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Mid-Term Elections: Brazil's Far Right Battles for Bolsonaro's Legacy

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As Brazil prepares for mid-term elections on 6 October 2024, far-right leaders are competing for leadership. All eyes are on São Paulo, where the right's "old guard" candidate faces the rise of a young, extremist YouTuber. Polls show a three-way tie between these two and the socialist left-wing candidate, backed by President Lula. The result will be a harbinger for politics in post-Lula Brazil.

- With 12 million people, São Paulo is more populous than many Latin American countries. In Brazil it serves as a microcosm of national politics, and leadership of the city is a key springboard for national ambitions.
- The recent far-right resurgence confirms the eclipsing of traditional conservative parties over the past decade. The new far right is stronger, better connected via social media and evangelical churches, and finds support from the poorest to the richest alike.
- Both candidates fighting for the extremist legacy in São Paulo have a military police officer as their running mate. They join the 6,600 candidates from the public security realm and armed forces running for office nationwide. Security remains a pressing issue mobilising voters. Across the political spectrum, security proposals are similar: expanding armed personnel.
- Irrespective of their ideological differences, the three main candidates tied for office in São Paulo are all accused of colluding with organised crime. While some fear Brazil is becoming a mafia state, like other business groups, crime syndicates will seek to influence government decisions – in their case, in favour of illegal economies.

Policy Implications

There is an urgent need for better regulation of a) the use of social media, both in terms of campaigning and fundraising; b) of illegal markets to combat their political and social reach; and, c) of the dual role played by military and police officers between institutional politics and the security realm in order to ensure the security forces, as a state institution, remain politically neutral.

Defining Brazil's Political Landscape Post-Bolsonaro

The municipal elections to be held on 6 October 2024 will serve as a barometer for candidates and parties gauging their strength of support ahead of the 2026 presi-

dential election. Almost two years after Jair Bolsonaro's defeat, from the north to the south of the country, the former president's allies are testing the same formula as in 2018 and 2022 alike: the fight against communism and its "Lula" version, meaning the defence of the family and morality. At the same time, President Lula da Silva and the country's centre-left forces are reaffirming the alliances made in the broad front agreements that saw him secure victory in 2022.

All of this is taking place amid an unprecedented climate crisis exacerbated by largely man-made fires, the succession dispute over the leadership of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, and the pressure on Brazil in the face of the crises in the region having international dimensions too, such as the post-election one in Venezuela. Against this backdrop, the country's eyes and ears have turned to the city of São Paulo and the choice of its nearly 12 million inhabitants in the upcoming mayoral election. Although São Paulo's elections have key national relevance is nothing new, an analysis of the situation reveals worrying scenarios: the advance of far-right agendas, the eclipsing of traditional conservative parties, allegations of collusion between leading candidates and criminal groups, and the protagonism of the security forces (especially the military police) in parliamentary politics. On all of these matters, São Paulo can thus serve as a microcosm for the state of affairs in Brazil at large – and possibly beyond.

In São Paulo, the largest city in the Southern Hemisphere, initially two candidates face off against each other as clear opponents respectively vying for the mayoralty. One is Ricardo Nunes, a candidate for re-election who comes from a traditional right-wing party and has the formal backing of the governor of São Paulo state, Tarcísio de Freitas. With Tarcísio as Bolsonaro's possible successor in 2026, Nunes has also won the erstwhile president's formal endorsement. A businessman, Nunes was elected deputy mayor of the city of São Paulo in 2020 and became mayor 12 months later when the incumbent died of cancer. The late mayor belonged to Brazil's historic centre-right Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), of which former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso was also a member. For some years now, however, the PSDB has been steadily losing ground in Brazilian politics. One of the hypotheses for why is that the far right is seemingly now taking over the spaces previously occupied by a traditionally democratic right. São Paulo was the party's last stronghold. But since Bolsonaro's election in 2018, candidates associated with the PSDB have appropriated the extremist narrative and associated themselves with its spoils. Nunes is no different.

