in 1950, against Getúlio who by then had regained the presidency. There was a countercoup led by Marshal Henrique Teixeira Lott in 1955, when the military grew divided over the transition between governments. The military again sought to take power in 1961, to prevent [João Goulart](#) from assuming office. It was only when [Leonel Brizola](#) led an armed insurrection in southern

Brazil, with the police on his side, that the country mobilized against the coup and a parliamentary agreement was brokered.

The year 1964 marked the beginning of the coup led by the Superior War College and Castelo Branco. The military appointed five successive presidents and stayed in power until 1985. People in Brazil still say that there was no coup d'état or military rule. Clearly, that's not true. The Brazilian military may tolerate civil authority, but it will never completely accept it.

Today, the Brazilian armed forces are once again under the control of the [Southern Command](#) of the United States. Brazil's foreign policy is set by the US ambassador in the UN, the American representatives at the UNESCO and the FAO. The only institution in which Brazilian interests are not completely subservient is the World Trade Organization, where for now Brazilian industrial and agribusiness interests are still defended.

But you're right — we made a mistake. In the past, I have tried to draw attention to two things: the military command in the Amazons and in overseas missions. This is where alliances with the Americans have been closest. The same goes for prosecuting attorneys in corruption trials: Sérgio Moro and ministers of the high courts studied in the United States, where they became associated with US interests.

What we have today is a serious problem with the armed forces: General Eduardo Villas-Bôas praises Regina Duarte (former actress-turned-apologist for the dictatorship), and military commanders have issued an official document praising the 1964 coup. They should have been separated from their posts and forced to go before a disciplinary tribunal, as happened in Uruguay and Chile and in other democratic countries.

Is there any remaining doubt about where we are headed? Democracy is on life support. We already have an authoritarian government that is taking over the Federal Police, the Council for Financial Activities Control, the Federal Revenue Office, and the Public Prosecutor's Office. The Federal Police is basically working for Jair Bolsonaro.

We are in a state of national emergency, which is why we need a broad front politics to defeat Bolsonarismo. And that has nothing to do with the electoral contest in 2022. To the best of my abilities, we are going to build a left-wing front or a democratic center front — without the right-wing liberals.

CSAHA

The military as an institution plays a prominent political role in many Latin American countries, but in Brazil in particular the armed forces seems more like a meta-party. The enduring political power of the military seems to have been set down from the late 1970s, when President Ernesto Geisel and General Golbery do Couto e Silva backed off from the more extreme repression tactics of neighboring Argentina and tried to “relax” the dictatorship. What are the political priorities of the Brazilian military today?

JD

I do not see any kind of internal dissidence within the armed forces, but with time it will emerge. It is clear that the contradictions in society will reappear within the ranks of the military, even if they have become a separate caste over the last thirty years. Military corporativism has long been a growing phenomenon, but recently it has worsened: they benefitted enormously from the recent pension reform law, so that now there are no age limits for military officer retirement. The armed forces have the best schools, monetary support for education and other types of financial compensation, the best health care plans, houses, clubs — it’s a caste in the same way that the Chilean military is a caste, where the armed forces enjoy the profits of copper exports and support the ultraliberal politics set down by Pinochet.

But there will be contradictions within their ranks. The agribusiness sector wants a national development plan, because Brazil is completely dependent on foreign trade to obtain pesticides, foodstuffs, vaccines, medicine, and so on. The country never achieved the industrialization of the chemicals industry, and there was never a proper scientific and technological revolution. The country has massive potential — not just for heavy industry. It also has a state-of-the-art agroindustrial sector,

the capacity for food and energy sovereignty, an internal market, public banks, an industrial base, and technological capacity. The potential is there for the country to undergo a major developmental leap in the next twenty years.

But the world is entering a phase of deglobalization and the rise of regional and national interests. We are entering a different world. And the military is facing the question: What is the future of Brazil? Will it be a country, like the current one, that depends on raw material exports, where 50 percent of people lack basic sanitation services, and 15 million apartments or homes are lacking? This is a country where a third of all people lack basic goods, and 12.5 million live in extreme poverty; 50 million people are living below the poverty line.

