

Brazil's presidential runoff: as Lula moves to the right, Flávio Bolsonaro prepares for dictatorship

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After fascist candidate Flávio Bolsonaro won the first round of Brazil's October 4 presidential election against President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party—PT) by 47.0 percent to 45.2 percent of the valid votes, the internal crisis of the party and its “broad front” deepened, opening a debate over the causes of the disaster that is already provoking a new turn to the right by the PT.

The numbers expose the nature of the result. Lula lost nearly 3.4 million votes compared to the first round of 2022 against former President Jair Bolsonaro, sentenced to 27 years in prison for leading the 2022-23 coup conspiracy. Lula's vote fell from 57.3 million to 53.9 million, Flávio received 56.1 million votes, more than 5 million above his father's 51.1 million four years earlier. Even so, Flávio received fewer votes than Lula did in 2022.

The election represented not a rightward shift of the masses, but rather the disintegration of the PT's electoral base—a protest vote against a party that, in Lula's own words, “became the system” and proved incapable of solving the increasingly severe problems of workers and the poor in Brazil.

Lula lost votes even among his historic constituencies. He won by a wide margin among the poorest, but lost votes across nearly all income brackets, registering growth only among the wealthiest 4 percent. Even in the Northeast, Brazil's poorest region and the PT's stronghold in recent elections, Flávio received 1.6 million more votes than his father in 2022, in all nine states.

For the runoff, Flávio's advantage tends to grow. Last Thursday, Datafolha released its first runoff poll: Lula appears with 48 percent of the valid votes, against 52 percent for Flávio. The most revealing figure in the poll is the rejection rate: Lula is rejected by 46 percent of the electorate, more than Flávio's 43 percent—that is, the candidate who presents himself as the defender of democracy against fascism is more rejected than the fascist. The poll also assessed the transfer of the 9 million votes of the four right-wing candidates who placed behind Lula and Flávio—Augusto Cury, Ronaldo Caiado, Renan Santos and Romeu Zema—showing that they will go overwhelmingly to Flávio.

The PT's response: deepening the turn to the right

The first-round defeat opened an internal crisis in the PT and its “broad front,” with a debate over the causes of the disaster. But this debate is, in essence, a fraud. Contrary to those who claim the PT is a party “in dispute,” the course is already decided—and it is the deepening of the reactionary course that produced the defeat.

The decisive confession came from Lula himself. According to Estado de S. Paulo, the president “admitted that the PT erred in not drawing closer to the broad front that supported it in the 2022 elections against Jair Bolsonaro.” Thus, the response now in the runoff is to broaden the “broad front.”

The class character of this response is condensed in the slogan that, according to press reports last week, is guiding the runoff campaign: “more Alckmin and less Janja.” Vice President Geraldo Alckmin, a representative of the São Paulo bourgeoisie, and former ministers Simone Tebet and Carlos Fávaro have been tasked with drawing closer to the corporate world and agribusiness. Alckmin is being considered for the Finance Ministry, as the guarantor of the promise of “fiscal responsibility”—that is, of continued austerity. First Lady Rosângela “Janja” da Silva, whose activity was oriented toward the party's base and the social movements, is being pushed aside.

The same logic guides the hardening of the discourse on public security. Lula adopted a new campaign slogan: “For the working people, protection. For the criminal, prison,” while again defending his Public Security bill which strengthens the repressive apparatus in Brazil. It is the PT's adoption of the far right's own police-state program—the very issue Flávio Bolsonaro exploits.

Lula's main strategy for the runoff is to go after the voters who abstained in the first round—33.4 million people, or 21.08 percent of the electorate, the highest level since 1998. The campaign will prioritize the voter who did not turn out, asking PT members to convince those “disenchanted with politics” to go to the polls.