His opponent is left-wing candidate Guilherme Boulos of the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), as strongly backed by President Lula. Boulos is a Philosophy professor and was elected as the most voted-for federal deputy in the state of São Paulo in 2022. He gained national prominence in recent years as coordinator of the Homeless Workers' Movement. Since the late 1990s, the latter has been campaigning for the right to housing and for urban reform. It became known throughout Brazil for its occupations of buildings that were vacant or did not fulfil their social function, as defined by the Constitution. Boulos ran for mayor of São Paulo in 2020, but lost in the run-off.

Lula's support for Boulos is the result of an agreement reached around the 2022 elections. The PSOL, one of Brazil's smaller parties, chose to support Lula against

Bolsonaro in a broad pro-democracy front and not to put forwards its own candidate. In return, Lula's Workers' Party (PT), the largest in the country, agreed – for the first time in its history – not to have a candidate run for mayor of São Paulo and instead to support Boulos's campaign.

With the official start of the election trail, however, another candidate has surged in the polls: Pablo Marçal, a former motivational coach with millions of followers on YouTube, is promising to “clean up” politics and “unite” the country from his base in the city of São Paulo. With just days to go before the first round, the three candidates for the country's largest budget are tied in the polls. With Marçal's arrival on the scene, he and Nunes are competing for the electoral spoils of Brazil's far right. While the latter has the formal support of the erstwhile president, Marçal is fighting for the Bolsonaro vote share, reaching especially those who are younger and more active on social media. His campaign, he argues, is being run without public money from the electoral fund. However, Marçal is suspected of organising competitions between his supporters to produce the most viral videos. Those with the most views can earn thousands of Brazilian reais. For this reason, his social media accounts (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) have been suspended by the electoral court. Allowed to create new pages, in just a few days he already has eight times more social media mentions than any other candidate.

Marçal is not a beneficiary of the long-established television prime-time slots for campaigning, as he comes from a party with little presence in institutional politics. However, as he is tied for first place in the polls, Marçal has been invited to take part in televised debates. For this reason, the latter taking place between the respective candidates, which in recent elections have seen falling ratings and been of little relevance to outcomes, have regained political momentum in the city. Marçal appropriates the debates to produce short, controversial content for digital media. He does this with a complete mastery of the techniques of the attention economy, corporate aesthetics, and powerful oratory. Unwilling to discuss government proposals, Marçal uses the allocated time to announce social media posts and launch catchy slogans. The candidate claims he will revive the country's morale. Reinforcing an anti-system and anti-politics vision, Marçal claims to be running “with God and the people” against the “state, municipal, and federal machine.” For him, the right has “no master.”

When Institutional Politics Meets the Attention Economy

This political configuration reached its climax on 16 September 2024. During one of the debates related to São Paulo's mayoralty, Marçal provoked one of his opponents, José Luiz Datena, the most famous “true crime” presenter on Brazilian TV. The YouTuber accused his opponent of sexually abusing women. He describes an attack, asks Datena if he has ever done the same, and ends by claiming his opponent is “not being man enough.” A few seconds later, we hear the debate moderator shouting “Datena, no!” as the presenter, enraged, pulls a chair from the set and strikes the former coach twice.

As absurd as this episode may seem, violence is nothing new or rare in Latin American politics (Kurtenbach 2019; Pearce and Perea 2019). Examples abound: presidential candidates assassinated in Colombia or Ecuador; activists and council-

lors killed, imprisoned, or systematically threatened throughout the region's "democratic" history. In this sense, Marçal's involvement amplifies a challenge that is by no means unique to Brazil: individuals and movements defining themselves as "anti-political" have systematically prepared for electoral confrontation for almost a decade now. Marçal, however, seems to be taking the issue to the next level. Although he does not have the systematic support of the Brazilian far right's traditional allies, such as the armed forces or the military police, his strategy of doing politics through the posting of extreme social media content challenges the mechanisms of democratic regulation as well as the very nature of electoral competition.

