

Brazil: “For an independent PSOL”

Wednesday 22 November 2023, by [CARVALHAES Ana C.](#), [LARRACHE Antoine](#) (Date first published: 19 November 2023).

In 20 October 2022, Lula da Silva was elected President of the Republic of Brazil for the third time, beating far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro by a narrow margin. This victory by the broad democratic front around Lula, as well as the campaign that preceded it, is giving rise to great debate within the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) which held its congress from 29 September to 1 October 2023.

Antoine Larrache: How do you see the political situation and the current government?

Ana Cristina Carvalhaes: Lula has come to power in a completely different political context to the first three PT governments: today, the far right has gained mass support. It came to power with Bolsonaro, governs some of the country’s most important states and has a majority in parliament, which just goes to show how much of a threat it poses.

Even before the election campaign, Lula and the PT chose to seek victory on the basis of the broadest possible alliance, both on the left, with the PCdoB and the PSOL [1], and above all on the right. This led to the election of Geraldo Alckmin (former leader of the PSDB) to the post of Vice-President, and to the inclusion in the “broad front” of so-called centre-left bourgeois parties, as well as more explicitly right-wing parties.

Lula was never prepared to seek victory with a left-wing coalition, nor to gamble on popular mobilization. In the second round, the coalition expanded to include parties even further to the right. Part of the bourgeoisie had already explicitly supported Lula in the first round, and a much larger part supported him in the second round. The bourgeois sector that supported Bolsonaro most fervently in the second round was the landowners. This tactic enabled Lula to win a narrow victory in the second round. It was a difficult and important democratic victory, which prevented the advance of neo- or post-fascism in Brazil, and the PSOL rightly participated in this process by voting for Lula-Alckmin.

Antoine Larrache: So this is a government of class conciliation, isn’t it? How do you manage this contradiction between left and right within it?

Ana Cristina Carvalhaes: The government has adopted democratic measures to deal with the destruction caused by Bolsonaro’s four years in power. It ordered a huge mobilization of resources to save the Yanomami [2] from starvation and disease when they were attacked on their reserve by illegal mining, to which the fascist leader had given carte blanche, so that a genocide was under way. He is also investigating those responsible for the attempted coup of 8 January 2023. He has recreated ministries and created the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples.

On the other hand, it has solid commitments to big business and to the stability of the regime: it has a clearly neo-liberal economic policy, a “green capitalism” environmental policy, and it does not seek to mobilize against the right, relying on the Supreme Court and the police to confront it. This is not a “protest government”. Its first nine months have not been a “success” in favour of the workers and the people because, on the economic front, the new fiscal rule negotiated with Congress is a classic

neo-liberal adjustment plan that cuts resources from education, health and investment programmes in order to achieve an improbable zero deficit by 2024. On the environmental front, Lula gave a speech at the UN defending the Amazon, while “letting” his right-wing ministers and the fossil fuel industry campaign for oil exploration at the mouth of the Amazon.

The government presents all the insoluble contradictions and inconsistencies imposed by its character of class conciliation. This is not a situation in which a policy of left opposition to the government, as the PSOL has done correctly in its first 12 years, is relevant. But more than ever, it is necessary for the party to be independent, to support what is positive, to fight the government’s measures against popular interests and to be ready to face new attacks (as there will certainly be on the environment and the popular economy), to maintain its autonomous profile and to present its programmatic differences with the government’s action.

Antoine Larrache: What is the situation of the far right?

Ana Cristina Carvalhaes: The threat persists, the far right governs major states and could return to power if the Lula government disappoints. We need to distinguish between several levels: there’s Bolsonaro himself, his family and his closest political group, and a much wider sector of people who vote for the far right, something like 20-25% of voters. Bolsonarism was considerably weakened by the attempted or simulated coup d’état of 8 January, because bourgeois sectors had to oppose it. This attempt is the subject of a judicial enquiry and the head of the air force at the time is implicated. He has therefore been greatly weakened by these legal cases and the investigations into corruption - in particular the fact that he appropriated jewels donated by Gulf sheikhs. The military officers who have governed with him have also been associated with scandals of embezzlement, mismanagement of resources during the pandemic and now even the diversion of weapons to criminal organizations. This in no way means that they have been defeated, but the confidence of the masses in the armed forces has collapsed. The Supreme Court, which ruled in favour of Lula, and Lula himself, are in the process of dismantling the apparatus created by Bolsonaro “from above”.

