

# The modern cult of Independence Day and the buildup of a fascist movement in Brazil

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The 200th anniversary of Brazil's independence from Portugal in 1822 was celebrated by the country's ruling class, led by President Jair Bolsonaro, with a noxious spectacle of "civil-military" integration and traditionalism. Bolsonaro succeeded in integrating the military high command into right-wing demonstrations calling for the overturning of the results of the October general elections to guarantee his continuity in power.

These efforts gained the tacit support of Portugal, whose president appeared side by side with Brazil's fascistic head of state, and US imperialism, which dispatched warships to join a naval parade off the beaches of Rio de Janeiro.

Meanwhile, the opposition led by the Workers Party (PT) canceled planned counter-demonstrations and focused on hailing the national green-and-yellow flag. They accused Bolsonaro of "hijacking" a supposedly beloved celebration, which had as one of its highlights the ceremonial transport from Portugal of the heart—preserved in formaldehyde—of Dom Pedro I, the Portuguese Prince Regent who in 1822 defied his father, King Dom Joao VI of Portugal, and declared Brazil an independent nation, becoming its first emperor.

In order to advance the patently false "popularity" of the celebrations, which are mostly ignored by workers and attended only by the families of the military, the PT muted all references to the so-called "cry of the excluded" counter-demonstrations held for decades by its in-house "social movements" and unions, virtually boycotting them.

The entire reactionary affair was centered on the celebration of Brazilian "unity," first and foremost its territorial integrity, which contrasts with the fragmentation of the Spanish-colonized regions of the Americas. For all the representatives of the ruling class, such "unity" confers upon Brazil unique potential to project geopolitical power. Underperformance in "great power politics" has been the central accusation leveled by the PT against Bolsonaro, with former president Lula kickstarting his presidential bid last year in a trip to Europe, where he curried favor with warmongers like Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz.

The reactionary chauvinism of the celebrations, including the semi-deification of former Emperor Pedro I, has a grim historical precedent—the 1972 celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the secession from Portugal.

In that year, Brazil lived under a blood-soaked military dictatorship, which had been inaugurated in 1964 with a coup supported by US imperialism. It carried out the annihilation of rural guerrillas and the complete suppression of working class opposition. In the next four years, the Brazilian regime would collaborate in the overthrow of bourgeois-nationalist governments across the continent, participating

directly in military coups in Chile, Uruguay and Argentina which claimed over 70,000 victims.

In those "years of lead," as they became known, the Brazilian military chose to bring the ashes of Dom Pedro I from Portugal in order to exalt him as the supposedly visionary leader of the establishment of a potential superpower in the fifth largest country in the world.

The meaning of the new monarchic cult was to bury any democratic and egalitarian legacy of the independence movement, which in many sections of the country was inspired by the American Revolution. For the military, Brazil should celebrate the unrealized, "great power" fantasies of its comprador bourgeoisie, which had nothing to offer to the workers and poor. The "accomplishments" to be hailed were the maintenance of a virtually absolutist regime, complete with life peerages, state Catholicism and a direct bloodline to the European nobility, along with the suppression of any questioning of the savage exploitation of 1.5 million slaves of African origin, who comprised a quarter of the country's population.

This regime was founded in virtual continuity with the structure established by Pedro I's father, the Portuguese king, Dom João VI, in the prior decade, after the Portuguese crown fled the Napoleonic invasion. Together with 8,000 members of the court, they disembarked to Rio de Janeiro in 1808, elevating it to the Portuguese capital. The transfer of the capital immediately implied the abolition of all colonial trade and manufacturing restrictions imposed on Brazil. It led to the declaration of a United Kingdom of Portugal and Brazil in 1815, when Dom João VI decided to move the court back to Lisbon after the defeat of Napoleon. His son Pedro was then designated as the Prince Regent of Brazil.

The final form of the 1822 independence declaration was a response to attempts in Portugal to restore Brazil's colonial status, and resulted in the maintenance in the country of large sections of the structure of the previous "United Kingdom"—first and foremost the rule of the House of Bragança. Under such conditions, Pedro I decided for secession and his own enthronement in order to avoid the possible abolition of the monarchy altogether.

Pedro I's rule was mostly identified with the shutting down in 1824 of a liberal Constituent Assembly that was devising a plan for a constitutional monarchy. Instead, the emperor crafted a new constitution assuring himself the "moderating power" to repeal any decision by the legislative and judiciary powers.

The regime Pedro I founded put down attempts in almost every Brazilian province to declare independent abolitionist republics between 1824 and 1844. This continued even after Pedro I himself abdicated in favor of his five-year-old son in 1831, in order to reclaim

the Portuguese throne disputed by his brother.

