

Democracy in Danger S2E3 The Bane of Brazil

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:04] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:12] Today, we'd like to turn our attention beyond the United States. Many countries around the world have seen authoritarian populists of the Donald Trump type come to power in recent years. And we're going to explore the impact of one of those leaders today in depth. President, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil.

Media [00:00:30] ...The far right candidate Jair Bolsonaro has won Brazil's presidential race.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:37] Yeah, Jair Bolsonaro is in a lot of ways the kind of, you know, platonic ideal of the right wing populist. He spent his early life in the Brazilian army. He still maintains an outspoken affinity for the military dictatorship that ran Brazil for two decades from the 60s through the 80s.

Jair Bolsonaro translator [00:00:56] "It works. I'm in favor of torture. You know that. And the people are in favor of it, too."

Will Hitchcock [00:01:01] He's an ardent anti leftist. He's an outspoken homophobe.

Jair Bolsonaro translator [00:01:08] "So your son starts to act a little gay, give him the whip. That'll change his behavior, right."

Will Hitchcock [00:01:13] His politics, his rhetoric is full of racist and sexist slurs.

Jair Bolsonaro translator [00:01:20] "The black people there don't do anything. I don't even think they're good for procreation anymore."

Will Hitchcock [00:01:25] And on top of that, he embraces the politics of denialism. He denies unpleasant facts as conspiracies made up to hurt him.

Media [00:01:33] There is no denying a coronavirus is ravaging Brazil. President Jair Bolsonaro, who sneered at the threat from the start, said this about the rising toll. 'So what? I'm sorry, what do you want me to do?' Instead, local officials were left to implement Lockdown's Brazil's crowded poor neighborhoods or favelas are fertile breeding grounds. Here disinfecting is often do it yourself.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:59] Hey, wait a minute. That sounds kind of familiar!

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:02:02] It does. And with similar results. You know, in Brazil, as in the United States, the impact of this kind of war on truth has been deeply harmful, not only to the prospects and functioning of democracy, but you know, to have it happen during a global pandemic has been deadly. In Brazil, more than eight million people have fallen ill from covid-19 and hundreds of thousands have died. And yet Bolsonaro touts ineffective

drugs. He mocks social distancing, saying he generally derides the threat of the virus, even as so many of his own supporters are dying.

Jair Bolsonaro translator [00:02:54] "It's all pandemic now. Enough of that stuff. I regret the dead. I do. We're all going to die one day. Everybody dies."

Will Hitchcock [00:03:11] Yes, Siva, Brazil sounds like a very troubled country, and it's facing a lot of the same problems we ourselves confront in the United States. Well, to help us gain greater insight into the fate of democracy in South America's largest country, we've invited our colleague here at the University of Virginia, David Nemer, to join us. David, as an assistant professor of media studies and a native of Brazil, and he's written widely about Brazilian politics, society and technology. David, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

David Nemer [00:03:41] Hi, Will. Hi, Siva. It's a pleasure to be here.

Will Hitchcock [00:03:44] Before we get into the contemporary scene, take us back in time a little bit. Now, if I recall it right from the 60s into the mid 80s, Brazil was ruled by a really brutal military dictatorship and it was known for censorship and worse, torture and exile of opponents. Democracy came back in the mid 80s and then in the early twenty first century, Brazil was governed for more than a decade by the leftist Workers Party, and that was led first by Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, known widely as Lula. He became president and then he was followed by his protege, Dilma Rousseff, who was ultimately impeached. And that then opened the door to the rise of an extreme conservative Jair Bolsonaro. So it seems like Brazil has rocked back and forth. Tell us a little bit about these big pendulum swings. What does it say about the nature of Brazilian politics in the last few decades?

David Nemer [00:04:40] Yes, well, your question is very interesting, because Brazil has something called the curse of the 30 years, which seems that every 30 years this fascist authoritarian figure seems to emerge. Ever since 1930 when Getulio Vargas was the first populist that took over the presidency. And 30 years later, we have Janio Quadros and then from Janio Quadros, he resigned, which paved the way for the military dictatorship, which was a coup sponsored by the United States. Later in 1990, Fernando Collor came up as this new face, Brazilian politics. He was a neoliberal figure that promised to promote the economy and promised to bring good morals back to society. He was impeached later. He was the first president to be impeached. He actually wasn't officially removed. He resigned before the Senate removed him, but he was the first one to be impeached by the House. And then later, 30 years later, we have Bolsonaro. And this is a question that historians don't have the answer. The hunch is that there's something in the institutions or something embedded in society that allowed these figures to come back up. Brazil, although it's known for a carnival and a very open society, it is actually a very conservative society based on Catholic teachings. Now the evangelicals are growing exponentially. So although we tend to sell this image of being very progressive and very open, we're very conservative socially. And so every time the society feels threatened by a government that seems to promote sort of inclusion and diversity, then they react and elect these figures.

