

CASE STUDY: BRAZIL

Global State of Democracy 2023 Report

Maria Santillana

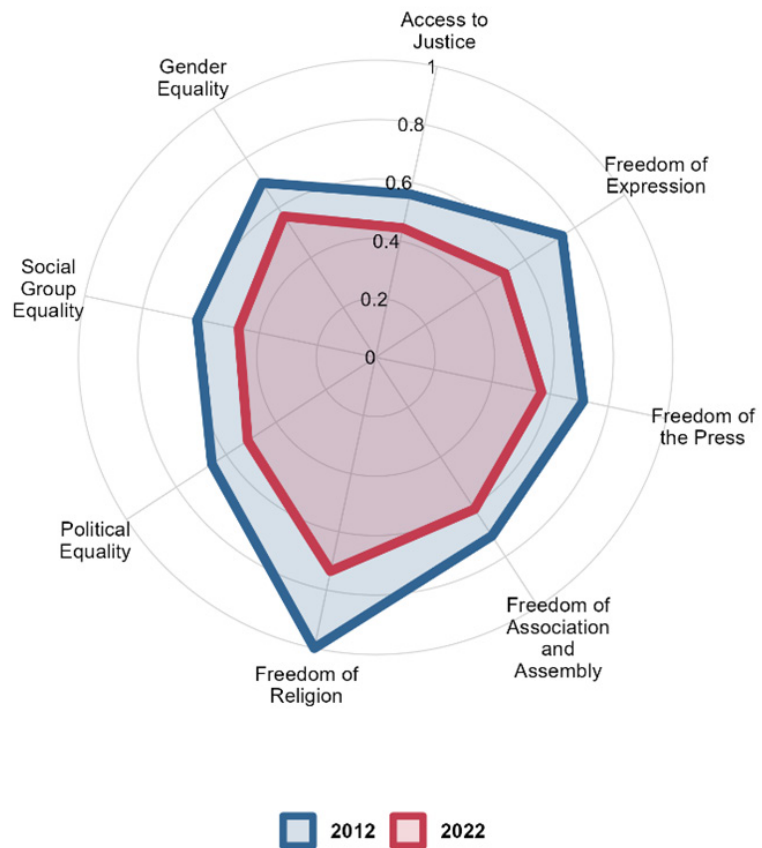
INTRODUCTION

On 8 January 2023, Brazil experienced ‘the most serious attack on state institutions since its return to democracy in 1985’ (Souto 2023). In an assault with alarming parallels to the 6 January 2021 attack on the Capitol in the United States, supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro stormed government buildings (Sullivan and Glen 2023), claiming the election had been fraudulent. This assault, which came months after Bolsonaro lost the election to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, has been attributed to Bolsonaro’s spread of election misinformation, toxic polarization and rising extremism (Salomón 2022). Like former US President Donald Trump, Bolsonaro frequently cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Brazilian electoral system, claiming without evidence that it was prone to fraud, especially regarding the electronic voting system (Al Jazeera 2022b; Santos 2022; Nicas, Milhorce and Ionova 2022). Bolsonaro issued a statement on social media condemning the riots and rejecting allegations of his involvement (Bolsonaro 2023; Millard 2023).

The 8 January attacks were the culmination of Bolsonaro’s efforts to destabilize democracy during his presidency (2019–2022), which was characterized by attempts to weaken core institutions, including electoral bodies, civil society, the media, and law enforcement agencies. The Bolsonaro tenure did have an impact, as seen in declining Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices scores in Credible Elections and Personal Integrity and Security. Waning performance in the Rights category is also notable, with significant declines across Access to Justice, Social Group Equality, and Civil Liberties, particularly Freedom of Expression, and Freedom of Association and Assembly (Figure 1). These declines are part of a broader decade-long negative trend and illustrate the democratic decline in Brazil.

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Figure 1. Rights performance in Brazil, 2012 to 2022



Source: Global State of Democracy Indices, v.7.1, International IDEA, 2023, <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/global-state-democracy-indices>>, accessed 17 October 2023.