Today, the bourgeoisie is counting on Lula to restore order to society. The big problem is that this agreement means that the PT will not mobilize the workers. And this is a very important point, because it is precisely the PT that is leading them, since it has regained its mass influence over the last eight years when it was in opposition. I think things will get worse in 2024. The austerity measures of the “fiscal adjustment” plan will become more obvious: the government is proposing a balanced national budget for 2024, which will have huge consequences, as it will have to cut budgets for education, health and other areas. I think there’s going to be a lot of anger about these choices.

Antoine Larrache: With Bolsonaro out of power for a while, isn’t there a risk of a real fascist movement developing?

Ana Cristina Carvalhaes: In the sense of another coup attempt? I don’t think so, in the short term. Bolsonarism is still very much alive, it has a lot of influence in parliament, and it intends to win 1,500 of the country’s 5,000 mayoralities next year. In other words, it’s all about the institutions. Anything can happen in Brazil, but their problem is that Bolsonaro is ineligible, because the Supreme Court has made him ineligible, and his movement is openly discussing who will be the candidate in the next presidential election.

Be that as it may, I would not rule out the possibility that at another time, in the event of a deep national and institutional crisis, there could be another coup attempt. We shouldn’t forget another constituent element of the Right in Brazil: neo-Pentecostal Christian evangelicalism. This movement has made enormous progress among the working classes. Today, it represents the majority of the

Brazilian population and, in terms of religious influence, it outstrips historic Catholicism and Protestantism. In the favelas, these fundamentalists are the most influential from an ideological point of view. They have one contradiction: they have less control over the women's vote. Many evangelical women voted for Lula.

The global crisis will also make things more difficult for Lula. This is the big problem with the so-called progressive governments of this second wave. The first wave benefited from a wonderful context, with the commodities boom, but this second wave is faced with a very difficult global economic situation. China continues to grow and, in many Latin American countries, it has become the first or second trading partner, while Brazil is deepening its links with the BRICS. I don't think China is going to save Brazil or other Latin American countries. I think that the next few years will bring many challenges for the government and that there will be struggles. It's inevitable that there will be struggles because the country is very unequal.

Antoine Larrache: What is the current relationship between the government and the social movements?

Ana Cristina Carvalhaes: The mass movements in Brazil are led by the PT, either directly or through people who are very close to it. There are a few counter-examples, such as the university teachers' union, which is run by people on the left, or Boulos' links with social movements. But these are isolated phenomena. The big difference with what happened under previous PT governments is that the leaders of the mass movements fear the far right and so they put the brakes on themselves. Teachers in the federal public sector are very angry about the government's plans. But they say: "What can we do? We're not going to go on strike and weaken Lula". There are strikes, but at state level. Last week, for example, there was a two-day strike in the Sao Paulo metro.

Perhaps there will be some distancing from the government, but that would be a second cycle of this type. Because the first took place during the PT's first governments, which lasted thirteen years. There wasn't really a honeymoon period: after a number of crises in various sectors, there was a shock break with what had been the basis of the PT's existence. This shock was caused by the pension reform of 2003, when a large proportion of state and federal civil servants, as well as poor civil servants, broke with the PT. Relations then continued to deteriorate, mainly with Dilma. At the start of the 2008 crisis, they managed to contain its effects, but from 2012-13 they were no longer able to do so, and the process of discrediting the government intensified. This process caused the PSOL to grow, in a limited but real way.

Antoine Larrache: Can you describe the main issues at stake at the PSOL congress?