Will Hitchcock [00:06:28] So, David, back in 2016, the Olympics were held in Brazil and this process of getting the Olympics and then developing the infrastructure triggered a series of economic, financial political scandals and crises, didn't it? Was this a part of the story of Bolsonaro's rise?

David Nemer [00:06:49] It was. It was. And it can be traced back to 2013 when actually Brazil was getting ready not only to host the Olympic Games, but also the World Cup in

2014. While Brazil was facing one of the biggest crises of its history, with 13 percent unemployment and inflation out of control, then the people were watching the government spending billions of dollars to build what they call the FIFA standard stadiums. And at the same time, they were not seeing the FIFA standard services in public hospitals, public schools, and that really made them frustrated. And what triggered the 2013 June Journeys was the increase of fares in public transportation in different cities in Brazil. It was started by student groups. And from that, it sparked all other manifestations and protests across the country. We had people from the left and the right. It was a non-partisan manifestations and protests asking for a better country, for better services. And then in 2014, because there was no leadership in those June Journeys, then the neo-right or the far right groups took over these protests and they took advantage of the sense of change that people had built and were really imposing this agenda that truly promoted Bolsonaro.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:08:13] Now, you know, you and I both study media, we study social media specifically. When you look at Brazil's media system and you do see this really vibrant, creative, what you might call mainstream system with a satellite news station that everyone seems to watch and then so much entertainment that sold around the world, but then boiling up out of everyone's phones you have WhatsApp, you have Facebook, you have Twitter. You have Discord - whatever Bolsonaro's son is telling people to use lately. Right. So can you walk us through what changed in the Brazilian media ecosystem in the past 10 years? And how much can we attribute the Bolsonaro effect to the WhatsApp and Facebook effect?

David Nemer [00:08:59] Yes, this is a very interesting question, because now there seems to be a war between Bolsonaro and Globo, which is the largest media enterprise in Brazil. Pretty much owning the media attention from everybody in the country. They are famous for their telenovelas, for their shows, for even their journalism. And they've always reigned in the country since the dictatorship. So because Globo has always been the number one TV station, then the other TV stations have always tried to develop programs and shows that catch the population's attention. And one of the outcomes of such approach is that these TV channels started doing some sensationalist shows and Bolsonaro became the number one guess for them. Bolsonaro was a congressman for 30 years, never really did anything. He only proposed a couple of bills, only two actually moved on. But he was an interesting character for these programs because he would say the most outrageous things, things like when he had a daughter was because he wasn't good in bed, or that if his son will come out as gay, he would punish the son. With that Bolsonaro got big and famous and he got a lot of stage time. So he didn't need to go to the official, you know, electoral TV time. And Brazil has always been a big fan of social media. And it was right on Facebook where personal attracted most people. That's where he could say his beliefs without having any TV kind of monitoring or script or telling him what to say or what was allowed what was not allowed. And there - that's where he got his biggest audiences. Interestingly, as we were going into the election period, Facebook was under a lot of pressure because there was a lot of pages promoting misinformation and disinformation in Brazil. And Brazil has very strict laws against defamation during election period, especially. Facebook ended up taking down several of these pages. And because Bolsonaro saw that happening, he was smart and had his people moving his campaign to WhatsApp. Ninety six percent of the people in Brazil that has access to a smartphone uses WhatsApp as their main mode of communication. And WhatsApp works as an encrypted app. So the only person who can read the message you send is actually the person that you send the message to. So there's no way that this the server or WhatsApp can access your message. So it was a perfect ecosystem that Bolsonaro found to promote his disinformation campaigns along with his election campaign and knowing that he wasn't

going to have time and Globo, because Globo was still the number one TV channel, he started a war against Globo. So the same way that Trump started a war against CNN. He did against Globo. He said that once he became president, he would cancel all of the ads, all of the governmental commercials on the TV channel, which actually happened. So, yeah, so they became one of Bolsonaro's enemies during the electoral campaign.

