



Brazil's True Believers: Bolsonaro and the Risks of an Election Year

Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°47
Rio de Janeiro/Bogotá/Brussels, 16 June 2022

What's new? Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's far-right president, faces possible electoral defeat in October at the end of a term marked by inflammatory rhetoric, appointment of military personnel to civilian posts throughout government and grave mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why does it matter? Bolsonaro and his close allies point frequently to the likelihood of fraud and cast doubt on the integrity of Brazil's polls, hinting that they might dispute an adverse result in October. At the same time, the government's support base has narrowed while taking a harder line and getting more confrontational.

What should be done? A breakdown in Brazil's constitutional order remains unlikely, but the courts, the military and political leaders will have to act in unison to rebut any baseless fraud claims. Should Bolsonaro's far-right sympathisers appear poised for violence, police should move quickly to head off the threat.

I. Overview

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro faces an election in October that will put his conservative agenda and bombastic rhetoric to the test. While his main rival in the election, former President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, remains well ahead in the polls, Bolsonaro has regained some ground after hitting an all-time low in approval ratings following his mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic and alienation of moderate supporters. Loyalty to his far-right government remains unconditional among a base drawing heavily upon evangelical Christians, the police, the armed forces, big business and rural landowners. The president's efforts in 2021 to change the voting system, his attacks on other state institutions, including the courts, and his recurrent warnings about an amorphous threat of "communism" stoke concerns that he may dispute the election if he does not win. Unrest could ensue if his backers rally to his defence. In that event, Brazilian institutions will have to respond cohesively to any baseless claims of fraud while swiftly defusing any violent threat that Bolsonaro's hard-right sympathisers might pose.

Bolsonaro's rise to power was as much a condemnation of previous left-leaning governments as a victory for conservatism in Brazil. Drawing on burgeoning discon-

tent with the Workers' Party government, which had been in power since 2003 and stood accused of involvement in grand corruption, Bolsonaro, a long-time member of Congress and defender of military prerogatives, portrayed himself as the consummate political outsider, a man unafraid to speak his mind in coarse language. At the same time, he gave a megaphone to a growing conservative clamour in Brazilian society. His allies included evangelical Christians affronted by demands for LGBTQ+ rights, farming groups opposed to environmental restrictions and urbanites demanding tough measures to combat crime. Support from disenchanted voters on the left and backing from a broad right-wing coalition, combined with Lula's exclusion from the race after questionable judicial proceedings, enabled Bolsonaro to win the 2018 election by a handsome margin.

He has since faced numerous setbacks. The state's failure to control Amazon fires in 2020 earned him international rebuke and prompted diplomatic isolation, which was greatly aggravated after his main ally, former U.S. President Donald Trump, left office. His democratic credentials have come in for scrutiny after he meddled in judicial probes concerning his family and sniped at the trustworthiness of the Brazilian electoral system. Most importantly, his refusal to accept the seriousness of COVID-19 or trust in medical research has led Brazil to suffer one of the world's highest death tolls during the viral outbreak, now standing at over 660,000. One of the health ministers during the pandemic was an army general, appointed by the president not for his competence for the position but for his loyalty, and emblematic of the thousands of military officers now staffing government.

Lagging behind Lula in polls, Bolsonaro has stirred disquiet with his affinities with Trump and carping at the electoral system. Many Brazilians fear that, should he lose in October, the president might refuse to accept defeat and call upon the military to help him thwart the voters' will. Military involvement, let alone a coup, seems implausible, given statements from the top brass. Officers suggest that few in their ranks would back any meddling, while the courts, the media and much of the public would oppose any rupture in the constitutional order. But other dangers exist. Bolsonaro inspires devotion among those who embrace his conservative agenda and demonisation of the left. His loyalists would loathe a Workers' Party return to government. In recent years, they have resorted to public acts of provocation and overt threats to get their way. Furthermore, crime-related violence is commonplace in Brazil, and the country awash with guns. No evidence suggests that a far-right militia is up and running, but Bolsonaro's supporters could nonetheless take to the streets en masse to try disrupting a peaceful transfer of power.

Preventing turmoil around the polls will depend to a great extent on the swift response of Brazilian institutions – above all the Superior Electoral Court, the armed forces and federal prosecutors – to accusations of electoral fraud, particularly insofar as they are able to handle valid complaints and distinguish them from groundless claims. Political forces in Congress, including Bolsonaro's Liberal Party and others who have been sympathetic to him, will be essential to blocking disinformation, as will the media, while social media companies should be attentive to the misuse of their channels. If street protests arise, Federal Police should pay close attention to what far-right groups are doing and break them up if they threaten to provoke violence. Military and police commanders should also be mindful of the dangers of displays of partisan behaviour by troops or police officers. Moderation, assurances of electoral

integrity and the cohesion of Brazil's institutions will be crucial in helping the country withstand peacefully any confrontation between its political poles.

Foreign governments and international bodies have an important role to play as well. They should stand ready to condemn any action aimed at subverting the Brazilian electoral process, whether by Bolsonaro or his supporters.

