

January 8 Protest in Brazil: Decay of Democracy?

Fatima Binte Zahid¹

Introduction:

2023 commenced with a shocking assault on democracy in Brazil. Followers of far-right former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro stormed the government buildings in the capital Brasilia on 8th January 2023 after he lost the General Election in 2022 to leftist leader Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. They strongly believe that the general election was rigged and stolen. They invaded the Supreme Federal Court, the National Congress building, and the Presidential Palace of Brazil. The objective of the Bolsonaro supporters was to overthrow the democratically elected President Lula da Silva and instigate military intervention.

Bolsonaro supporters wreaked havoc through vandalism and looting in government buildings and even assaulted security forces. Almost 3000 people were involved in this attack². The siege continued for over three hours. They blocked roads and set vehicles on fire. The security forces had to use tear gas to push back the rioters. In response to the riots, President Lula had to declare a federal security intervention in Brasilia for the whole month of January. According to the Brazilian police, 300 people had been arrested for the attack.³ Security forces in Brazil are now under scrutiny for the apparent security failure. Brazil's Supreme Court has also instructed to investigate Bolsonaro's involvement with this riot although he has repeatedly denied any involvement. 39 people had been indicted by Brazil's attorney general stating that they used violence and threats trying to abolish democracy in Brazil.⁴

The attack on January 8 was an attack on Brazilian democracy. It was visibly similar to the US Capitol Riot, 2021 when Trump supporters had also stormed the United States Capitol in order to interfere with the certification of electoral votes from the Presidential election of 2020. The

¹ Fatima Binte Zahid is working as a Research Assistant at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies. Previously, she was a teaching assistant at the Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). She completed her MSS and BSS (honors) in International Relations from BUP.

² "Bolsonaro supporters storm key government buildings in Brazil", AlJazeera, January 8, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/8/bolsonaro-supporters-storm-government-buildings-in-brazil>.

³ Aljazeera, "Bolsonaro supporters storm key government buildings in Brazil".

⁴ James FitzGerald, "Brazil Congress: Dozens indicted over 8 January riot", BBC News, January 17, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-64299892>.

activities of the Bolsonaro supporters in Brazil were indistinguishable from the activities of the Trump supporters. These incidents show how right-wing leaders are assaulting democracy by inciting violence through disinformation.



Figure 1: Bolsonaro Supporters storm Congress (Source- DW)

A Brief Background of Democracy in Brazil:

Brazil won independence from Portugal in 1822 and a constitutional monarchy was established.⁵ This empire lasted only up to 1889 when a military coup established the ‘First Republic’.⁶ The military played a leading role in Brazilian history. It was the most powerful institution in Brazil. It persistently interfered with the government and in 1964 a military dictatorship was established. The military dictatorship continued for 21 years. During this period, all democratic activities were suspended. Unlike many countries, the Brazilian Army is still highly regarded by many Brazilians.

In the 1980s as other South American countries transitioned to democracy, the Brazilian army also began the transition to democracy and the Sixth Republic, or the ‘New Republic’ was established in 1985.⁷ Fernando Affonso Collor de Mello was the first elected President of the

⁵ Christopher Sabatini & Jon Wallace, “Democracy in Brazil”, Chatham House, January 24, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/08/democracy-brazil>.

⁶ Sabatini & Wallace, “Democracy in Brazil”.

⁷ *ibid*

New Republic. The military dictated the terms of the transition from dictatorship to democracy and as such, it had a considerable authoritative and leading role in state affairs.

Jair Bolsonaro, a former army captain and right-wing politician, became the elected President of Brazil in 2018. Bolsonaro's election campaign was characterized by disdain for democratic principles, disinformation, aggressive rhetoric, and conspiracy theories. His electoral win relied on right-wing ideologies including the evangelical movement, gun lobby, and anti-environmentalism⁸. An avalanche of disinformation about the opposition was a prime driver behind his 2018 win. Bolsonaro and his supporters glorified the previous military governments and supported increased military interference in state affairs. His supporters openly demanded the shutdown of the Supreme Court and Congress and a return to military rule during his tenure. Many Brazilians saw him as a threat to democracy.