Anti-discrimination measures and the protection of Indigenous peoples were negatively impacted, as specialized agencies were weakened, their funding cut, and mining was encouraged in protected lands in the Amazon.

CHALLENGES TO BRAZIL'S DEMOCRACY UNDER THE BOLSONARO ADMINISTRATION

Despite the long-established use of electronic voting in Brazil, a system widely regarded as trustworthy (Goldsmith and Ruthrauff 2013; Abel 2018; Audi 2022), the former president cast doubt on its integrity (Muggah 2021; Jeantet and Bridi 2022). Bolsonaro even introduced a bill advocating for printed ballots, largely deemed as an effort to sow uncertainty ahead of the 2022 election. In March 2022, Bolsonaro's supporters demonstrated in São Paulo to echo the narrative of election fraud (Stuenkel 2022).

Bolsonaro enacted policies that significantly eroded civic space. Anti-discrimination measures and the protection of Indigenous peoples were negatively impacted, as specialized agencies were weakened, their funding cut, and mining was encouraged in protected lands in the Amazon (Smith 2020; HRW 2021; Roper 2021; Fishman 2022). The former president's handling

of the Covid-19 pandemic was widely criticized due to high fatality rates, his government's spreading of misinformation, downplaying its severity, and an approach that framed the pandemic as a security issue instead of a public health emergency; military officers with no public health experience took on high-level posts in the Health Ministry (Pfrimer and Barbosa 2020; Akkoyunlu and Lima 2022). This contributed to erode trust in the country's specialized institutions (Zimmermann 2021; Heuser 2021).

Bolsonaro sought the concentration of executive power, often using social media to attack justices he criticized as obstructive to his agenda and to incite his followers against the judiciary and legislature (Werneck Arguelhes 2022). A notable instance was when, during a social media broadcast, he expressed discontent over the Supreme Court's investigation into fake news in Brazil. He labelled the probe as unconstitutional, and attempts to curb fake news as a threat to freedom of speech (Reuters 2020).

THE RESILIENCE OF COUNTERVAILING INSTITUTIONS IN BRAZIL

Congress and the judiciary

Brazil's democratic resilience can be attributed to its strong system of checks and balances. With power effectively distributed among branches of government, there are standards of accountability that prevent the concentration of power (Melo and Pereira 2013).

The National Congress was able to withstand efforts to change the voting system, rebuffing unfounded allegations about its vulnerability to tampering. In August 2023, for example, it rejected Bolsonaro's initiative, thanks to a strong opposition that had expressed concern about the increased cost, complexity, and potential for vote-buying or coercion associated with a printed receipt system (Boadle 2021; Hanley 2021; Iglesias and Carvalho 2021; Jeantet and Bridi 2022).

The Supremo Tribunal Federal (STF), Brazil's Supreme Court, is a central pillar in the country's judiciary, and its structure offers several safeguards against undue influence. Its 11 justices are appointed for life, allowing decision making free from political pressures. Appointments require presidential nomination and Senate approval, ensuring multiparty agreement. While lacking an internal comptroller, the Court operates under checks and balances, with each justice able to review colleagues' decisions. Its broad jurisdiction and constitutional interpretation authority further fortify its independence. The STF has taken an active role in defending its ability to regulate executive power. In a notable move in 2019, the STF granted itself the authority to initiate investigations into attacks on its operations without prior prosecutorial action, even amidst criticism for potential overreach. This decision came in response to constant misinformation and attacks on its work and justices, leading to the initiation of the 'fake news inquiry' (Globo 2021), which was defended as necessary to

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safeguard the constitutional order. Moreover, the STF's broad competencies allow it to consider many cases, reinforcing its role as a guardian of Brazil's constitutional order. However, these actions have raised questions about the balance of power in Brazil's democratic system, highlighting the complex dynamics between the branches of government (Nicas and Spigariol 2022).

The STF has continued to issue milestone judgments on subjects such as academic freedom, civil society participation and Indigenous rights, in many cases rejecting Bolsonaro's interpretation of the Constitution (STF 2019). During the pandemic, the STF played a pivotal role in maintaining public health and enforcing shared governance across the federal states in response strategies, notably suspending any state propaganda disseminating misinformation (STF 2021). Crucially, it rejected Bolsonaro's claim that article 142 of the Constitution allowed for military intervention in government branches (Peluso Neder Meyer and Bustamante 2020).