Ana Cristina Carvalhaes: The PSOL held a major assembly of its extended leadership just after Lula's election. At this meeting, there was an initial clash between the party majority, which wanted an even closer relationship with the government, and the minority, which wanted to guarantee the PSOL's independence from the government. The minority presented a motion affirming the PSOL's refusal to participate in the Lula government. The two main currents that form the majority, that of Guilherme Boulos (Revolução Solidária) and that of the previous party president (Primavera), did not want such a declaration, which would have put them in great difficulty when the government was not even in place. They therefore worked on a more united motion by making concessions, in particular to the left wing of the majority bloc, which included comrades from the Fourth International. This current, called *Semente*, remained allied to the majority with three fundamental arguments: firstly, unity was needed, including with the PT, in the face of the fascist danger - which was right; secondly, the minority sector of the party wanted a policy of opposition to the government - which was wrong; and thirdly, the tactic needed in the period to overcome petismo (support for the PT's historic political project) was to bank on the figure of Guilherme Boulos. In an attempt to

influence the majority, *Semente* succeeded in obtaining a majority resolution refusing to participate in the government. The MES [3] and other sectors of the party's minority bloc then agreed to vote in favour of the majority resolution.

However, this declaration of intent is ambiguous: it indicates that the PSOL will not participate in the government, will not send members as representatives of the PSOL, but it leaves the door open to the participation of some of its members in their own name. One exception had already been accepted by all PSOL members: the participation in the government of the leader of the Brazilian Indigenous Peoples' Association, Sonia Guajajara, because this was an explicit request from the indigenous peoples. But when the government was formed, another PSOL member joined it, a representative of the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST - Movimento dos trabalhadores sem-teto). The latter is linked to Boulos. In addition, at Boulos' instigation, it was decided that the group of PSOL MPs would form part of the government's parliamentary group. The president of the group is a member of the PT and the vice-president a member of the PSOL. The ambiguity of the December resolution was intended to allow these choices to be made.

Antoine Larrache: And how was this conflict over participation in the government reflected in the PSOL Congress?

Ana Cristina Carvalhaes: In the tradition of the PSOL since its creation (2005), a congress has been organized every two years. There was an interruption with the pandemic - a long interruption - even though we held a virtual congress. So this was the first congress with a physical presence since 2017. The main objective of this congress, for the leadership, was to obtain approval for participation in the government. Another objective, which was not admitted, was to get rid of all those who were opposed. To understand the dynamics, it is important to understand, without over-personalising, that Boulos comes from the social movement, the MTST to be precise, which is a movement of great value. Boulos relies on it and that gives him considerable weight. But he has always wanted to join a party with no current, no opposition. [4] That's not what those who brought him into the party wanted, but that's the way he's always been, and it's neither new nor defamatory. He is an important leader to the left of the PT, but closer to the PT than to the PSOL tradition. He unequivocally wants to be part of a PT-led government. The other large majority group, *Primavera*, runs the mayor's office in Belém in the Amazon region and is in the political tradition of the Popular Fronts of the 1930s.

PSOL congresses follow a three-month process, with neighbourhood assemblies in the big cities, district assemblies that elect delegates at state and provincial level, and these delegates elect the delegates for the federal congress. Throughout this process, political positions are discussed. An important topic at the convention was a change in the way the leadership operates. Within the opposition bloc, of which I am a member, we knew that our weight would diminish at this convention, due to the integration of the Boulos group since the 2017 convention. But we hoped to have at least enough votes to influence what would come out of it.

Since the founding of the PSOL, which brings together a large number of groups, there has been a tradition of building its stability around pacts, broad operating agreements. In our case, the historic pact was between *Primavera* and the MES. *Primavera* was in charge of management and the main posts, while the MES was in charge of the treasury, even though it did not hold the purse strings alone, as two signatures were required for all expenditure. In my opinion, it was a good pact because it was based on the results of the congresses and allowed the party to function. The leadership around Boulos wanted to call into question the PSOL's founding pact in a context where parties are very rich: the Foundation is a propaganda and popular education body which, by law, has 20% of the party's budget at its disposal. As the President of the Foundation controls 20% of the party's budget, this position is de facto strategic and ranks third in the party hierarchy.

