



Meet the Andrew Breitbart of Brazil

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At a rally against the Brazilian government on Rio's Copacabana beach on March 13, Rodrigo Constantino, a 39-year-old right-wing blogger and libertarian think tank director, stood atop a truck draped with a banner emblazoned with the words "Free Brazil Movement," an anti-Dilma Rousseff group founded after her re-election as president in 2014.

"Good morning patriots. ... Enough of communism and enough of collectivism!" he bellowed to the crowd of thousands. "Enough of tolerating indifferent people, these 'neutrals.' Neutrality today means support of the Worker's Party!" The crowd roared in approval.

For months, Constantino has been writing and promoting rallies like this to build support for what, as recently as a year ago, seemed unthinkable but increasingly seems probable: Rousseff's impeachment. Constantino has gone from a far-right media figure – the author of nine books on topics including Ayn Rand and the global liberal elite, and head of a tiny ultra-right think tank — to a figurehead of a national movement.

Constantino's ascent has been aided by the country's swirl of escalating crises. Its economy shrank 3.8 percent in 2015 while members of at least six of Brazil's political parties, including

Rousseff's ruling Workers' Party (PT), are under investigation for their alleged connection to the bribery scandal surrounding the state-backed oil company Petrobras.

But Constantino's success also owes something to his innate appreciation of the power of digital media to advance extreme political views. He admits to have taken his cues from the most controversial of U.S. media figures: Andrew Breitbart, the late conservative Internet mogul who fanned the Tea Party's flames during its rise in the early 2010s. With Brazil's masses turning decisively against the entire political establishment, the country's national political discourse increasingly bears the vigilante logic that had always defined Constantino's – and Breitbart's – punditry.

After studying economics at Rio's Catholic University and Ibmecc, Constantino worked as a financial analyst and investor. In those years, papers published by the conservative Washington-based Heritage Foundation and libertarian Cato Institute became the source of his conservative political awakening. He has recounted how they instilled in him a fervent belief in small government, deregulation, and the privatization of state-held companies.

In 2005, Constantino started a personal blog “to complain about politics.” It quickly became a platform for him to level broadsides against the PT, which has held the presidency since 2003, for the size of its government and its generous social assistance programs. Based on the blog's success, he began writing columns in the local Rio newspaper *O Globo* and the national newspaper *Valor Econômico*. In 2013, he was hired as a blogger at *Veja*, the nation's largest newsmagazine.

At *Veja*'s, he posted prolifically, roughly 10 times a day in his first month. He wrote posts arguing that affirmative action was a form of racism, supporting harsher sentencing for teenagers, slamming feminists, attacking Brazil's famous leftist education theorist Paulo Freire, and criticizing government business subsidies. The consistent threads were his vehement anti-government criticism, and his promise to opine without “fear of the ‘politically correct’ patrol.”

Although Constantino posed as a victim of the media establishment, he benefited immensely from this anti-establishment reputation. Tai Nalon, of the fact-checking site Aos Fatos, says that Brazil has long suffered from an “information crisis” with reliable news organizations shrinking and quality education out of reach for many. While most major Brazilian newspapers consistently take center-right editorial lines, Internet pundits have attracted huge audiences — even if, like Constantino, their journalistic standards are dubious.

Constantino's political involvement has also included a special focus on educating young minds — specifically Brazil's booming young libertarians. In 2012, Atlas Network, a Washington-based support organization for libertarian think tanks, helped the Brazilian free-market advocacy organization Instituto Ordem Livre conduct a seminar outside Rio to draft “new ideas for how the [libertarian] movement in Brazil would grow up,” said Bernardo Santoro. Soon after the seminar, Santoro relaunched the Instituto Liberal with Constantino as his partner. Not long

thereafter, seminar attendee Juliano Torres founded a Brazilian chapter of the American group Students for Liberty; now, Students for Liberty's 1,016 Brazilians constitute half of its global membership.

"We grew so quickly because we took advantage of the unpopularity of the PT, and because libertarianism feels like something new and different," Torres said. Atlas and Students for Liberty are funded by conservative U.S. groups such as the John Templeton and Charles Koch Foundations, although Students for Liberty Brazil has more recently transitioned to a local funding model. A handful of its leaders have received training in the United States on organizing, fundraising, and public speaking.

On his *Veja* blog's first anniversary, Constantino wrote that he had received over 2 million views per month and would continue covering diverse topics. But he made it a special mission to attack the PT, "because the priority is to take down the mafia that is installed in power."