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Brazil's top Electoral Tribunal, the Tribunal Superior Eleitoral (TSE), plays a pivotal role in preserving the integrity, transparency and fairness of the country's electoral process. The TSE is composed of justices from various organs of the judiciary and notable jurists, which strengthens its institutional credibility. Throughout the 2022 electoral process, the TSE effectively managed appeals, enforced electoral norms and certified results, while addressing allegations of fraud. The TSE also upheld strict electoral regulations concerning campaign financing and political advertisements, ensuring fair competition among candidates (Green 2022; Reuters 2022). Moreover, the TSE collaborated efficiently with a range of stakeholders, including social media platforms, to mitigate the impact of disinformation during the election period (Biller 2023; Regattieri 2023). Prior to the election, the TSE launched a Program on Countering Disinformation, which was instrumental in ensuring the credibility and smooth running of the electoral process (Campos Mello 2022; TSE 2022).

Significantly, the decision to bar Bolsonaro from public office for eight years demonstrated the judiciary's effectiveness as a safeguard for accountability, citing his remarks discrediting Brazil's electoral system (Nicas 2023). Following the anti-democratic protests in January 2023, prosecutors initiated a federal investigation into Bolsonaro's involvement, extending the probe to other key figures implicated in the unrest. The arrest of Anderson Torres, Bolsonaro's former justice minister, on evidence of a planned far-right coup further illustrates Brazilian institutions' ability to uphold the rule of law (Al Jazeera 2023).

Media and civil society: A safeguard against authoritarianism

Despite Bolsonaro's frequent attacks on the press, Brazilian media has maintained its independence, resisting government interference. Media outlets provided thorough and balanced coverage of pivotal events, such as those on 8 January 2023, debunking disinformation disseminated by Bolsonaro, especially on social media platforms, where he sought renewed legitimacy for his divisive rhetoric, and publicizing violations of free speech and access

to information (Wirtschafter and Piccone 2023; Caeiro 2021). The media has also been key in exposing corruption scandals across several administrations, thereby increasing public pressure on the government and contributing to accountability (Article 19 2023; RSF 2022).

Brazil's civil society organizations have been instrumental in protecting democracy (Abers, Rossi and von Bülow 2021; Harris and Pooler 2022; Lacerda 2023; Aguiar Aguiar 2023). Public demonstrations against the January riots signalled citizens' demand for respect of the rule of law; meanwhile, activists have been denouncing policies that discriminate against Indigenous populations and risk their lands, the environment and their livelihoods (Fishman 2021; Watson 2023; Al Jazeera 2022a; Kahn 2023). Their activism included challenging a draft bill imposing an arbitrary cut-off date for Indigenous land rights, which underlines civil society's role in countering discriminatory legislation (Bruce 2023; HRW 2023).

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NAVIGATING THE ROAD AHEAD: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Brazil's democratic institutions have shown remarkable resilience and effectiveness in countering attempts to centralize executive authority and erode democracy. Their commitment to transparency, accountability and the rule of law has been key in preserving Brazil's democratic fabric. However, significant challenges persist, including ensuring the respect for rights, including freedom of expression, while countering misinformation. Political polarization, corruption and inequality should also be prioritized after a decade of democratic declines. Investing in education and social welfare, and fostering a culture of dialogue and compromise, among other efforts, will safeguard Brazil's democratic progress and mitigate the risks of autocratic leaders (Bradlow and Kadivar 2023).

ABBREVIATIONS

GSoD	Global State of Democracy
STF	Supremo Tribunal Federal
TSE	Tribunal Superior Eleitoral

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This case study was written by Maria Santillana with contributions/input from Miguel Angel Lara Otaola, Nicolás Liendo and Maria Angeles Morales.

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Design and layout: International IDEA

DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2023.70>>

ISBN: 978-91-7671-689-2 (PDF)



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