The 1972 celebrations honoring Emperor Pedro I marked the sunset of a period after the military overthrew Brazil's second and last emperor, Pedro II, in 1889, sending him into exile and abolishing monarchist traditions. In their place, signaling promises of reform and social equality, the military recognized as Brazil's national hero the republican martyr known as "Tiradentes" ("the teeth extractor"), a representative of the lower middle-classes of the urbanizing colony who was the only one punished for an early attempt of secession and declaration of a republic, the Minas Gerais Conspiracy of 1789. As Brazilian history textbooks explain, Tiradentes was hanged and his body dismembered and displayed, on the road connecting the colonial capital, Rio de Janeiro, to the insurrectionist center of Vila Rica, in order to deter further rebellions.

The historic sympathy evoked by Tiradentes was amplified by the fact that over a dozen other rebel leaders, being either high-born or members of the military or the Church, had their sentences commuted, with Tiradentes taking full responsibility for the rebellion.

On September 7, 2022, Brazil marked its 200th anniversary under conditions of an unprecedented assault on living standards and mass impoverishment, along with unnecessary death and disability caused by a raging pandemic. The self-styled "anti-fascist" political opposition to Bolsonaro was entirely oblivious to those basic contradictions. The PT feared above all any questioning of the official history and the role of the military, and upsetting Bolsonaro's ultra-right civilian supporters, whom the party still intends to rehabilitate in the name of "national unity."

The sharp right-wing shift within what passes for the "left" in Brazil was exposed in an interview published by PT's mouthpiece *Brasil 24/7* with one of the foremost pseudo-left apologists of the party, the president of the Workers Cause Party (PCO), Rui Costa Pimenta. Pimenta was called upon to offer a "left-nationalist" veneer to the PT's shameful capitulation to Bolsonaro's fascistic demonstrations by raising the profile of Pedro I and of Independence Day itself. Pimenta proclaimed September 7 to be a "fundamental date for Brazil," adding that "Dom Pedro must be regarded as a Brazilian hero. He was an admirer of the French Revolution, a soldier and a military leader. He and Princess Leopoldina were deeply united in favor of the liberation of Brazil." He concluded: "As an independent nation, Brazil achieved a much higher level of development compared to the backward countries."

This narrative is patently false. Brazil saw itself fall sharply in terms of per capita income compared to the United States during its monarchical period, and it shared all of the weaknesses of the fragmented Spanish-speaking republics surrounding it. It soon became prey to British bankers and later to US imperialism. But above all, it remains to this day one of the most, if not the most, socially unequal countries on the planet, in which a tiny minority can amass fabulous wealth and dream about "great power politics," side by side with omnipresent *favelas* (slums).

But as politically bankrupt and reactionary as Pimenta's ideas may be, they serve material interests. Like the PT's own obsequious observation of the holiday, they embody the PT's adaptation to the increasingly desperate attempts of the Brazilian ruling class to mobilize right-wing support through the promise of geopolitical advantages for a few in the upper-middle class—achieving a "much higher" position in comparison to other backward countries.

The latest September 7 celebrations have exposed how Bolsonaro seeks to weld together his fascist base on the basis of naked hostility

to equality, extolling "natural divisions" among humans, embodied in monarchic and authoritarian principles, as well as in his own eugenicist "let it rip" approach to the pandemic. The celebration of Brazil's early 19th century emperor as the "moderating power," above legislators and judges, is particularly important and ominous.

Bolsonaro loyalists have long maintained that Article 142 of Brazil's Constitution, stating that the Army can be called out by any of the three branches of government, endows the military with just such a "moderating power" in the case of a clash between different sections of the state. In response to the buildup of a fascist movement in Brazil, the PT-led opposition seeks only to disorient and disarm workers, while supporting the strengthening of the state and nationalism.

The restoration of the reactionary and repugnant monarchical cult in this year's Independence Day celebrations in Brazil sounds the death knell of any pretense of aspirations of social reform within the country's ruling class, which is gearing up for a showdown with a working class unwilling to accept deepening poverty and misery.

In order to carry forward its struggle for its promised and never-realized social and democratic rights, Brazilian workers must reject all forms of chauvinism and nationalism, and their political promoters in and around the PT.

Brazil's backward comprador bourgeoisie failed to produce a meaningful bourgeois-democratic revolution, such as those in 1776 and 1861-1865 in the United States, or 1789 in France. The world integration of capitalist economy has ruled out any possibility of such a development on a national basis.

Brazil's history and its present historic impasse provide a powerful confirmation of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which established that in countries of a belated capitalist development, only the working class is capable of leading the struggle for the basic democratic and social rights of the oppressed masses, by seizing power in a socialist revolution and establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat as part of the fight for socialism internationally.

Workers need a socialist and internationalist strategy and the building of a new revolutionary political leadership within the working class—a Brazilian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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