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On the eve of the convention, the majority informed everyone that the Foundation would no longer be part of the proportionally distributed leadership positions, but that its leadership would be appointed directly by the winning list. This was a coup d'état designed to ensure that the opposition would not only lose Congress, but would also be completely excluded from central management. Essentially the only sector of the majority to oppose this manoeuvre was Insurgencia, from Semente. This caused great unease within the majority bloc, which was forced to withdraw the proposal. In the end, the presidency of the Foundation will remain among the management positions elected at the Congress and will therefore, in practice, remain with a member of the MES.

Antoine Larrache: Can you explain the deeper reasons for these conflicts?

Ana Cristina Carvalhaes: I think there are two fundamental issues combined. Firstly, the party's relationship with the government, which is expressed in an attempt to crush those who oppose participation. Faced with this political situation, the PSOL leadership asserts that we are in a “period of united front”, that this is our government, that we must be with it and that those who are not with it will end up in the dustbin of history. In concrete terms, the PSOL deputies were divided on the vote on the adjustment plan: 7 voted in favour and 3 voted against (the two MES deputies and one independent deputy). The argument put forward by Boulos, who is the leader of the parliamentary group, is that we must always support the government because the far right could take advantage of its difficulties. And at the congress, Boulos' speech was the same: in an assembly, referring to the collective kitchens that his movement had set up during the pandemic and which are now financed by the state, he declared that these were “much more socialist than all the speeches of the extreme left, which will end up in the dustbin of history”.

The second problem is that the PSOL has become so wealthy that taking total control of the party machine and apparatus is becoming a matter of life and death for the majority. In the context of the right-wingization of society and all the corruption scandals of the 2014-15 period, a new law has granted very substantial funds to political parties. This changes a lot of things. For example, the PSOL received an electoral fund of 99 million reais (\$20 million) in 2022, compared with just the equivalent of \$590,000 for Plinio's presidential campaign in 2010 - to which must be added the party's permanent fund of \$774,000 a month (\$9.3 million a year). That's a mountain of money. It changes internal relations. [5]

Antoine Larrache: When all is said and done, how do you think the PSOL will define itself in relation to the government?

Ana Cristina Carvalhaes: In fact, the victory of the current majority bloc in Congress is already a clear definition: the policy of this bloc will prevail, i.e. open support for the government and participation, if possible. The problem is that, at the moment, there is not the slightest possibility of Lula opening up more space for the PSOL, because, under pressure from the right in Congress, all he is doing is sacking progressive ministers in order to give more positions to the right within the

ministry. The current situation suits the PSOL leaders because they can both support the government and claim autonomy.

So the congress was very confrontational. There is a major difficulty for us because the comrades of the FI are split in two, with very different points of view on the leadership of the PSOL. The internal situation between the majority of the PSOL and the minority is very tense, very conflictual, and I think that things are going to get worse.

But we must maintain the prospect of an independent PSOL, because this independence will be crucial in the medium term.

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Footnotes

[1] PCdoB is the Communist Party of Brazil. Originally a pro-Cuba split from the Communist Party, it has since become autonomous and drawn closer to the PT. The PSOL was founded in 2004 after parliamentarians were expelled for voting against pension reform and dissenting from the ruling PT. The PSDB, Brazil's Social Democratic Party, was founded in 1988 as a supporter of the liberal "third way" represented by Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and Gerhard Schröder. For many years it was the main party of the Brazilian right.

[2] The Yanomami are the largest people living in relative isolation in South America. They live in the rainforest and mountains north of Brazil and south of Venezuela.

[3] The Movimento Esquerda Socialista (Socialist Left Movement) is a sympathizing organization of the Fourth International.

[4] Guilherme Boulos joined the PSOL in 2018 as a pre-candidate for the presidency of the Republic.

[5] We can also add the fact that the PSOL grew from 41,000 to 226,000 members between 2010 and 2022