This strategy is, in itself, a confession of bankruptcy. The record abstention is the most honest expression of the working class's rejection of the entire political system—including the PT. Lula is now trying to convince the people who rejected the system to vote for the party that oversees “fiscal responsibility.” The “strategy of fear” that the PT promises against Flávio, deconstructing his image on social media, amounts to a confession: the party has nothing to offer the working class but blackmail, demanding that it accept austerity under the threat of an even darker future under a fascistic government.

A significant part of the internal debate in the PT and its “broad front” is focused on communication. PT leaders blame Communications Minister Sidônio Palmeira, also responsible for Lula's electoral campaign, for the first-round problems. Lula himself declared that this was “the least organized campaign I have participated in since 1989,” when he first ran for president.

This discussion is revealing precisely for what it excludes. The PT treats the defeat as a marketing problem—of organization, of social media, of “theoretical concepts” that did not “connect” with the voter—without any substantive political content. The campaign's coordinators lament that

Flávio was “more pragmatic,” using the price of food in the supermarket, while Lula spoke of sovereignty and rare earths.

But the question is not one of advertising techniques. The rejection of Lula has a real class content: a government that imposed austerity, left 80.9 percent of families in debt and set interest rates at 13.75 percent has nothing better to “communicate” about its attitude towards the cost-of-living crisis facing millions of workers. And there was no lack of money for the PT’s campaign. The party that received the largest share of the electoral fund after Flávio’s Liberal Party (PL)—R\$ 615 million, of which R\$ 127 million was earmarked for Lula’s campaign—suffers not from a shortage of resources, but from political bankruptcy.

In the final stretch, the Lula government launched a package of electioneering measures: it expanded the gasoline subsidy, granted a 15 percent increase in the Bolsa Família (Brazil’s main social program for the poor) and launched a program that forgives R\$ 12.6 billion in debts of 3.6 million micro-entrepreneurs. These and other measures are a confession that the PT has no program: after four years of austerity, the response to the electoral defeat is a handful of last-minute handouts, too small to compensate for what the government itself took away.

Flávio Bolsonaro: the “scissors” and the threat of a dictatorship in Brazil

Flávio Bolsonaro’s response to the first-round result has been a combination of social demagoguery and coup preparations. The candidate reacted with “strong indignation” to the Lula campaign’s accusations that he would cut funds and eliminate benefits, dismissing the allegation as a “lie.”

However, according to a *Folha de S. Paulo* report of October 7, Flávio’s economic team is studying a package of fiscal measures focused on containing federal mandatory spending, to enable an initial adjustment on the order of 2 percent of GDP—about R\$ 250 billion. Among the measures are the delinking of pension and BPC (Continuous Cash Benefit) adjustments from the real gains of the minimum wage, and the end of the constitutional floors that tie health and education spending to federal revenues. In other words: the candidate who promises not to “touch” the social programs is planning, behind the scenes, the largest attack on social spending in recent history.

The “Ministry of Prosperity” announced in the electoral broadcasts is the ideological piece of this operation. Presented as an “exit door” from the social programs through training, entrepreneurship and microcredit, it is in fact the mechanism for dismantling the social safety net—replacing rights with individual “opportunities,” in the purest style of neoliberalism. The same logic explains the turnaround on changing Brazil’s 6x1 (six days of work followed by one day of rest) workweek. After months of dismissing the proposal as “opportunistic,” Flávio caved to electoral pressure and declared that he will vote to end the 6x1 workweek—while maintaining, behind the scenes, a commitment to business owners to water down the measure in Congress if elected.

Flávio’s intention is explicit: to implement the Milei-Bukele model in Brazil. The Argentine president took part in the launch of his candidacy. In place of the chainsaw, Flávio promised a “scissors”—a sweeping cut in public spending—to balance the public accounts. His campaign coordinator, Senator Rogério Marinho, declared that the current economic model is “bursting” and that the pension (2019) and labor (2017) reforms would be “revisited”—that is, deepened.