Although Marçal may seem like a new social force, his rise has come as no surprise to those who follow the many Discord, TikTok, and YouTube channels promoting morality, self-entrepreneurship, and the reconstruction of the masculine world amid the identity crises of recent decades. This turn of events can be described as the product of a commodified life, in addition to the economic and masculinity crisis. [Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco \(2020\)](#) argue that the inclusion of the poor in the world of consumption through access to credit and individual empowerment, and the subsequent economic crisis that has blocked growth and access to consumer goods for this same demographic, has created an existential self-esteem crisis – especially among men.

Based on nostalgia for the traditional social roles and upwards mobility of the past, this current of thought has found its political expression in the far right. The sense of belonging produced by far-right networks, whether via digital channels or the grassroots activism of evangelical churches, gun clubs, or neighbourhood associations, transforms individual resentment into a collective agenda when organised. More than that, it existentially reconciles [\(Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2020: 22\)](#) a hundred individuals who feel wronged by hidden enemies. In other words, if the difficulties experienced by these people are absolutely concrete – economic recession, the destruction of formal-employment realms, intergenerational clashes over moral values – then the spaces produced by far-right networks facilitate interpretations of these problems taking hold that are based on a profound disconnect from reality. In this sense, ghosts of the past such as "communism," or internal enemies like "universities," "immigrants," and "social movements," are fed back as explanatory tropes.

Those who believed that the crisis of representation plaguing the country was only one of the elite – a kind of revanchism against economic growth and the recognition of political minorities (black, indigenous, women, and queer communities) – were not entirely correct. Of course, pushback by Brazil's conservative forces is a big part of the problem, as is the merciless profit-seeking of agribusiness, but many of the poorest regions of the country voted for Bolsonaro *en masse* in 2018 [\(Richmond and McKenna 2023\)](#). This pattern changed in 2022 in many working-class neighbourhoods. In São Paulo, for example, the urban periphery extensively voted for Lula. This shift was largely due to the economic and social failures of the Bolsonaro government and, above all, the prestige enjoyed by Lula as a popular leader. Such a swing can be understood as informed by a continuous

and concrete sense of crisis, where those in question are desperately looking for quick and consistent solutions yet remain unable to find them.

Simple solutions to complex problems are hence making a comeback in the 2024 municipal elections, especially via the figure of Marçal. According to his reams of virtual content, Marçal has at his disposal psychological tools that can help “unlock people’s minds and create new systems.” On coming to pass, his constituents and the city of São Paulo should prosper. The so-called attention economy that candidates like him dominate uses visibility, based on an aesthetic that values elements of overcoming, morality, honour, strength, and masculinity, to serve their respective ends. As he is tied for first place in the polls, Marçal has, as noted, been invited to take part in the televised election debates. Unlike Bolsonaro, who constructed stereotypical performances of simplicity – going to official events wearing flip-flops and football shirts, for example – Marçal worships the body, physical fitness, and financial success. The image projected is that of a man who has risen from poverty and achieved everything that the material world has to offer. He believes everyone should have access to the “emotional intelligence tools” that enabled him to make millions of dollars in no time – even if his critics claim that his prosperity is the direct result of a financial scam preying on the elderly, for which he was convicted years ago. Marçal’s celebration of traditional masculinity is supported by his wife, who produces digital content highlighting “Trad Wives” (Traditional Wives) in which women star in a new narrative of submission to traditional domestic roles by “choice.”

In all these games of viewership, Marçal is emulating one of his key role models: Nayib Bukele, the president of El Salvador. Like the latter, his trademark is the first letter of his name – in this case, “M.” To amplify his brand at scale, he sells thousands of caps with the letter “M” on them, triggering millions of TikTok mentions. The attention economy, with its short but toxic content, thus defines the electoral agenda and prevents political proposals from being meaningfully countered. Since his campaign first launched, Marçal has remained front and centre in the news cycle. The attempt to disseminate nuanced information relevant to the city’s public policies is always limited by the YouTuber’s involvement, in seeking to become a nationwide symbol of anti-politics.