In April 2014, when federal prosecutors published the first allegations of bribery at Petrobras, both Constantino's outrage and his readership soared.

Gradually, over the course of 2014, Constantino made corruption the focus of his attacks against the PT. Meanwhile, some Students for Liberty members, under the name Free Brazil Movement, began campaigning for Rousseff's impeachment following her re-election in October of that year. Their chief grievances were rising gas prices and inflation. They also parroted Constantino's longtime claim that the PT is "totalitarian." There are, as yet, no formal charges against Rousseff as part of the Petrobras anti-corruption probe. But over the course of 2015, Free Brazil organizers planned four nationwide protests and camped out for weeks in front of Brazil's Congress, where they lobbied lawmakers to begin impeachment proceedings. Websites of pro-military and anti-gay groups that had long declared themselves enemies of the PT joined in the recruitment calls for Free Brazil rallies. On Constantino's personal site and his blog at *Veja*, he excitedly called readers to demonstrate against the PT, "the great villain of our country."

Then, in October 2015, *Veja* abruptly terminated Constantino's contract without explanation and removed all his posts from their site. Shortly thereafter, he uploaded a video speculating that *Veja* had succumbed to government pressure. "I think *Veja* decided he was just too embarrassing," said Celso Barros, a political scientist and *Folha de São Paulo* columnist.

But the pot Constantino had stirred would continue to boil. On Oct. 6, the center-right PSDB sued the Rousseff administration on charges of illegal campaign financing, which could disqualify her election win. By the end of the year, the Free Brazil Movement had found a potent ally in embattled House Speaker Eduardo Cunha, a member of the big-tent PMDB party who has been accused of taking \$5 million in bribes connected to the Petrobras scheme. On Dec. 2, Cunha filed impeachment charges against the president. In March, it was reported that testimony from the Petrobras investigation cited top leadership from the PSDB, who called out their base for the March 13 demonstrations against Rousseff.

For two years now, the prosecutors investigating the Petrobras allegations have been hailed across Brazil's political spectrum for their nonpartisan approach. But this month, PT supporters began to suspect that they were being unfairly targeted when prosecutors detained former President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva for questioning, and a national television news program broadcast wiretaps between Lula and Rousseff mere hours after they were recorded. When Rousseff attempted to move Lula into a cabinet position, PT critics cried he was avoiding justice. The investigation became deeply politicized on both sides, with neutrality no longer an option for anyone even remotely involved in politics.

Most Brazilians calling for Rousseff's impeachment do not focus on the specific charges of misuse of funds in her 2014 budget. Instead, they repeat narratives from Constantino and the Free Brazil movement: that the PT is the most corrupt party in Brazilian politics, that Rousseff is unable to govern, and that her impeachment will resolve the majority of current problems. The PMDB would assume the presidency in the case of impeachment.

"It's misleading to say removing Rousseff in favor of a PMDB president would calm things down," said University of Campinas economist Pedro Paulo Bastos. "If the president's mandate is cut short in this way, the left is going to agitate across the country. We haven't seen mass strikes in years because the left has been in the government."

Bastos, Federal University of Rio economist Luiz Carlos Prado, and University of Campinas economist Fernando Nogueira da Costa said that the PMDB does not have a record of governing with less corruption or bureaucracy than the PT. "The PMDB is known for being a party of oligarchic local chiefs," Costa said.

Prado said Brazilian lawmakers should allow the Petrobras probe to run its course, and refocus on education and inequality — the country's two most pressing issues, in his view. "Brazil has nothing to gain from escalating and oversimplifying its problems," he added. "We are moving backward from the kind of pluralistic, civilized debate that has constructed the base of prosperity in the West since the postwar period."

Even if Free Brazil doesn't bring down Rousseff and the PT, the firebrand libertarianism that Constantino represents has jerked Brazilian politics and political discourse to the right. Free Brazil is planning to run 120 candidates for municipal elections this year in six parties including Novo, Brazil's first libertarian party. The PMDB released a platform in October recommending cuts in government spending on social services and promising a more pro-market orientation. "It's a real departure from PMDB policy in the past," says Bruno Borges, a political scientist at the State University of Rio, "and a plan on which they would have difficulty getting elected."

Almost a year ago, Constantino fulfilled a dream of moving to Miami to get away from a Rio that is "too violent and with many, many poor people." (He flew back for the impeachment protest.) He said his daughter attends a good public school. But what he is still trying to wrap his

head around about the United States is that “People are still talking about socialism in 2016! It’s absurd. It’s absurd.”