For the 2022 election campaign, Bolsonaro again expressed disregard for democratic principles and began questioning the electoral system of Brazil. He claimed that only through fraud he would lose the election. This claim was analogous to how Trump had framed the electoral debate in the US. Bolsonaro advocated for the closure of Congress and attacking the Supreme Court.



Figure 2: Democracy in Brazil (Source- Chatham House)

⁸ Sabatini and Wallace, "Democracy in Brazil"

Democracy under attack:

There is no denying that democracy is backsliding around the world as political ideologies are shifting. Changes can be seen even in ideal democratic states like the US and European states. This backsliding of democracy can be linked to various issues. Previously it was believed that only a major coup could demolish democracy in a country. But now that narrative has changed. Democratic backsliding can now be linked with various other factors. One of them is the rise of right-wing groups. Democracy is being dismantled from within. Anti-democratic right-wing forces are entering democratic systems and slowly disrupting the democratic institutions. As a result, the democratic characteristics of the states are destroyed without formally transitioning from democracy to dictatorship.

Democracy in Brazil is under attack due to its election of a right-wing leader and the spread of disinformation by them. The January 8 attack portrayed the severity of the situation. Attack on democratic institutions is an attack on democracy. Brazil as a country has become highly polarized and politically divided due to this. Disinformation has become a major threat to democracy in Brazil.

Disinformation: A threat to Democracy in Brazil

The right-wing leaders are undermining the democratic institutions by capitalizing on the socio-economic dissatisfaction of the people. One of the key tools for steering up dissatisfaction is the spread of disinformation. They are resorting to disinformation to gain electoral support and hamper democracy. The US Capitol riot was a cautionary example of the dangerous effect of disinformation.⁹ This incident has sparked a democratic crisis worldwide.

Disinformation has emerged as an immediate threat normalising extremist rhetoric. It has blurred the lines between domestic and foreign attempts to undermine democracy. This disinformation campaign has become a main hazard to democracy in Brazil. Both the attack on Brazilian Government buildings on January 2023 and the US Capitol attack had a similar background where the right-wing leaders' Trump and Bolsonaro effectively used disinformation to gain electoral advantage and create unrest.

Framing the 2022 post-election debate and January 8 attack: Bolsonaro had framed the post-election debate about the outcome of the presidential election since the beginning of his

⁹ European Parliamentary Research Service, *Trump's disinformation 'megaphone' Consequences, first lessons and outlook*, Naja Bentzen.
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/679076/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)679076_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/679076/EPRS_BRI(2021)679076_EN.pdf).

campaign. During the election campaign, he persistently repeated the narrative that Brazil's electoral system is flawed and that anything other than a victory for him would mean that the election had been stolen. But he failed to provide any evidence supporting his claims. Bolsonaro claimed that the Brazilian military also shared his concerns.

Bolsonaro's claims had been dismissed by Brazil's electoral tribunal. They called it 'disinformation' and the Supreme Court even opened an investigation against him for spreading disinformation. Bolsonaro's manipulative narratives have served to incite political unrest in protest against a perceived conspiracy and ultimately led to his supporters' mobilization in Brazil. The January 8 attack was the result of this spread of disinformation and creation public dissent. This attack has become a danger warning for Brazilian democracy.



Figure 3: Disinformation Campaign (Source- Security Magazine)

Conclusion:

January 8 will remain a dark day in Brazil's democratic history. The activities of the Bolsonaro supporters were a clear warning to Brazil's democracy. The US Capitol riot of 2021 has started a new form of democratic assault. Both attacks were fuelled by disinformation. Disinformation campaigns of far-right leaders have become a menace to democracy worldwide. Brazil as a country with a long history of military rule and an influential military vulnerable to such anti-democratic tactics and must remain vigilant to protect its democracy. Preventing the spread of disinformation would be the crucial initial step to halt the democratic decay in Brazil.