Brazil's elites are not fit to run the country. How can you run a country when the tax rate is fixed at between R\$2,000–6,000 (US\$400–1,200), where someone earning R\$60,000 pays the same as someone earning R\$600,000? There is no tax on profits and capital gains, inheritance, or large fortunes; it is the working class who is paying taxes. And while the rest of the world is paying negative interest rates, public debt in Brazil is set at between 4 and 8 percent.

These interest rates are an appropriation of working-class wages, of the Brazilian majorities and small-business owners. Bolsonaro's minister of agriculture Tereza Cristina says that agribusiness cannot afford to pay 9 percent interest, but the working class is paying 50 percent interest on consumer goods.

It's clear that without breaking up concentrated income, wealth, and property, Brazil has no way forward. But the liberal opposition to Bolsonaro is not interested in that discussion. They talk about inequality, but none of them are willing to discuss tax reform or adjusting interest rates. Brazil needs a new national program because today it's the pandemic, tomorrow it will be global warming, squalor, and poverty. The world is headed toward tragedy.

CSAHA

Do you think with the current pandemic that Latin American

governments are headed for a “Malvinas” situation in which repressive regimes face imminent collapse?

JD

The type of neoliberalism that Finance Minister Paulo Guedes wants to do in Brazil was implemented in Argentina by Mauricio Macri, by Pinochet in Chile, and so on. The people in Chile and Ecuador rose up in protests. In Colombia the military chose not to intervene, and the streets were overrun with protesters for four weeks. In Bolivia, there was a coup, and the old regime has been restored.

In Bolivia, we’re back where we were before: the indigenous-majority population is completely ignored, as are other minorities. Similarly, Brazil’s education minister, Abraham Weintraub, now declares that “there is only one people.” If that sounds familiar, it’s because we’ve heard that kind of talk before — it’s Nazism! There are no whites and blacks, no women and men, no rich and poor, no Christians, no worshippers of Umbanda, agnostics, or atheists.

It’s against this background that the military has come to a crossroads, and they have an appointment with Brazilian history. Will they look after their own interests and align with the United States’ and Brazil’s predatory elites, or will they take sides with the people?

CSAHA

Former Communist Olavo de Carvalho is an important ideologue for the military. He also has traction with the State Prosecutor’s office, the Federal Police, and the courts. Trotsky once wrote in *Fascism: What It Is and How to Fight It* that Mussolini — also a former socialist — was one of the principal ideologues of Nazi fascism. Olavo seems to aspire to be a kind of Brazilian Mussolini. He claims to have met you and says you are the PT’s own Gramsci. How do we understand what Olavo has become?

JD

I met Olavo de Carvalho in the 1960s in the Casa do Estudante, where we held meetings. I was secretary of propaganda for the dissident wing

of the Communist Party. The sense I had then was that Olavo de Carvalho lacked charisma and had little leadership potential. He was not at all intellectual. He was what we might today call a yuppie. I didn't think of him then as a communist.

He accuses me of having elaborated a plan to take power based on a peculiar reading of Gramsci. Obviously, the PT is a collaborative project and a pluralist one with many political currents — albeit less so today. It is also a party of intellectuals and policy-makers, historians, and philosophers. Olívio Dutra always said that the PT was like an orchestra.

Olavo de Carvalho is the architect of a far-right ideology that is basically protofascist, but he has no strategy for taking power. He was embraced as an ideologue that could animate Bolsonaro's adventurism — and that "adventure" is now costing Brazil dearly. The Brazilian elite got into bed with the enemy in order to combat the Left and the PT, but now they're enemies again. The elite are trying to broker a divorce settlement, but it's not easy because Bolsonaro wants not only to suppress the Left, but also his former allies, beginning with Rede Globo, Folha de São Paulo, and the Social Democracy Party. For Bolsonaro, these different groups are all "communists."

