

Bolsonaro prepares electoral coup amid Brazilian Congress probe of COVID-19 response

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Over the past two weeks, Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro has stepped up his preparations for an electoral coup, pressing Congress to pass a so-called "print ballot amendment" to the Brazilian Constitution. He has claimed that this is the only guarantee against what he describes as massive and recurrent electoral fraud preventing his reelection next year.

Bolsonaro's approval rating has sunk to an all-time low of 24 percent, and a plurality of 49 percent of Brazilians support his impeachment for the first time, with public attention drawn to the ongoing proceedings of a Senate commission of inquiry (CPI) into his murderous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the help of his close ally, House Speaker Arthur Lira, Bolsonaro has succeeded in creating and stuffing with far-right loyalists a special panel to discuss, and bring to the center of the national debate, his longstanding and baseless allegations against the Brazilian electronic voting system, in place for almost 20 years. He claims it was rigged to stop him from winning the first round of the 2018 elections, in which he beat the Workers Party (PT) candidate Fernando Haddad in a run-off. The panel will analyze and vote on a constitutional amendment to attach to every electronic ballot a backup paper ballot. Bolsonaro alleges the current system doesn't allow recounts and is prone to vote rigging, an accusation debunked by Army-promoted hacking competitions to find loopholes in the system, and by the very fact that the 2014 presidential elections saw a recount at the behest of runner-up Aécio Neves.

Bolsonaro is following a carefully calculated strategy. After supporting until the eleventh hour Donald Trump's claims that the 2020 US elections were stolen by the Democrats, Bolsonaro endorsed the January 6 putsch at the US Capitol, declaring Brazil would see "much worse" if his backup print ballot amendment was not adopted. In an undeniable indication of preparations for such an electoral coup in Brazil, Bolsonaro's son Eduardo, a House member and former head of the Foreign Relations Committee, was present in Washington for a pre-coup meeting held at the Trump International Hotel on January 5.

Election experts virtually unanimously see print backups as technically irrelevant for the safety of elections. They have

already been approved four times by Congress for use in a limited number of locations. They were opposed for facilitating the tracking of votes and, thus, political intimidation, common in both urban areas controlled by organized crime and countryside areas dominated by landed oligarchs. The adoption of the system is entirely irrelevant to Bolsonaro plans. He is betting that the system will be opposed by the Electoral Court, as has happened before, giving him the opportunity to allege that the courts are part of a conspiracy against him. Bolsonaro now warns that if the paper ballot amendment passes the Congress and is not adopted, "there will be no elections" and he will not relinquish power.

Two days after the establishment of the Senate COVID-19 commission, on May 13, Bolsonaro led a rally of a thousand supporters, sponsored by agribusiness associations, in which he said that only fraud could stop him from winning the election against former Workers Party president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who has recently appeared in the polls as the frontrunner for 2022. In a bid to mobilize the most backward and violent elements in Brazilian society, Bolsonaro now refers to Lula with the dehumanizing alias "nine-fingers," mocking the severing of Lula's finger in an industrial accident when he was a metalworker in the 1970s.

Bolsonaro appealed for the crowd to support a coup, declaring that "the greatest power in Brazil is not the Executive, the Judiciary or the Legislature, it is you," adding that he "was following where you led." At the rally, Bolsonaro stood side-by-side with his defense minister, Gen. Walter Braga Netto, who assumed office two months ago after Bolsonaro fired his predecessor along with the entire military high command in order to obtain the military's full alignment with his government.

Braga Netto made a speech at the rally saying the Army was "ready to allow our people to work." This follows Bolsonaro's threats to the use military to overthrow local authorities and cancel their limited social distancing measures against the COVID-19 pandemic. As Braga Netto spoke, the crowd shouted, "I authorize," the slogan adopted by Bolsonaro's far-right base indicating support for a military takeover.

Bolsonaro's provocations are unfolding in the shadow of the proceedings of the Senate's investigation into his COVID-19 response, which have been followed by millions of Brazilians outraged by the catastrophic toll taken by the pandemic. Brazil has the second-largest number of recorded deaths in the world, with over 450,000 victims. At this point, nearly 2,000 Brazilians are dying every day. The country is sleepwalking into a deadly third wave with unpredictable consequences as the transmission rate, indicating the acceleration of contagion, climbs to 1.12 after two months below 1.0. In the ensuing economic catastrophe, the wealth of Brazil's billionaires has skyrocketed, while 60 percent of Brazilians face food insecurity, and over 20 million have been thrown into poverty.