But while Marçal uses the technologies and vocabulary of these modern online communities, his discursive enemies are those of the Cold War era, namely what he describes as the “Brazilian Communist Consortium” in São Paulo. As the old right disappears from the electoral scene and is forced to become more radical to attract voters, candidates like Marçal argue that “we need to discuss not proposals, but values.” The dominance of social media by candidates “native” to these spaces challenges democratic elections. The proliferation of these practices across Latin America suggests a shared expertise between individuals and movements, too (e.g. Bukele, Argentina’s Javier Milei, and Marçal’s sizeable followership).

What, then, are the other candidates doing to stop the advance of a figure like Marçal? As campaigning began, the latter sought to undermine Boulos’s candidacy by attacking Lula as well as the social movements backing him, linking the left to violence, dictatorship, drugs, and similar. At first, Boulos and his campaign fell for the provocations, opening up even more space for Marçal by facilitating

controversial moments he could use to create short videos – the YouTuber’s main campaign strategy. As a result, the other right-wing candidate, Nunes, maintained a more moderate and composed image, bestowing his campaign with a certain stability.

Over time, Boulos came to the idea that the less he engaged with Marçal, the less damage the latter’s attacks would do. Boulos began to ignore his opponent’s presence, responding to his provocations in an ironic way, without mentioning names and with short but catchy phrases. Boulos seems to be betting on following his own path and letting the right-wing and far-right candidates fight it out between themselves. The strategy seems to be working in the first round, as Boulos’s vote share remains stable. He is also keeping an eye on the national level: victory could give Boulos the credentials to succeed Lula when the day comes.

As a result of this change in direction by the Boulos campaign, Marçal started aggressively attacking Nunes instead, who responded as the YouTuber expected: namely, by resorting to heated arguments and tantrums. Nunes and his team understood that other vote shares, ones previously uncontested by parties like the PSDB, had become crucial. By winning the support of the São Paulo governor and of Bolsonaro, Nunes made a nod to the far right. At the same time, as a devout Catholic, he began a pilgrimage to the city’s evangelical churches. He began distributing campaign material “in defence of Christian principles” and advocating “moral standards.” The strategy has indeed had some effect, as Nunes’s standing remains stable in the polls and his opposition rate is the lowest among the three leading candidates.

In contrast, Boulos and Marçal both have high levels of voter rejection, at 38 and 48 per cent respectively. The challenge for both is to overcome this pushback. If Boulos were to face Marçal in the run-off, the contest would appear almost a clash between “barbarism” and “civilisation” – echoing the framework of the 2022 Lula–Bolsonaro election. The difficulty for Nunes is to keep on-board conservatives who do not identify with Marçal’s violence and radical anti-politics while at the same time courting the extremist vote.

Accusations of Collusion with Organised Crime

The three main candidates have traded accusations over each’s links to South America’s largest criminal group, the so-called Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC, First Command of the Capital). The group is largely responsible for the logistics of transporting South American cocaine to European ports, earning billions of euros a year. The “brothers” – as PCC members call themselves, and to which Feltran (2018), an expert on the group, agrees – operate via international partnerships, having commercial links with the ‘Ndrangheta in Italy as well as mafias in the Balkans and Russia (Feltran, Vianna, and Bird 2023; *O Globo* 2024). The organisation was founded in the city of São Paulo in the late 1990s as a collective of inmates seeking humane treatment within the Brazilian prison system.