I believe that Olavo de Carvalho has assumed the prominence he has due to the absolute intellectual poverty of Bolsonaro, the military, and the Brazilian elites. If you look at what the Partido Novo (a neoliberal Third Way party) is proposing, this has already failed everywhere. Have you seen what has happened in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru? The Latin American people do not accept neoliberalism. The same goes for Brazil.

Even if we [the PT] made some errors, I think you have to go back to the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso to understand the present: fixed exchange rates, fire sales of public assets, raising taxes, unemployment, two bailouts from the IMF. They like to blame us for this national tragedy, but that's not the full story. Currently, it is the Social Democratic Party that is leading the way with labor reform and pension reform laws, and they stand behind the neoliberal projects of Finance

Minister Paulo Guedes. It doesn't do any good to blame Bolsonaro's former party, the PSL [Social Liberal Party], for the rise of the extreme right and everything that is happening in the country.

In any case, the time has come to band together to throw Bolsonaro out of power.

CSAHA

The PT was in part an outgrowth of the workers' movement of the late 1970s. It was also formed by figures like yourself, who had come from the armed struggle and were looking to form a mass left-wing party. Can that spirit of the late 1970s teach the present-day PT anything?

JD

Yes, just as we did in the 1970s, the challenge is to return to the people and the places where they live. Where are we today when a mother sees her son struggling with drugs? The evangelical church is there to send them to a clinic. Where are we when the head of a household goes unemployed? The evangelical church welcomes them with open arms. The evangelicals are there when a family is going through separation to offer couples therapy. When there's a fire or a flood, where are we with our solidarity campaigns? These are the questions we need to be posing. Where are the trade unions and the parties of the Left in these situations?

Where we are present is in institutional struggles, in state governments, and this is important, because it means we have a historically consolidated social base. This was expressed in 2018, despite all they did to try to censor us politically.

They took Dilma Rousseff down and then they went after Lula, to imprison him and make him ineligible for office. If Lula had been free, he would have got Fernando Haddad elected. But even if he wasn't free, if the PDT [Democratic Labour Party], Ciro Gomes, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and the PSDB [Brazilian Social Democracy Party], Rodrigo Maia, and others had supported Haddad in the runoff election, this might have been enough to defeat Bolsonaro.

We need to wage political and social struggle in the places where people live, but also on the social networks: we need to offer courses, legal counsel, and culture. We're clearly on the side of the people in the institutional struggle, in the courts, parliament, and state government. This is evident by the contrast between PT-led state governments in the country's Northeast and Bolsonaro's government.

The different parts of the Left are starting to reorganize, even if, for the time being, it is mostly online activity. Since 2008 this has been the main instrument for political life.

In 2018 we were caught off guard by these historical changes taking place online. In a similar way, we were not paying enough attention to shifts in the world of labor: today the reality of the Brazilian working class is one of small and medium businesses, individual micro-entrepreneurs, and, in virtually every neighborhood, informal workers.

CSAHA

As capital has gone on the offensive against labor in the last decades, an important part of its strategy has been to rebrand workers as entrepreneurs — to make them self-identify as capitalists.

JD

The Brazilian economy is increasingly integrated into the world economy as a provider of services and a producer for major conglomerates. Apart from the exploitation of interest rates, there is the exploitation based on workers enjoying progressively less of the wealth they create. But here there's a problem: there's insufficient consumption and demand, as in Europe. Wealth concentration and precarity rise together, as vast layers of the working class see their wages fall.

In the 1970s, Brazilian capitalism generated mass poverty in the urban centers, but it also created the industrial working class, which to this day enjoys wages five or ten times greater than that of services. When we talk today of a hundred thousand new unemployed in industry, what we are really saying is that there are another million unemployed in services and another five hundred thousand in retail.

What we have then is a contradiction, because there is no way for the economy to grow with such an intense concentration of income, and the technological revolution will actually make this even worse. Without a basic minimum wage structure or universal social services, there is no leisure activity, no culture, no tourism. A plan for employment needs to be thinking about reducing the workday to four hours, but how do we have that conversation with so many unemployed?

