

# Why is Jair Bolsonaro so popular?

Jean-Jacques Kourliandsky



**On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, a Brazilian pollster institute revealed a result that no one saw coming. President Jair Bolsonaro would have never been so popular. The Datafolha / Folha de São Paulo survey, that was carried out on August 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> is absolute and avowed. In one month, Jair Bolsonaro went from 32% to 37% in favorable opinions. He hasn't been this high in the polls since his election in 2018.**

A similar situation prevails regarding the percentage of people that believe the chief of state when he speaks. 57% of the Brazilians say they trust Jair Bolsonaro, which is five points higher than at the end of June. The result is – to the least – unexpected for those that tend to read Brazil with democratic and rational glasses. Indeed, it is also true that the country is sinking everyday more in the coronavirus crisis. The successive changes of health ministers testify to a serious governmental refusal of assistance of the Brazilian population. This same refusal is claimed by the president himself, for whom death is an inevitable human fatality.

The threshold of 100.000 deaths was crossed in August. Indeed, as a collateral effect of the pandemic, the economy slowed down. The fall in GDP will be considerable this year, with the same situation regarding the employment rate. The Amazon rainforest is continuously being ravaged. With all this happening and despite the fact that Bolsonaro had made of the fight against corruption his electoral “warhorse”,

behind the image, there are ongoing legal proceedings against the president's family. For all these reasons, Jair Bolsonaro had given the impression that he was in serious trouble, in a way similar to his American mentor, Donald Trump, and for the same reasons. Their denial of the ongoing health situation, the priority they gave to the economy despite the circumstances, their frivolity in managing the state's affairs, their "big gun" style... all these, were thought to bring them popular shame.

But those that thought that President Jair Bolsonaro would be facing troubles were proved wrong. Despite the circumstances, opinion surveys for the last month indicate that Bolsonaro is actually doing very well: people approve of him and they seem to be happy with the way he dealt with the issue generated by covid-19. Clearly, the situation is hard to understand.

That said, who is it really in Brazil that sees in Jair Bolsonaro the worst president since the return of democracy in 1985? Who are those who want to remove Jair Bolsonaro from power? The polls tell us that these people can be found among two collectives, both black people and the wealthiest categories of the population. It is also true that the mainstream newspapers, the same that were mobilized three years ago against former Presidents Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff and the "Partido dos Trabalhadores" (The Worker's Party), have not been as critical with Bolsonaro. On the other hand, judges, who are central elements of this privileged category of the population, multiply the accusations and convictions of people close to the president.

That said, in Brazil like in other countries, wealthy people represent a minority, which leads to an unexpected possibility: the fact that Bolsonaro would be able to rely on the votes of the poor. Many people on the Brazilian left claimed first that the polls favorable to Bolsonaro were tools of propaganda and disinformation. But the facts are the facts. This is why everybody is trying to find their own explanation for what is happening. On the left and on the right, the quest for firewalls is open.

Nevertheless, there exists a consensus on the fact that the most helpless do feel grateful towards the president. For them, eating comes before the prevention of covid-19. The emergency grant of 600 "reais" (just over one hundred dollars) per family that had been approved by the parliament in March and distributed by state services, probably had had a decisive impact there. This aid reaches about 66 million people, in fact 126 million people if we include their relatives (officially counting). And the amount of this aid is even higher than the "Family Grant" that the helpless benefit from.

Brazil is going through a paradox. Jair Bolsonaro was indeed opposed to these measures. They were adopted though by decision of the Parliament. As a result, the most liberal and the least social chief of State that Brazil has ever known ends up being so far the President who will succeed in reducing poverty in the most radical way.

Bolsonaro has taken care of his image as the “savior” of the nation. He stood by a “religious style” that he had developed during his electoral campaign, and this same image was consolidated thanks to the support granted to him by Pentecostal Evangelists and Charismatic Catholics. As a result, receivers of these aids see in Bolsonaro an effective Donor, the picture of Jesus giving out bread. Numbers speak by themselves. The North-East region, known for its extreme poverty, has drastically reduced the refusal rate of Bolsonaro, shifting from 52% to 35% for the period between the end of June and mid-August 2020. And, at a national level, numbers have also dropped from 44% to 31% for the poorest. This situation generates indignation and uncomfortable feelings on the left side of the political spectrum. It is indeed thanks to the left-wing parties that this aid was increased and approved last March by the Brazilian parliament against the advice of the president. But this situation also raises another important problem, especially for the leaders of progressive formations. Despite their intense campaign through sending “tweets” of indignation and telephone messages, the fact is that something has been broken when it comes to their relations with “the poor”.

End of July 2020, Bolsonaro’s tour in the traditional leftist strongholds of the North-Eastern provinces ended up being very successful. That poor region of Brazil benefited a lot from emergency programs, be it State aids, or under the form of aids voted by deputies and senators of all political tendencies. But at the end of the day, it is the President that ends up being seen as a savior. Representations speak for themselves. Like Saint George, he traveled the region of Piauí by horse, wearing a “cangaçeiro” hat (the name given to the bandits of the poor regions of the North-East, which appeared in the XIX century).

Not long ago, deputies and senators that disagreed with Bolsonaro’s way of handling the coronavirus crisis stood ready to vote his dismissal. However, they are now practicing the silence of approval. At the same time, by stopping his attacks against parliamentarians, Jair Bolsonaro also ended up short cutting their animosity. He even succeeded in calming down the current most popular political trend, « Centrão ».

Other pollsters, such as the Parana Institute for the Veja Review, tried to draw lessons from the current situation ahead of the 2022 presidential election date. Their conclusions have still to be taken with a pinch of salt, especially since we yet disown who will be the candidate running against Jair Bolsonaro. But so far, it looks like Jair Bolsonaro would defeat over the ex-judge Sergio Moro (independent right); João Doria, current governor of Saint-Paul-PSDB party (center right); Fernando Haddad, PT candidate in 2018; Ciro Gomes, ex-governor of Ceara-PDT (center); Luciano Huck, center-right independent; and even the former President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva from the PT.

Given the potential electoral profitability of the emergency aid, Jair Bolsonaro is considering keeping it under the form of what would become a “Revenue Brazil”, even though it would imply derogating from the law that was adopted under the rule

of former President Michel Temer, that blocks public spending for a total of twenty years. At least we have been warned.

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