

Christian nationalism is thriving in Bolsonaro's Brazil

Understanding the political situation in the US's mirror-image nation

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A young man wearing a Brazilian flag prays during a night vigil on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro (AP Photo / Domenico Stinellis)

The January 6 insurrection on Capitol Hill brought the impact of Christian nationalism to the forefront in the United States. The prominent presence of Christian symbols and messages in that tragic event shocked many US Christians and caused them to join with others in condemning the role that religious resentment has played in radicalizing a significant number of White Americans.

Christian nationalism, however, is not solely a US phenomenon. It is particularly evident and virulent in Brazil.

American sociologist David J. Hess once described Brazil and the United States as “slightly distorted mirror-images of each other.” While one must take historical and cultural differences into consideration, the image of the mirror illuminates recent events in both countries. In fact, as historian Benjamin Cowan argues, Brazil and the United States have constructed together a transnational religious right. The Christian nationalisms of these two nations are intimately connected.

Thinking of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro through the lens of Christian nationalism helps us understand better the chaotic situation the Brazilian people have been facing during the pandemic—and the risks this situation poses not only to Brazil’s immediate neighbors but to the stability of the entire region.

Bolsonaro’s rise to power began after the farcical impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff in 2016. Conservative evangelicals played a significant role in the drama, helping to give Bolsonaro a national stage and, through corruption of the national court system, a near guarantee of power.

Since taking office in 2019, Bolsonaro has established himself as a right-wing, pan-Christian figure who unites conservative competitors in the religious market—Catholics and evangelicals—around a mythical representation of Brazil’s past and an imagined project for its future.

His inaugural speech included a repackaging of a well-known trope, one that recalls the discourse of those who supported the Brazilian dictatorship in 1964. “Let’s unite the people,” said Bolsonaro, “value the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, fight gender ideology, and preserve our values. Brazil will once again be a country free from ideological shackles.” By “ideological shackles” we should read: the inclusion of minoritized voices in society, politics, and education. Conservative Christians in Brazil embrace this language and resemble their US counterparts in their exclusionary dispositions. Brazilian evangelicals, who have been consistently influenced by southern US evangelicals since the 19th century, are central to Bolsonaro’s success.

The evangelical movement in Brazil continues to grow more established and closer to political power. In the past two decades, Brazil has seen the election of an ever larger number of evangelical politicians. Add to that the growing financial power of evangelical business owners, the broadening success of evangelical publishing houses (which translate conservative evangelical authors from the United States),

the increasing presence of evangelicals in mass media markets, and the interests of transnational evangelical power brokers that influence Brazilian culture and politics—and you have a very powerful movement indeed.

While the missionizing strategies of the 21st century are different from those of the past, US evangelicals continue to invest in influencing Brazilian society. For example, Ralph Drollinger and his powerful Capitol Ministries used the political weight of former vice president Mike Pence and former secretary of state Mike Pompeo to spread its influence throughout Latin America. Drollinger's Bible studies were translated into Spanish and Portuguese in an effort to spread his vision of using the gospel to influence top politicians around the world. Likewise, Brazilian pastors are among the international leaders brought to Capitol Ministries training events in Washington, DC. Drollinger visited Brasília—Brazil's capital—to negotiate terms with the Brazilian government for the formation of the Brazilian chapter of Capitol Ministries.

Bolsonaro unites conservative religious competitors around a mythical Brazilian past.

These realities overlap with the fact that conservative Catholics have now noticed that their influence over Brazilian politics and culture has weakened. Growth of their own parishes is largely driven by charismatic Catholicism, which is influenced by Pentecostal practices. Brazilian Catholics know that if conservative Catholic influence is to survive in Brazil, Catholic-evangelical coalitions are indispensable. And evangelicals have shown themselves more than willing to cooperate with their former archenemies against what are, to them, more dangerous boogymen: moral relativism, social liberalism, alleged neo-Marxism in its various forms, and LGBTQ rights.