CSAHA

With Sérgio Moro's departure from the Bolsonaro administration, it seems clear the center right is on a collision course with Bolsonaro. They are capable of initiating impeachment proceedings or outright removing his entire administration. Given how difficult it is to hold large demonstrations during the pandemic, what is the best strategy for uniting the center right and left to defeat Bolsonaro?

JD

If you look at surveys, the vast majority of business owners are against the lockdown, even if they are in favor of social distancing. But how do women, young people, the undereducated, and low-wage earners feel about it? Women and youth are the major opposition to Bolsonaro — on the question of freedom. It is not material issues, not unemployment, not even necessarily his authoritarian nature driving their opposition. It's Bolsonaro's obscurantist attitude and the direct threat he poses to women's rights and the freedom of the youth.

Meanwhile, Bolsonaro no longer has support from the country's "superstructure," not even the parties. His base of support is in the judicial branch, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Federal Police, the Military Police, the military top brass, security corporations, militias, and the evangelical groups. He'll end up with 20 percent support, but 65 percent of the country will be opposed to his government and in favor of impeachment.

The first problem here is the risk of military reaction, should there be impeachment. The second is that Bolsonaro's group will not accept impeachment and go on the offensive, potentially leading to civil war —

unless, of course, these recent shows of force that Bolsonaro is putting on are a complete bluff, with his talk of arming the people and so on.

Bolsonaro's rallies are drawing fewer and fewer people. The majority of the middle class is either progressive in their politics, in support of Moro, or cohering into an anti-Bolsonaro conservative position. Where, then, is Bolsonaro going to drum up support for a coup? From the armed forces, because neither the judiciary nor the parliament will stand with him. He's appealing to the "Centrão" parties in Congress, but as I've noted elsewhere, that option is undermined by his attack on state governors.

The country has thus reached a stalemate: the liberal opposition doesn't have the courage to take the initiative. They are left waiting for a cue from ultra-neoliberal finance minister Guedes, a figure from the current administration that the center right would like to hold on to. And they are waiting for a sign from Vice President (General) Mourão and the armed forces to reach out and invite them to take part in a transition from above, like what happened in 1985 or later with Fernando Collor de Mello [president from 1990–92].

Bolsonaro has no way of gaining institutional approval for the type of legislation that would allow him to transform his rule into a one-man authoritarian regime — not without a coup. He tried ruling by decree, but the Supreme Court wouldn't let him. Then he tried to censor the press, and again the Supreme Court frustrated those efforts. He tried to violate university autonomy, he pushed the "Nonpartisan School Law" and other measures, and again the Supreme Court shot him down.

So while we have reached a stalemate, that too has its limits. You can see it happening as columnists on TV and the newspapers begin to call for impeachment. Some say Bolsonaro will survive and stay competitive for the 2022 presidential elections, but that seems unlikely. Considering the pandemic, the economic crisis, the political conflicts that will soon be unfolding, to think that the pandemic will end and Bolsonaro's side can go back to pursuing their agenda, and without an upturn in political and social struggle, you would have to be from another planet.

As for the liberals of the center right, their idea has long been that

workers will rush to embrace the idea of “fewer rights and more jobs.” This is clearly a fairy tale. Human beings won’t accept slavery and super-exploitation — look at platform workers and how they’ve started to fight back.

The problem for the Left is this: Where are we while they are fighting? Are we fighting alongside them? Did we ever instruct them on their labor rights, put on shows in support of their cause, or provide them with legal assistance? No! And then we go and say that workers don’t fight back? Workers are actually struggling right now, as we speak, the same way women spontaneously rose up against hunger in the neighborhoods of the major urban areas in the 1970s. Brazilian history was altered decisively when workers joined in the struggle against the dictatorship.

Meanwhile, if the liberal opposition were to take the “nuclear option” and make an appeal to the military, then what we will have is a cold war with Bolsonaro. But Bolsonaro won’t let that happen and neither will the country at large. Sooner or later, something will have to give.