Its members now operate as a horizontal secret society (Feltran 2018). Hegemonic in São Paulo, but present all over the country, they function specifically in a capil-

lary way, being organised into different “cells” according to the particular activity of interest: car theft, drug trafficking, the arms trade, money laundering. In São Paulo, the group effectively regulates the use of violence in the criminal world. Experts argue that the organisation’s members – acting as a kind of shadow court – were responsible for “pacifying” illegal markets by reducing homicide rates in poor neighbourhoods (Feltran 2018). Before the group’s emergence, murder was endemic in the criminal world. With the PCC now ruling the roost, the practice has become a last resort that requires the collective’s approval (Maldonado and Beraldo 2024).

The group has become a regular feature of São Paulo’s electoral debates and newspaper coverage. Nunes has been accused of facilitating the group’s success in tenders submitted for the management of the public-transport network in the city. The social movements in which left-wing candidate Boulos is involved, meanwhile, have been accused of having links to the group, as many of the city’s social housing estates have been the subject of allegations regarding PCC involvement on-site. Marçal, in turn, saw members of his Brazilian Labour Renewal Party – including its leader – linked to the PCC with regards to ongoing investigations into drug trafficking and the theft of luxury cars during his election campaign. Further, his partner in many social media endeavours has been accused of involvement in drug trafficking by diverting chemicals from a particular company to facilitate the production of crack cocaine.

Whether or not it is true that the candidates and those around them have links to the PCC is not necessarily the most interesting question here. The very way in which these allegations are made, attributing to the criminal organisation a relationship with public life, is misleading. This is based on a misunderstanding of how the group functions, which limits the ability to combat it. Unlike other such groups, the PCC does not operate per a hierarchical organisational structure but rather like a collective of illegal entrepreneurs who help each other to do business, manage violence, and maximise profits. As a result, the group itself does not necessarily infiltrate institutional politics or compete for public contracts in the country (Carrança 2024).

For example, one of the most lucrative businesses for PCC members today is the cocaine trade. One kilogram of export cocaine bought by a “brother” on the border with Bolivia costs USD 3,000; sold at retail price on the streets of Berlin it will make around USD 115,000. The group handles all the logistics from the border to Brazil’s ports, then collaborates with groups in Europe to transport the packages across the Atlantic before their subsequent distribution, profiting at every stage of the process (Feltran, Vianna, and Bird 2023). To move cocaine from South America to Europe, its members must deal with the port infrastructure. Certain regulatory measures may therefore not be in their interests, such as increasing the number of containers scanned or creating additional inspection and policing units. In this situation, we could assume that those involved in this business would try to lobby the relevant authorities not to approve certain laws and regulations, or to favour others less damaging to their business (Carrança 2024). Lobbying in politics is nothing new, but the novelty here may be that, instead of using indiscriminate violence to achieve their ends, the PCC has ironically started using

the same formula as legal businesses to expand its illicit enterprises (Carrança 2024). “Violence serves nobody” has been the group’s motto for many decades now.

The Security Forces as Key Political Player

Some 6,600 candidates in Brazil’s municipal elections declare themselves to be active or former members of the country’s law-enforcement agencies – be they from the police or the armed forces. Bolsonaro’s party, the Partido Liberal, features the highest number of such candidates. São Paulo is the state with the most representatives from these agencies. According to the [Sou da Paz Institute \(2024\)](#), 103 deputies were elected in 2022 who are or were members of the country’s police forces. Of these, 44 (of the 513 deputies who make up the Federal Chamber) make up the “bullet bench,” as the security forces’ grouping in the National Congress is known. According to data from Brazil’s Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (n.d.), in 2022 eight of the 82 federal deputies elected to represent the State of São Paulo and six of the 112 state deputies in the State Assembly were directly linked to the police.

Of the six leading candidates for mayor of the city of São Paulo, three have a military police officer as their running mate, including the two vying specifically for Bolsonaro’s spoils. What is striking, however, is how all relevant camps repeatedly voice the same proposals to combat insecurity and crime: namely, doubling the number of municipal guards and increasing their salaries and equipment (weapons, vehicles, and similar). The alignment of security proposals, regardless of ideology, illustrates a prominent phenomenon in Brazilian politics over the last decade: that is, the hegemony of a rigid law-and-order discourse among candidates active in institutional politics.