Will Hitchcock [00:12:16] David, two earlier guests on our show, Jason Stanley and Federico Finkelstein, recently wrote a piece in which they talked about Bolsonaro's failures in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, and they likened his actions and his inactions to genocide. And some people inside Brazil have actually echoed this charge. And they say the government's covid denialism is an act of genocide against the country's indigenous and black populations because they've been hit disproportionately hard by the virus. Now, invoking the term genocide is a pretty serious charge. And I wonder, do you think it's appropriate in this case?

David Nemer [00:12:57] I think it is, and I was one of those people echoing, calling this a genocide. Now Brazil has about two hundred thousand deaths to coronavirus. Recently in the Amazon region, we just had about fifty-one people die because they didn't have oxygen tanks available in the hospital, although the governor and the city mayor had personally requested that to the Ministry of Health and the request was never answered. And it's really interesting to see how Bolsonaro approaches the vaccine. For example, Brazil has been collaborating with a Chinese lab, Bolsonaro has started this cultural war against China. So he's been demonizing the vaccine ever since this partnership was happening. And two months ago, a person that was part of the trial passed away. And then Bolsonaro ran to his social media to celebrate that the CoronaVac caused the death of this person. But in fact, unfortunately, the person committed suicide. But then when just a few days ago, we had the first person getting vaccinated in the country and he just didn't mention a single word about vaccination. He was actually the first state leader that did not celebrate the start of vaccination. So it shows really well that he's not interested at all in saving his own people in Brazil, as you mentioned, black people and indigenous people have been hit disproportionately. They're the ones, unfortunately, at the bottom of the labor pyramid. So they're the essential workers and they're being more exposed and also living under conditions that doesn't really protect them from coronavirus. And nothing has been done to help them.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:14:43] You know, when we when we think about all this going on, a lot of Bolsonaro's support seems to come from evangelical Christians. Right. Who seem again in like with their support of Donald Trump, seem to be supporting a person who leads a life that they would be appalled by or maybe should be appalled by. And yet their growing support for Bolsonaro has certainly kept him viable. How do you explain this? Why is Bolsonaro popular among evangelical Christians in Brazil?

David Nemer [00:15:21] So I think it has to do with the social advancements that we had during Lula and Dilma Rousseff governments. So several measures were taken towards protecting the LGBT populations in Brazil. Brazil, unfortunately, ranks number one in killing members of the LGBTQ community. And Brazil's starting to have a conversation about abortion and it was moving forward. So that all bothered the evangelical camp. And they saw in Bolsonaro a way to set the social agenda way back. Bolsonaro, in fact, is Catholic. But it was a win/win situation there for both of them. So Bolsonaro saw them as a very loyal base. The evangelical saw in Bolsonaro a way to fulfill their backwards agenda. And one way to fulfill that agreement Bolsonaro selected a woman called Danares Alves as a minister of human rights and women's rights. And she's the biggest advocate against

abortion. Abortion in Brazil is illegal except for some cases like rape or if the pregnancy puts the life of the mother in danger. These abortions are legal in Brazil and she would even go against those laws to avoid any sort of abortion. She's also the one that keeps screaming about saving the children, which for you guys, I'm sure that rings a bell. She's also known to be one of the one of the people that represents the sort of Qanon conspiracy theory ideologies. And dark web also works really well with her.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:17:08] So Qanon is thriving in Brazil as well?

David Nemer [00:17:13] It is. Unfortunately, it is. And the approach there is different from here where it's coming from the bottom up. In Brazil, it's coming from the top to bottom. So people from Bolsonaro's first team are the ones bringing the Qanon conspiracies to the country and bringing that to the people. Not happening all the way around.

Will Hitchcock [00:17:35] David, when we look around at the world and see populist authoritarian leaders taking control, taking power. Of course, there's an element to this of technology, of conspiracy theories, of misuse of platforms like Facebook and Twitter and others. But there's also a very hard reality undergirding a lot of this, isn't there? And that's social and economic inequality. And we're all still trying to figure out to what extent, you know, grinding poverty and inequality is driving the appeal of authoritarian leaders and it and it probably varies a great deal from country to country. But you've done a lot of work in the slums, the urban slums of Brazil's cities. What do the people that you've talked to that you've that you've studied at the bottom of the economic ladder in Brazil, what do they say about their aspirations, their problems, their grievances and their politics? What do they want? What do they see when they look at a Bolsonaro, or a Trump, in a country that has some of the most extreme inequality in Latin America?