A Christian expression of Bolsonarismo—the cultlike movement that animates Bolsonaro's base—is the place where all these dynamics meet. The political elements are multiple and reflect the interests of the movement's US supporters as well: pro-gun, anti-LGBTQ, anti-Black, anti-democracy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Christian Bolsonarismo has shown its deadliest dispositions. The parliamentary commission of inquiry that investigated Bolsonaro's responsibility for Brazil's 600,000 COVID deaths concluded that he committed 11 crimes, including homicide by omission, quackery, causing epidemic with death, and document fraud. Still, he has retained the support of a significant number of conservative Christian

leaders.

Conservative Christian support of Bolsonaro can be explained in part by his adoption of a moral agenda that strongly resembles that of the religious right in the United States. Bolsonaro and his influential sons are strongly pro-American, having close ties to Donald Trump and his former adviser Steve Bannon, among others.

Bolsonaro's son, the senator Eduardo Bolsonaro, often joins Bannon in his far-right nationalist, but ironically transnational, crusades. On January 4, Eduardo arrived "by surprise" at the White House. On January 5 he spent the day meeting with the Trump family and supporters, and the next day he was photographed in DC wearing a Trump 2020 election hat.

While Trump has been deterred somewhat by being voted out of office, Bolsonaro remains. He is the leading right-wing candidate for the 2022 presidential election, and, following Trump's playbook, he has already announced that he can only lose if the election is rigged. "Only God can get me out of this seat," he has said repeatedly in recent months.

On September 7—Brazil's Independence Day—Bolsonaro used the occasion to assault Brazilian democratic institutions, threatening both the Congress and the Supreme Court for their refusal to support his attempts to change electoral rules ahead of the election. On a day in which several high-profile evangelical leaders demonstrated their support for Bolsonaro, he declared that he will leave Brasília after the election only if he is arrested or killed. Otherwise, he will be victorious.

Former Trump adviser Jason Miller was in Brazil at the time, as a speaker at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Brasília on September 3–4. He was then held by the Brazilian authorities, who were acting on behalf of the Supreme Court, and questioned for hours in connection with his alleged participation in antidemocratic acts, including his alleged support for "digital militias" in Brazil.

Bolsonaro's wife is an active member of a Baptist church, and at least one of his sons identifies as evangelical. Bolsonaro himself, however, is Catholic and enjoys the support of conservative sectors of the Brazilian Catholic Church. His genius is to command a significant evangelical loyalty while keeping his Catholic identity, in a country where there is a historical rivalry between these groups. Bolsonaro even let a Pentecostal pastor baptize him in the Jordan River, still without renouncing his Catholicism. This ability to navigate a diversely Christian environment has led some

to describe him as the first pan-Christian president of Brazil.

Since the beginning of this century, a considerable number of Brazilian evangelicals, in their attempt to declare Brazil as “belonging to the Lord Jesus,” have engaged in concerted efforts to elect an evangelical president, though the few politicians who campaigned as evangelicals for the presidency never received enough support to win. In 2018 Bolsonaro was elected with massive evangelical support. He is often invited to speak in prominent evangelical pulpits, and he has close ties with popular evangelical leaders from many Brazilian denominations. His cabinet includes a number of Presbyterians and Baptists, and pastors like the Pentecostal Silas Malafaia pride themselves on being his spiritual counselors.

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In return for the support he receives from conservative Christians, Bolsonaro protects and promotes their interests. For example, Bolsonaro supported evangelical pastors and conservative Catholic priests campaigning to keep the churches open during the pandemic, showing strong opposition to lockdown, masking, and social distancing measures. More recently, he named his former attorney general André Mendonça, a Presbyterian minister, to fill a vacant seat on the Brazilian Supreme Court. Bolsonaro has contributed significantly to the growth of evangelical political power. The far-right alliance forming the base for Brazil’s Catholic president has consolidated him as the central figure of Brazilian Christian nationalism.

Brazilian Christian nationalism enjoys the vociferous support of conservative Catholics and the evangelical establishment alike. Devout Christians have become the most fervent supporters of a politician whose most recognizable campaign symbol is a machine-gun gesture. This is the same man who called an army officer convicted of torture during the 1964–1985 military dictatorship a national hero and has threatened to close both the Congress and the Supreme Court; the president who, in the midst of a pandemic, mocked the deaths of the people he is charged to protect.

