

Brazil's Bolsonaro threatens use of dictatorship-era law against Lula for “inciting violence”

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Barely two days after Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, of the Workers Party (PT), left jail thanks to a Supreme Court (STF) ruling granting some five thousand Brazilian prisoners the right to remain free until exhausting their appeals, President Jair Bolsonaro threatened to have the ex-president re-arrested under Brazil's dictatorship-era National Security Law for “inciting violence.”

The violent threat came in response to a speech that Lula delivered to a reception organized by his supporters at the headquarters of the ABC Metalworkers Union, where he praised the mass demonstrations in Chile as an example for Brazilian workers.

Under conditions in which Brazil faces the fourth year of an economic crisis that has kept GDP still 5 percent below its 2014 peak and unemployment at 12 percent, while throwing 4.5 million more people into extreme poverty, the fear of a social explosion has obsessed the country's ruling circles. This has led to reports of heightened military alert and threats to call out troops against demonstrators following the mass unrest in Latin America and especially the insurrectionary upheavals against the entire political system in Chile, previously viewed by both Bolsonaro and the PT as a “model” country.

Lula was freed last Friday from his prison in the southern capital of Curitiba, where he was serving an eight-year sentence for passive corruption and money laundering involving the so-called “triplex scandal.” Prosecutors claimed he had received undercover kickbacks from the OAS construction conglomerate in the form of a beachfront penthouse in the city of Guarujá, in exchange for collaborating in the illegal favoring of OAS for contracts with the state-run oil company, Petrobras. The sentence, upheld by the 4th Appeals Circuit court in the southernmost capital of Porto Alegre, resulted in Lula being barred from the 2018 presidential election under the “clean slate” law that he himself had enacted in 2010.

This is only the first of a total of 10 charges against Lula in similar cases that are moving through the Brazilian courts. Lula has appealed the sentence on the basis of suspicion of bias on the part of the right-wing then-judge Sérgio Moro, who later was rewarded for his role in sentencing the ex-PT president with appointment as Bolsonaro's Justice Minister. The first such appeal, based on Moro's illegal leak to the press of a private conversation between Lula and former president PT Dilma Rousseff, was rejected in 2018 by the STF under pressure from then-Army Commander, Gen. Eduardo Villas Bôas. A new appeal, largely based on evidence presented by *The Intercept* that Moro instructed prosecutors in their pursuit of Lula, while telling them to abandon other similar cases, is still under review.

Less than 24 hours after his release, Lula delivered a speech making vague reference to the Chile protests as a means of fighting Bolsonaro's austerity and carefully criticizing the “rotten side” of the Brazilian state for allowing his imprisonment and barring him from the election. He adopted the now standard pseudo-left definition of the Bolsonaro government as a “militia's government,” referencing the extensive ties of the Bolsonaro family with Rio de Janeiro police-based vigilante groups.

The reference to the militias and the “rotten side” of the Brazilian state is a carefully crafted formula aimed at expanding the anti-Bolsonaro opposition to include every bourgeois political actor in the country besides the president's family itself. This found clear expression in Lula's political meeting hours before the speech with the multi-millionaire philanthropist and neoliberal critic of Bolsonaro, Luciano Huck, the owner of the plane chartered by the PT to fly him out of Curitiba. The meeting was praised by the pro-PT *Fórum* magazine.

In response, Bolsonaro, who had already met the top military brass when the decision to release Lula became known, said that the National Security Law could be used if Lula “really went ahead” with his stated intentions of leading demonstrations against the government.

The threat to invoke the National Security Law in response to a mere call for demonstrations is part of a serious escalation of the build up of a police state in Brazil that cannot be overstated. It is also testimony to the bankruptcy of the PT and similar social-democratic and bourgeois nationalist forces all over the world that have laid the political groundwork for the rise of the far-right.

In response to the threats of police state measures, the PT's leadership scrambled to generate “political insider” columns in the media dissociating themselves from Lula's mild criticisms of Bolsonaro. “PT leaders think Lula's speech was over the top”, was the headline of the column of Mônica Bergamo in Brazil's largest daily, *Folha de S. Paulo*. Bergamo, the first journalist to interview Lula in prison, wrote that party leaders gave assurances that his future public statements would be more “moderate”. She added that what most disturbed them was Lula's quip that when Bolsonaro was young, “he found a way not to work; he joined the military.”

The PT's president Gleisi Hoffmann rushed to dismiss Lula's speech as absolutely inconsequential and stopped just short of describing it as a personal reaction, saying she thought criticism of Lula's speech by party's leaders was “absurd” because it could not be considered “radical,” and concluding that “if he didn't want to

respond to Bolsonaro after 580 days in jail we would not be able to call him human.”