David Nemer [00:18:40] This is a very interesting question. Well, when you see that, you know, the economy is getting so bad that they are so afraid of even starving, then they try to hang on to anybody that promotes a salvation. Like Bolsonaro truly came as this savior that was going to save Brazil from poverty, corruption and organized crime. These people are also, for example, in the favelas. It's an area of risk, right, where shootouts happen all the time. It's occupied by drug cartels and Bolsonaro truly promoted this idea of law and order, that he was going to end crime in Brazil. So when you're fighting for your life, that your life becomes a matter of if you can or cannot walk out the door alive, then these people take this message seriously and that becomes their only hope. So in my research, it was interesting because the discourse in Brazil was that the people voting for Bolsonaro was a middle class white men, kind of like what happens here with Trump. But in my research, I said, no, that's not what is happening. And these WhatsApp groups identified people from every social class, you know, in every spectrum of even political ideology and even women, men and members of the LGBTQ. So although Bolsonaro was a self-declared homophobe, some of these people believe that while we may lose some rights here, but we will survive because he's going to promote law and order. So it's it's a very convoluted in the sense that some people were hanging on to some of the promises that Bolsonaro was selling. Bolsonaro was never sold as a complete package to most people, people who were hanging on to these things that he was promoting, the same thing that happened with Evangelical's, the same thing with people from the slums. There's an anthropologist in Brazil, Isabela Kalil. She says that the approach to Bolsonaro, it's kind of a kaleidoscope.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:20:44] So if voting for Bolsonaro was an expression of general frustration for so many people. What prospect is there for reassembling the sort of coalition

that can restore faith in government, restore faith in democracy, restore some sense of trust and optimism in Brazil? I mean, it wasn't so long ago that people in Brazil and beyond look at Brazil as a model for a post-colonial post dictatorship country with a vibrant, diverse economy, an extremely diverse population, teeming cities, developing infrastructure, you know, natural resources, a real standing in the world. And now it seems to have devolved to the point where no one believes in Brazil's future. What chance does Brazil have to reassemble either a political coalition that can topple Bolsonaro or even a center right movement that is not crazy or just general faith in the future?

David Nemer [00:21:54] Yes, in this this has been Bolsonaro's plan all along, which is to discredit every institution from the government. So what happened here with the insurrection- it happened in Brazil in June in the midst of the pandemic. His most loyal fans were gathering in Brasilia and he was promoting such agglomeration. These people were asking for the Supreme Court and Congress to be shut down. And Bolsonaro was, although he didn't say that publicly, he was promoting such message and his rhetoric would, you know, motivate people to make those calls. With the Amazon crisis, we have an institute, a government agency that monitors the Amazon called INPE. And while Bolsonaro was denying that the fires were happening, the director of INPE said no, that the fires were happening at a much larger scale and speed and what happened was Bolsonaro fired him. So Bolsonaro's working really, really hard to take over the institutions and make sure that the other branches of power like Congress and the Supreme Court are discredited so people lose faith in them. There's a lot of conversation happening in Brazil right now to build the so-called Frente Ampla, which is this coalition conservatives, liberals, progressives and people from the right, from the left working together against a common enemy, which is Bolsonaro's fascism. It's an ongoing conversation right now. People are interested in that. But when you put so many diverse political thoughts together and try to come up with one representative of all that, that's when things get really complicated. It's not going anywhere right now. He has to go somewhere because next year, 2022, we're going to have presidential elections. Boston has started to promote the idea that the voting machines are already hacked, although it hasn't really happened anything. So it's really interesting to see what happens here in the US because it's going to happen in Brazil two years later.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:24:06] Obrigado, David. Thank you very much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger.

David Nemer [00:24:12] Thank you, Siva. Thank you, Will. But I'll say one thing. I'll remain hopeful, and that's why I do the kind of work I do and hopefully will have a better tomorrow.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:27] That was David Nemer, assistant professor of media studies here at the University of Virginia and the author of Favella Digital The Other Side of Technology.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:24:37] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Please visit democracygroup.com to find all of our sister shows. We will be right back.

