



Electoral Authoritarianism- Elective Dictatorship

Javier López

Jair Bolsonaro will be President of Brazil. A homophobic soldier with authoritarian excesses, who has scorned democratic mechanisms and threatened his political rivals, will lead the greatest regional power in Latin America that is now a global giant. In fact, his profile, a caricature of a third-rate dictator, would be comical if it weren't for the fact that he amassed more than 50m votes. His election, with incalculable consequences, is the latest in a long line highlighting the battered fragility of democracy. What is happening to our societies when voters decide to put their destiny in the hands of eccentric authoritarians, while the influence of the far-right multiplies election after election all over the planet?

Democracies are like Tolstoyan families: the happy ones resemble each other, yet each is unhappy in its own way. In Brazil it was not the losers of globalisation or the countryside versus urban elites that handed victory to Bolsonaro. It was the white middle class and big cities who threw their support behind this shady character. This far-right-winger built an electoral alliance that gave answers to diverse sectors of the country. He promised family values to evangelists, hard-line tactics to the military and police, economic orthodoxy to the markets and the establishment, a break with traditional politics to those fed-up with corruption and rivers of hatred towards the Workers' Party (PT) which Fernando Haddad could not counter. That the impulse of 'anti-PT-ism' has cemented electoral victory makes his rise to power even bloodier. The PT, a reference for the left, a force capable of bringing tens of millions of workers out of poverty, led by a global icon, the charismatic Lula Da Silva: beaten by a candidate who defends the previous military dictatorship. But Brazil has been just the latest appointment with these characteristics. From Donald Trump in the US to Narendra Modi in India or Rodrigo Duterte in Philippines, Bolsanaro's real alter-ego, they form a mosaic of a new electoral authoritarianism. Strong men who have become vehicles for widespread resentment, rage and weariness. The answer that many voters are finding for changes, in their eyes bewildering changes, facing their societies: digitalisation of the economy and communication, rise of diversity, disappearance of traditional spaces of socialisation or the egalitarian transformation of gender roles. We're dealing with abrupt and profound changes that are behind an anxiety that propels election behaviour in people who approach ballot papers like those applying the handbrake.

An End To Rational Thought

We are experiencing an emerging blackout of rational thinking. Uncertainty provokes a search for strong anchoring that acts as a mirage. Facing liquid modernity, people cry out for solid references and, facing vulnerability in a risk society, there is a demand for security. It's a type of reactive pendulum of which far-right charlatans and sorcerers wrapped up in the cloak of the nation take full advantage. Because it's precisely the nation which is the only scaffolding that seems to be left standing. After the death of God in the 19th century, ideologies at the end of the 20th and progress at the end of the 21st, it is the old and always seductive idea of nation which seems ready to act as our collective compass. A nationalism that takes full advantage of our instinct for roots, that protects the community in an accelerated, globalised world. This is the backlash to globalisation: a shout, an appeal to more animal instincts, a call for the recovery of control and denunciation of economic abandonment. A desperate and harmful cry with causes that deserve to be answered by presenting a horizon of hope and concrete solutions.

It is at this crossroads, between national democracy and a global system, where electoral authoritarianism finds a rich vein of contradictions to

digestion that national globalisation are obvious: the political power from the instruments for dealing with imposed by interdependence. power, under a system of with a right to vote that has prepared to sacrifice freedom control; to achieve this, who

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the one who is the very incarnation of the will of the people? That's how this game of mirrors works. Fed up with what they perceive as an impotent deliberation, they've decided to vote for the personification of this decision.

At the same time, these incarnations of "national determination" delight in this era of nostalgia. The fatigue of optimism has given way to a search for the past as a positive narrative, engendering a toxic relationship with the future that has stopped tomorrow from being a desirable destination for many people and thereby altering one of modernity's favourite sons: progress. There are many causes behind this phenomenon, but we can find in the current intolerable levels of inequality the reasons for the breakup of multiple elements of confidence in our societies: confidence in institutions, confidence in our fellow citizens or confidence in the future.

Social Media Deconstruction

To find other reasons for the rise of the far-right we should look towards profound behavioural changes in the sphere of communications. Social networks have become a factor in the deconstruction of public debate. Without doubt they have

permitted individual empowerment, but they've also modified the way public opinion is gradually built. Working as self-referential tribal echo chambers, they are a giant tool at the service of confirmation bias, and feed polarisation, bypassing editorial control and the hierarchy of information intermediaries. They are machines that, misused, can become weapons of mass distraction; they empower us and make us easier to manipulate: a contradiction we still don't know how to resolve.

But it's not just something to do with social networks per se. We live in a time of massive audio-visual consumption and message saturation, a phenomenon fed by mobile devices, wreaking havoc on our attention span. Well, this language and its codes have also colonised politics. The narration time of "stories", as if we were dealing with a HBO series. And it is a time when political histrionics and thuggish behaviour are more efficient at grabbing our attention, as if we were watching a reality show. The strong men take advantage of the irresistible attraction of the villain in a good story. This is also the effect of politics as spectacle. In a limitless competition to capture our attention, submitted to a constant bombardment of inputs, messages and signs, disruption has its reward. The prize is media coverage, attention and votes. Nothing is true and everything is possible: it's no surprise that it was a TV producer, Peter Pomerantsev, who sensed this logic by referring to the absurd heart of the new Russia. Entertainment and authoritarianism: the two sides of the new radical right.

Europe must learn to face the future under this new international political scenario. A scenario where democracy is no longer a source of universal authority, but is seen as a strategic weakness. Our continent is stalked by the same monsters roaming the planet who now have free reign in Rome, Budapest and Warsaw. Whereas the ideals of the European Union represent the quintessence of all that this new authoritarianism wishes to destroy: a space of cosmopolitan cooperation based on deliberation and rules.

Europe should learn from its errors and take note of this popular unease if it doesn't want to be devoured by its voters. To do so, measures must be taken, especially via a true agenda of social rebalancing in the form of redistribution, to be seen as a protective armour of security for citizens. And it will need to make its institutions more robust, as their checks and balances are what protect us from the siren calls that could end up endangering our democracies. This will be the political battle of the century: the defence of democracy. And it could have Europe as its last great bastion.

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- [Collapsed Progressivism in Iberian America, Brazil's case](#)
- [Brazil goes back to an oligarchic past](#)
- [Brazil, in perfect harmony with TLWNSI's concept](#)

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