She responded to Bolsonaro’s threats by tweeting that Bolsonaro was “inverting facts” by accusing Lula of breaching the National Security Law and calling him a “radical.” A week before she had declared that president’s son, Eduardo Bolsonaro, the head of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, had breached the same law by threatening to suspend parties and democratic freedoms if mass protests broke out in Brazil.

The PT’s real aims were further exposed in its celebration of Steve Bannon’s comments on Lula’s freedom in a BBC interview on Sunday. The PT’s media mouthpieces, first and foremost *Brasil 24/7*, extolled Bannon’s description of Lula as the successor to Barack Obama as “the greatest leader of the globalist left in the world”. For the PT to welcome a comparison between Lula and Obama—even from the fascist Bannon—says everything about the class character of the misnamed Workers Party.

For his part, Bannon’s equation of Lula and Obama is based on his strategy of employing right-wing populist demagoguery to advance far-right forces posturing as opponents of the political establishment. The hypocrisy of Obama’s invocations of “human rights” and identity politics as he became the deporter-in-chief and bombed seven countries finds its equal in the hypocrisy of the PT, which claimed to represent Brazilian workers, while imposing austerity measures and serving as the political instrument of Brazilian capital, including in massive corruption schemes.

Such policies, along with the promotion of chauvinism, xenophobia, and terror scares, served to legitimize the far right and bring elements like Trump, Bannon, Farage, Bolsonaro, Salvini, Le Pen and the Spanish Vox into the mainstream.

This was certainly the case with the PT, which, while applying brutal austerity policies, counted Bolsonaro as part of its congressional coalition for 13 years. It also enacted in 2016 the first “anti-terror” law in Brazil since the fall of the dictatorship, with the ostensible aim of satisfying OCDE financial regulations and attracting foreign investment.

In other words, Bannon, who has close ties with Bolsonaro through his son Eduardo, a Bannon protégé, sees Lula, like Obama, as an easy political target.

Multiple press reports in the immediate aftermath of Lula’s release have indicated optimism within Bolsonaro’s inner circle that Lula’s release will allow the fascistic president to attempt to recover his rapidly declining popularity by posing as someone besieged by corrupt institutions, including the Supreme Court.

Against this backdrop, the main responsibility for the political impasse confronting Brazilian workers lies at the feet of the PT and, even more so, its pseudo-left apologists who have been obsessed for almost 600 days with the farcical “free Lula” campaign.

These forces have refused to organize an independent opposition to Bolsonaro within the working class, working instead with the sole goal of restoring the PT’s authority and virulently denouncing workers who justifiably hold the party in contempt. They kept all their focus on the “free Lula” campaign, even as the hypocrisy of the PT’s “coup” narrative became increasingly apparent even within the party’s declining base. Lula’s attempt to rebuild his former congressional basis for the 2018 election with parties that later supported Bolsonaro cut across this narrative, as did the attempts by the PT’s leadership to win favor with Bolsonaro’s coup-mongering vice-president, Gen. Hamilton Mourão, at the beginning of the year

and its incessant appeals to the supposedly nationalist sentiments of the military high command.

In the Brazilian edition of the Morenoite *Izquierda Diario*, Thiago Flamé writes: “Bolsonaro bets on radicalism and Lula’s freedom serving his strategy.” The organization making this statement, the Revolutionary Workers Movement (MRT), affiliated with the Argentine PTS, has spent the last year trying to outdo the PT in the loyalty to Lula, accusing the party of not doing enough to free him. It went so far as to set up a live transmission of Lula’s speech after his release, and once again has appealed to the PT and its bourgeois allies such as the Communist Party to “raise immediately a plan to struggle against Bolsonaro, organized from workplaces.”

In other words, the pseudo-left is conscious that Lula’s treacherous role over decades—which ultimately brought the far right back to power—is an asset for Bolsonaro, yet it still seeks to subordinate the working class to the PT.

Nothing could express this cynical policy better than the words of the pseudo-left Socialism and Liberty Party’s (PSOL) Valério Arcary in his Thursday column on its website *Esquerda Online*. Writing a day before Lula’s release, he stated: “Lula’s role in the resistance is now a key factor and strengthens the need for the left united front. If Lula decides to campaign around the country to build the opposition to Bolsonaro, all of the left should engage in it.”

Needless to say, “if” Lula decides not to wage such a campaign, the pseudo-lefts will mount their own campaign pressuring him to do so in order to continue promoting illusions in the PT.

The politics of subordinating the working class to such supposedly left bourgeois parties and governments leads to disaster, as the events of the past several days in Bolivia have once again confirmed.

Underlying both the threats of police-state dictatorship from Bolsonaro and the frantic efforts of the pseudo-lefts to breathe new life into the political corpse of the PT are the deep-seated fears within the ruling class that Brazil is on the brink of a mass revolutionary explosion along the lines of Chile.

The most pressing issue for the Brazilian working class is to draw a balance sheet of the role of the PT and its apologists and consciously organize in opposition to them, building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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