Violence and security are thus at the heart of politics in a city where every three minutes a mobile phone is stolen. For many decades, the social malaise that runs through the metropolis has taken the form of a criminal conflict. In response, the police – and, above all, the figure of the military police officer – have taken on the role of moralising regarding security in the country. This is because, in the hegemonic narrative, these individuals risk their lives every day in the fight against crime. From this moral position, pitting good against evil, (military) police officers emerge as experts on the security agenda, as mostly associated with Brazil’s right-wing and far-right parties.

These representations serve to polarise the city between “good citizens” and “marginals.” The possibility of integration evaporates herewith, and those who do not obey the law must not only be sanctioned but eliminated. Punitive practices have come to be seen as a more effective way of creating a better future, increasingly gaining electoral support as a result (Motta, Maldonado, Alcantara 2021). It is no coincidence that “war” has emerged as the key metaphor for framing this phenomenon, not only analytically (Leite 2012) but also in the political discourse of the one on crime. In this martial logic, the police have become autonomous from the elite that had hitherto always controlled them, now making their own policies and consolidating themselves as the true agents for the management of public order (Feltran 2020). They find a key ally in the Pentecostal reli-

gious groups, which allow them to form majority blocs in various political arenas. Campos's (2024) thesis, for example, shows how sections of the neo-Pentecostal church have infiltrated the military via grassroots work and training. Although these groups grew in strength under the Bolsonaro government, according to him their networks predate the latter and form capillary structures closely entangled with institutional politics.

Returning to São Paulo's electoral arena, Marçal openly calls for furthering Bukele's legacy, saying that this is the last generation of criminals in the city and that PCC will be known in future as Pablo Contra Comunismo ("Pablo Against Communism"). The former motivational coach even travelled to El Salvador to showcase his affinity for Bukele and his policies. His social media posts show him standing in front of the mega-prison built by Bukele saying that he could feel the "energy of change."

El Salvador's president has become an international right-wing icon after using highly controversial means to reduce criminal violence in his country. Based on backroom negotiations with criminal groups, a policy of mass incarceration (with around 2 per cent of the population imprisoned), and the concentration of power in the hands of a single leader, Bukele's regime has been the subject of extensive accusations of overseeing human rights violations (Pinzón and Salguero 2024). His policies reinvigorate old questions: What price are we, as a society, willing to pay for a sense of security? Is the latter worth a regime of exception? Which sections of the population will pay the price for security policies? And, how are security policies used for authoritarian purposes? Bukele's significant popularity at home and the cementing of his image as "the" leader capable of curbing crime in a historically violent country has worryingly reintroduced *mano dura* policies as a way out of criminal violence in Latin America. However, the history of the region itself has shown that these same policies, implemented decades ago, are responsible for the rise and expansion of the local criminal groups now active worldwide. The PCC is a perfect case in point.

With the election rapidly approaching and the three main candidates still tied, 6 October will show us what lies ahead. Will the second round be a clash between the left, supported by Lula, and the nominee of the traditional right, drawing on a faction of the far right enjoying Bolsonaro's backing, or will an emerging extremist, young candidate, supported by digital networks, make it to the final contest for the mayoralty of one of the largest metropolises in the world? Regardless of the ultimate outcome, the São Paulo electoral contest reinforces the question of how far democratic communities can tolerate violence and human rights abuses in the name of freedom of expression when political actors use their networks to undermine democracy and promote extremist ideals.

On a practical level, this analysis underscores the urgent need for: a) regulatory instruments and protocols regarding the use of social media by political candidates and parties, both in terms of campaigning and fundraising; b) more effective regulation of illegal markets to sustainably combat their political and social reach; c) limiting the dual role played by military and police officers between institutional politics and the security realm, as well as the use of their career paths as

campaign boosters; and, d) ensuring that the security forces, as a state institution, remain unpoliticised and neutral.

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