Just a couple of months ago, while an average of almost 1,000 Brazilians died each day due to the uncontrolled spread of the virus, evangelical and conservative Catholic leaders continued to enable Bolsonaro’s lies. Throughout the pandemic, they have used their pulpits and their social media platforms to disseminate false

cures and anti-science rants. For many months, they promoted the use of hydroxychloroquine (shipped to Brazil by the Trump administration) and other untested drugs to cure the sick, while also discrediting the vaccines. They continue to spread the idea of the superiority and dominion of Christianity, directly or indirectly contributing to the increasing religious intolerance and racial prejudice that infest the country.

While his support among evangelicals remains significantly high, Bolsonaro's mismanagement of the pandemic has impacted his popularity, which recently reached an all-time low of 24 percent. On October 18, Brazil reached 603,000 COVID-19-related deaths. On that same day, the United States had around 724,000 deaths, and India was approaching 452,000. These three countries are the top contributors to the grim milestone of more than 4.5 million COVID-19-related deaths in the world. Brazil alone, with only 2 percent of the world's population, accounts for 13 percent of its COVID-19 deaths.

Brazilian scientists and activists are using the epithet "the Brazilian tragedy" to refer to this disproportionate death rate, and there is significant agreement among them that at least a third of those deaths were preventable. The impact of the pandemic goes beyond infection as well. More than 30 million of the 211 million Brazilians currently do not have a formal job, and 19 million Brazilians have gone hungry over the past year.

Brazilian scientists and social movements rightly blame Bolsonaro and his anti-science policies for the dramatic health crisis the country is facing. Bolsonaro's denialist stance on the pandemic is well known. He once dismissed COVID-19 as just a little flu. Last year, when asked by a journalist about the mounting bodies during the collapse of the health-care system in Manaus, he answered that he was not a gravedigger.

Infuriated and despairing, a large number of civil society organizations, including religious leaders, have organized frequent national protests calling for Bolsonaro's impeachment and even imprisonment. His administration is also being investigated for corruption in its negotiations for the purchase of vaccines.

A large number of Brazilians describe the Bolsonaro administration's policies as genocidal, seeing it in continuity with the politics of subjugation and extermination that Black and Brown Brazilians have experienced over more than five centuries.

The disproportionately deadly impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black and Brown Brazilians is perceived as a new chapter in this violent, racialized tradition.

In light of the growth in evangelical numbers and political power, Bolsonaro can be described as the first Brazilian political leader who is simultaneously the product, representation, and exploiter of contemporary forms of Christian nationalism; he is the messiah of Bolsonarismo. Bolsonaro's middle name, Messias, actually means "messiah," and this has not gone unnoticed by supporters and critics alike. When confronted by a reporter regarding the growth in COVID-19-related deaths, he said, "So what? I am sorry, but what do you want me to do? I am Messias, but I do not make miracles." Behold, the pan-Christian president of Brazil!

Messianic Bolsonarismo can be better understood if seen in light of a drastic religious shift taking place in the country, where new conservative alliances are being forged and a new political-religious coalition is flexing its muscles. One should be aware, though, that this is not the only game in town. The growth and radicalization of Christian nationalism have paradoxically contributed to the rise of evangelical, Catholic, ecumenical, and interreligious resistance movements that counter it. Though much smaller, these networks are also growing and connecting with broader popular movements of resistance.

Progressive evangelicals in Brazil are relentlessly organizing to oppose Bolsonaro's false messianism and defend the Brazilian democratic institutions under attack. This growing resistance is finding allies abroad in organizations such as the US Network for Democracy in Brazil, whose religion working group aims to educate potential US partners about the dangers of the course the Brazilian far right has set, not only for the Brazilian people but for the entire region. A movement such as transnational Bolsonarismo demands the mobilization of transnational and broadly ecumenical alliances of solidarity against it.

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