



The Brazilian Riot Was Not Inspired by January 6

The riot in Brasilia arose from the local tradition of political mob violence.

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On Sunday, over 1,000 supporters of Brazil's former president, Jair Bolsonaro, stormed the seat of the country's government in the capital city of Brasilia. Claiming that last year's election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was illegitimate, the rioters demanded a military intervention to reinstate Bolsonaro, who has yet to recognize his electoral defeat to da Silva, the leader of Brazil's Workers' Party. Bolsonaro has been in Florida since before the current president's inauguration on January 1.

Twitter soon became flooded with images of shattered windows and flag-waving ruffians who, clad in the yellow jerseys of the national soccer team, plundered the insides of Brazil's Congress, the Planalto presidential palace, and several ministries. Without delay, the global media began to feel reverberations of the Trumpist insurrection of January 6, 2021, in Washington, D.C.

"Brazil capital riot echoes Jan. 6," quipped MSNBC. "Bolsonaro supporters storm Brazil's Congress, echo Jan. 6 invasion," *Newsweek* reflected. "In echo of Jan. 6 attack in U.S., Brazilian protesters storm their Congress, high court and palace," added *USA Today*. The BBC's Mike Wendling, a "US disinformation reporter," went further and expounded on "how Trump's allies stoked Brazil Congress attack," noting, for instance, that Donald Trump's former adviser Steve Bannon had questioned the validity of Brazil's 2022 election in his podcast.

For all the global echoes of January 6—and the many instances of foreign correspondents echoing each other—Brazil's riot on January 8 was very much part of the local tradition of political mob violence, a tactic that the Brazilian left has fully mastered. For certain locals, in fact, yesterday's act of Bolsonarista thuggery was rather more reminiscent of the country's general strike in May 2017 than of the assault on the U.S. Capitol two years ago.

At the time, Brazil was in the midst of a fiscal crisis as the economy struggled to recover from a profound two-year-long recession. Then-President Michel Temer, a left-winger who had replaced the impeached Dilma Rousseff in 2016 (Temer had been Rousseff's vice president), sought to implement mild reforms to the country's notoriously rigid labor laws and set the minimum age of retirement at 65. As Reuters explained then, it was common for Brazilian workers to "retire with full benefits in their 50s." Brazil's leading labor unions, however, had other plans.

Together with the Workers' Party and the Communist Party, among others, union leaders claimed that Temer, whom the Supreme Court was investigating for corruption under the wide-reaching Odebrecht scandal, was an illegitimate president. They demanded his resignation and an ensuing election even though, had Temer resigned, an interim president would have been installed by law until the end of the established term. Taking the law into their own hands, however, the unions called a general strike that sought to bring down the government.

On the evening of May 24, 2017, Bloomberg reported the following:

Amid frequent clashes with police, demonstrators mobilized by Brazil's main labor unions broke into several ministries, causing widespread damage and setting fire to the agriculture ministry, according to GloboNews. All ministry buildings were subsequently evacuated and civil servants sent home.

That might sound eerily similar—if not identical—to Sunday's ruinous events in Brasilia, except for the fact that government buildings were empty last weekend. Not all commentators, however, have regarded both assaults as equally censurable.

Take the case of Brazil's current justice minister, Flávio Dino, who has taken to the airwaves to condemn the Bolsonaro riot with Churchillian flourishes and impeccable law-and-order rhetoric. "They will not succeed in destroying Brazilian democracy," Dino stated in a press conference. "We need to say that fully, with all firmness and conviction. We will not accept the path of criminality to carry out political fights in Brazil. A criminal is treated like a criminal."

In 2017, however, Dino, who was then governor of the state of Maranhão, a Workers' Party stronghold in Brazil's northeast, took a rather different view of the general strike and its aims. Taking to Twitter on the morning of May 24, weeks after the strike had proven to be an inherently violent affair, Dino wrote that "the voice of the people will make itself heard today in Brasilia. It is an essential political actor that analysts often ignore. May all take place in peace."

As things unfolded, "the voice of the people" turned out to be a euphemism for a throng's violent disregard for the rules-based system that Dino claims to uphold today. As Helio Beltrão, president of Brazil's Mises Institute, comments: "Five years ago, Flávio Dino encouraged the protests that burned down ministries. Those leftists who today correctly repudiate [the events], what did they say in 2017?"

Having cheered the attempted overthrow of a president with a constitutional mandate just five and a half years ago, da Silva denounced Sunday's events against his own government as "barbaric" and "abominable." Naturally, his regional allies have parroted this line, in some cases with even less moral authority to decry political violence than the Brazilian premier himself.

Chilean President Gabriel Boric, for instance, condemned "the disgraceful attack against the three branches of the Brazilian state by the Bolsonaroistas," and yet he helped to topple his country's constitutional order and only came to power after taking advantage of the most violent protests in recent Latin American history. Colombian President Gustavo Petro likewise denounced "fascism's coup" in Brazil, adding that "the right has been unable to maintain the pact of non-violence." As recently as last year, however, Petro was hinting that he would take up arms once again—he began his political career as a member of the murderous M-19 insurgency—if he lost the presidential election. Much like Bolsonaro, Petro warned that, were he

to lose, it would be due to electoral fraud, so he would not accept an unfavorable result. Those concerns dissipated the moment he was declared the victor.

Sunday's events in Brasilia are indeed contemptible. But Latin America's hard left has excelled at the art of political sabotage and the tactical use of violence against legitimate sitting governments, all the while selling a global media narrative of the fight for social justice, a noble stance against "austerity," or the principled defense of human rights. Instead, both sides exhibit a troublingly hypocritical will to power.

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