Bolsonaro is deeply aware that the inquiry's exposures are feeding the growth of mass social opposition, despite the best efforts of the opposition to confine it to relatively bureaucratic questions such as the delay in buying Pfizer vaccines offered by the company in mid-2020. The opposition, which controls the commission, has entirely abandoned efforts to probe Bolsonaro's herd immunity policy, which is shared by all congressional parties.

In a damage control operation, the CPI has turned its main focus to Gen. Eduardo Pazuello, who headed the Health Ministry for almost a year, from April 2020 to March 15, 2021. He was fired under pressure from Congress at the height of the second wave of the pandemic, when Brazil reached a daily death toll of 4,000. Pazuello was installed after his two civilian predecessors resigned in protest over Bolsonaro's herd immunity policy. He is an active-duty three-star general—the second-highest rank in Brazilian Army—who has for over a year resisted demands that he retire in order to safeguard the political neutrality of the Armed Forces. He has been the only active-duty officer to hold a senior post in the Bolsonaro government, despite the fact that a third of the cabinet is comprised of retired military personnel, including Bolsonaro himself, and over 6,000 officers hold junior and management positions in the cabinet and state companies.

In order to avoid his questioning by the commission implicating the Army itself, the commission's vice president, Randolfe Rodrigues, insisted that Pazuello appear in civilian attire.

He was deposed by the CPI for two days on May 19 and 20, when he was chiefly questioned about the government's promotion of quack cures such as hydroxychloroquine, the delay in buying Pfizer shots offered in mid-2020 and the government's inaction in face of the catastrophic lack of oxygen in the city of Manaus that led to a 41 percent increase in COVID-19 deaths in the city. The collapse of Manaus' health care system for the second time in less than one year, after Bolsonaro's allies declared the city had reached "herd immunity," led to widespread outrage. The more contagious P.1 variant, believed to have originated in the city's second wave, spread throughout South America, as other Brazilian

states scrambled to airlift dying patients out of Manaus without adequate preparations.

Bolsonaro's response to the exposure of his crimes before the CPI was to invite Pazuello to yet another "I authorize" rally in Rio de Janeiro last Sunday. PT-aligned media outlets circulated an unverified report by pundit Denise Assis that the Army high command met on Sunday to discuss Pazuello's possible arrest for breach of the military code prohibiting political partisanship, and a former president of the Supreme Military Court told the press that if he was not punished, it would provoke "anarchy" in barracks. Army commander Gen. Paulo Sérgio de Oliveira, however, has remained silent.

Oliveira, named by Bolsonaro after firing the entire military command in late March, had been hailed by the PT and the press as "opposed to herd immunity" and proof that the Army had not sided with Bolsonaro. Now he faces the dilemma of arousing a far-right faction of the Army if he punishes Pazuello and precipitating the exposure of the penetration of fascist forces in the state apparatus against the best efforts of the bourgeois press and parties to lull workers into thinking otherwise. Such an outcome would threaten to unleash the very outpouring of opposition that Bolsonaro is rallying his far-right to suppress, while the Army considers itself not yet prepared for a dictatorship.

The responsibility for the sharp dangers facing Brazilian workers, and for Bolsonaro's ability to openly develop his conspiracy to hold onto power by nullifying an election, lies squarely with the self-styled opposition led by the PT. Its main aim is to avoid the deep anger against Bolsonaro turning against the whole of Brazilian capitalism. Whatever differences it raises with Bolsonaro's policies, it seeks to frame them in the most chauvinist, pro-capitalist terms, while directing its appeals to the Army. The CPI has been the foremost example of this policy, transforming the central discussion on the scarcity of vaccines, a global catastrophe caused by the criminal vaccine hoarding of the imperialist countries and the irrational policies of ruling elites the world over, into an indictment of Bolsonaro's "anti-patriotic" foreign policy, which should be reversed by the military.

The fight against the deadly herd immunity consensus within the ruling class, social inequality and the threat of dictatorship requires a break with the capitalist state and the forces which promote it—including the PT, the unions and their pseudo-left satellites—and the building of a socialist leadership within the working class, a Brazilian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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