But the “scissors” is only the economic half of the project. The other half is the continuation of his father Jair Bolsonaro’s coup conspiracy. Flávio has promised that, if elected, he will grant his father a pardon—and

that Bolsonaro will climb the ramp of the Planalto Palace alongside him at the inauguration. The declaration that “Brazil belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ,” made in a live broadcast in August, is not a folkloric detail: it is the ideological expression of a theocratic project, fusing religious fundamentalism with state authoritarianism.

The center of the coup project is the reform of the judiciary. In addition to defending the impeachment of Supreme Federal Court (STF) ministers—first of all, Alexandre de Moraes, responsible for Jair Bolsonaro’s conviction—Flávio has promised to “change the Constitution and redemocratize Brazil”—a formulation that, in the mouth of an heir to the coup plotters, means exactly the opposite: the capture of the state apparatus to liquidate the institutional checks that still limit executive power. The STF minister appointed by Bolsonaro, Kassio Nunes Marques, has already signaled that he will consider the case that could lead to Jair Bolsonaro’s release right after the runoff.

The parallel with El Salvador is explicit and embraced. Bukele’s Minister of Security and Justice, Gustavo Villatoro, declared in 2024 at the CPAC conference in Brazil that in El Salvador “we sent the Supreme Court ‘al carajo [to hell].’ And not only that, we also sent the Republic’s prosecutor ‘al carajo.’” Villatoro took part in the Fiesp (Federation of Industries of the State of São Paulo) Public Security Congress in São Paulo in August, defending Bukele’s model before the Brazilian industrial bourgeoisie. This exposes the social base of the project: FIESP, the heart of Brazilian industrial capital, is openly courting Bukele’s dictatorial model.

The student protests against Flávio and the trap of the “lesser evil”

The threat represented by Flávio Bolsonaro provoked a real and spontaneous reaction. On the night of Monday, October 5, the first university mobilizations began at the Fluminense Federal University in Niterói, and over the course of the week spread to more than 40 universities in 14 states and the Federal District, with assemblies, plenaries and marches bringing together tens of thousands of young people. The concern is legitimate: a Flávio Bolsonaro government would mean a brutal attack on education, science and democratic rights.

But it is necessary to say clearly what these protests are—and what they are not. The class character of the demonstrations, such as that of October 11 in São Paulo, is petty bourgeois: university students and self-employed professionals, not the organized working class. And their political direction is already defined: the UNE (National Union of Students) is openly calling for mobilization in the universities to elect Lula—“Brazilian youth will occupy the universities across the country to build Lula’s victory in the runoff!”

The students’ concern over education is real—and it is precisely for this reason that the PT’s response is so cynical. The party that now presents itself as the defender of education against Flávio is the same one that, under Lula’s “new fiscal framework,” promoted the dismantling of the federal universities, driving professors and staff into countless strikes.

The youth mobilizing against Flávio has a history: it protested against the Bolsonaro government—and was diverted by the PT into the elections, where its energy was dissipated in support of a government that continued its predecessor’s policies. To repeat this cycle is to repeat the disaster.

The essential question is not whether Flávio Bolsonaro represents a threat. The question is how to fight it. And the lesson of the PT’s four decades is unequivocal: the policy of the “lesser evil”—voting for the PT to contain the far right—does not contain the far right; it strengthens it. The PT does not represent a genuine struggle against fascism; it opened the path to it by destroying every alternative to the left and handing the far

right the ability to posture as an opponent of the system.

The only force capable of defeating the far right is the independent mobilization of the working class—the class that, while the establishment moves to the right, is moving to the left, as demonstrated by the strikes of bank workers, postal workers, teachers and metalworkers that have clashed with the Lula government in recent months.

The central task in this election is to build the unity of workers and youth in rank-and-file committees independent of the PT, the trade union federations and the pseudo-left—linked internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and the Socialist Equality Group in Brazil. Against Flávio's dictatorship and the PT's betrayal, the answer is the struggle for socialism—the only real alternative to fascism.



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