Will Hitchcock [00:25:03] So, Siva, one of the things that I feel listening to David describe the situation in Brazil, generally speaking, is it's not only a lot like America, but it may be describing, in a sense, America's future, in the sense that things may get even worse. A second theme that comes out in his description of the challenges facing Brazil is the ecological crisis, which again, is something that lurks in America's future that we have

really not fundamentally dealt with. And then a third theme that he raises that I think is something to really dwell on is every time there's progress in American history, there is backlash. And the Trump period is definitely a backlash against Obama. We're now in a period of progressive legislation in which blue states have gotten enough representatives in Congress so they can actually try to repair some of the damage. But we have to anticipate there's going to be a backlash to come. And in Brazil, every time the pendulum swings, it swings farther. And I worry that in America, too, we may be facing a period of polarization in which to say that there's no center is an understatement. There is going to be a state of permanent extremism.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:07] Well, so when I look at Brazil, I don't think, well, you know, Lulo was pretty far left and he was followed by Zuma, who is also pretty far left, who is then followed by Bolsonaro who's very far right. Like, I'm not looking at the left right pendulum so much as I'm looking at the consistent undermining of faith and trust in institutions and in parties and in democracy itself, in its ability to do things to make life better. And what I see as an American is that more and more we are becoming more like Brazil, more like Mexico, more like India. Now, how is that? Because we are increasingly tolerant of corruption. We are increasingly unwilling to trust in institutions. Those are, to me, the signals of an ill democracy, because that's the dynamic, I think, that ultimately prevents India from fulfilling its dream as a powerful global leader and exemplary democracy. It's what I see gets in the way of Mexico. It's certainly what gets in the way of Brazil. So I you know, that's why when I look at this country and I see Donald Trump, I don't see Donald Trump as being I mean, yeah, he's extreme right in a lot of ways. But I see him just as importantly, perhaps more importantly, being an example of our willingness to just stop caring. Caring about, like rampant theft and corruption at the highest levels.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:45] Corruption is a theme that was brought out to in an earlier show with Ruth Ben-Ghiat about the ways in which corruption and strongmen go hand in hand and they know what they're doing is the way to hollow out the institutions is to prove that they are corrupt and inept and that they're bendable to the will of the strongman. And this has been happening in America. The New York Times recently carried a piece that described some 200 very small but very significant new regulations that were imposed on our asylum and immigration system. It will take years, maybe many years to unwind them. It's sort of death by a thousand cuts. If you could demonstrate that the problem of immigration and asylum is too big, too complicated ever to be solved by creating so much chaos in the institutions, then you can simply say all we have to do is build a wall and keep everybody out. So the idea of making the institutions fail on purpose then allows you to open the door to radical solutions. That's clearly Bolsonaro's strategy - hollow out the institutions from the inside, create chaos and anarchy and then impose an autogolpe, a self-coup, in order to bring law and order to the mess that you've created.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:52] Right now, undermining trust in institutions is bad enough in itself. But I think when you look at Brazil, the thing you have to fear the most is the intentional undermining of belief that the future can be better. Because if you don't believe the future can be better and what's the point of democracy? What's the point of environmental protection? Right.

Will Hitchcock [00:29:15] Right, why prepare for tomorrow, if you believe tomorrow is going to be worse than today.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:18] That's right. Why wear a mask?

Will Hitchcock [00:29:19] Yeah. And in thinking about Brazil as a mirror, maybe it's a parallel to America. Maybe it's our future. But impeachment has also become the norm of late in Brazilian politics. And I have a feeling we're headed there. I think every time we're going to have a Congress and a president from different parties, we'll have an impeachment. It's going to become a matter of course, which is again, a sign that the institutions are collapsing in on themselves.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:52] That's it this week for Democracy in Danger. On our next episode, we'll talk to Eduardo Porter. He's an economics reporter for The New York Times and he's going to discuss the effects of wealth inequality on democracy.

Eduardo Porter [00:30:05] What we need is create a new idea of what being American is. You know, it's creating economic opportunity and sharing economic opportunity better where we all fit.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:16] Are you from Brazil? What's your take on Brazilian politics? Please let us know what you think. We're on Twitter @DinDpodcast that's D-I-N-D podcast or visit our website dinDanger.org.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:30] Please subscribe to Democracy in Danger wherever you get your podcasts. We've added a new streaming service to your options. It's called Radio Public. Please check it out.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:41] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell and Jane Frankel.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:49] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab, and we're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective at WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:06] And I'm Will Hitchcock. Until next time.