II. **Building a Conservative Base**

Conflict and controversy have swirled around Bolsonaro ever since his political life began in 1986. Then an army captain, in that year he penned an op-ed in a well-known magazine airing soldiers' discontent with low wages.¹ Due to rules prohibiting serving military officers from publicly voicing political opinions, Bolsonaro was sentenced to two weeks in jail. Intended to deter him from seeking public renown, the move backfired: Bolsonaro was lionised by military officers as a result, and hundreds of their wives and retired soldiers wrote letters on his behalf. A year later, Bolsonaro was accused of planning to bomb several military facilities and the water treatment system in Rio de Janeiro as part of his campaign for higher salaries in the armed forces. After a trial in a military court, Bolsonaro was expelled from the army. The Supreme Military Tribunal reversed this decision following an appeal, but Bolsonaro nonetheless quit the armed forces to stand for election to the Rio de Janeiro city council, where he won a seat in 1988.

Bolsonaro became a member of the National Congress two years later and proceeded to keep his seat in the capital Brasilia through six subsequent elections. Despite his longevity in the legislature, he has shown little respect for traditional political loyalties during his career: he promptly resigned from the Christian Democratic Party that helped him get elected to Congress, and between 1990 and 2020 belonged to six different parties. He was elected president in 2018 under the banner of the Social Liberal Party but left it in his first year in office. Unable to attain the threshold requirements for securing legal status for his new party, the Alliance for Brazil, he remained without formal political affiliation until November 2021, when he joined the Liberal Party.²

Despite these brittle party ties, Bolsonaro's constituency has progressively expanded from its military core toward evangelical Christian movements, cultural conservatives, rural elites and supporters of "iron fist" law enforcement. For the first decade of his political career, his backing was anchored in military and security force personnel and their families. By 2009, he had emerged as the de facto spokesperson in Congress for the conservative caucus, enabling these parties to build alliances around a number of prominent themes.³ Proving himself a skilled political operator, he mo-

¹ Jair Messias Bolsonaro, "O salário está baixo", *Veja*, 3 September 1986.

² Bolsonaro ran in 1994 with the new Progressive Reform Party and in the 1998 and 2002 elections for the same force, renamed the Brazilian Progressive Party. Between 2003 and 2006, Bolsonaro changed parties three times – joining the Brazilian Labour Party from 2003 to 2005, the Liberal Front Party in 2005 and the Progressive Party from 2005 to 2016. He then switched affiliations two more times, joining the Social Christian Party in 2016-2017 and the Social Liberal Party in 2018-2019. In the 2022 election, the president is set to stand for the Liberal Party.

³ Crisis Group interview, anthropologist, October 2021.

bilised traditional rivals, such as Catholic and evangelical groupings, on issues such as religious teaching, home schooling and sexual education.

Bolsonaro also took advantage of the many challenges facing President Dilma Rousseff and her Workers' Party government. In what became known in Brazil as the "crisis super cycle", which culminated in her impeachment and departure from office, Rousseff experienced an outbreak of mass protests over poor public services and other grievances in 2013, the *lava jato* (car wash) corruption scandal, beginning in 2014, and an economic slump.⁴

While cheerleading the rising tide of opposition to Rousseff, Bolsonaro also carved out a more distinctive profile as a right-wing outsider by leading the resistance to proposals unveiled by the Workers' Party governments as part of the Third National Human Rights Program, launched in December 2009.⁵ Among other recommendations, officials proposed decriminalising abortion, placing limits on religious teaching and home schooling, prohibiting display of religious symbols in state offices, and creating a Truth Commission to delve into crimes committed under the 1964-1985 military dictatorship. Bolsonaro rallied his supporters against the creation of what he dubbed "gay kits" – materials that some opponents claimed were aimed at helping schoolteachers address the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people.⁶ From that time onward, Bolsonaro stayed at the forefront of debates on socio-cultural norms in Brazil, becoming a staunch defender of the conservative agenda in Congress. A deputy from Rio de Janeiro said he embodies "the true values of the Brazilian people. He is the only one who cares about family and God".⁷

Once close to the Workers' Party, especially during Lula da Silva's tenure, most evangelical groups – which tend to be stronger in poorer urban areas – broke ranks with the party after the Human Rights Program proposals were unveiled. A prominent pastor wrote in 2010 that "Christian principles are non-negotiable for us. In this regard, the Workers' Party is on the other side".⁸ The evangelical caucus in Congress moved to the opposition, finding in Bolsonaro a fierce ally against progressive causes. With its well-oiled political machinery and influential communications apparatus,

⁴ Fernanda Odilla, "5 anos depois, o que aconteceu com as reivindicações dos protestos que pararam o Brasil em junho de 2013?", BBC, 9 June 2018. Iolando Lourenço and Ivan Richard Esposit, "Lava Jato, crise política, impeachment e disputa entre Poderes marcaram 2016", Agência Brasil, 23 December 2016. Adriano Brito, "Em 3 pontos: Por que o governo Dilma não deu certo?", BBC, 18 April 2016. For a comprehensive analysis of the Rousseff presidency's latter years and the reasons for the onset of recession, see Richard Lapper, *Beef, Bible and Bullets: Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro* (Manchester, 2021), chapters 4 and 5.

⁵ "Programa Nacional de Direitos Humanos – PNDH-3", Brazilian Presidency, 21 December 2009. National Human Rights Programs are stipulated in the constitution, although it is the choice of each government whether to embark on one or not.

⁶ For more on the "gay kit" controversy, see Lilian Venturini and Matheus Pimentel, "Por que Bolsonaro mantém discurso do 'kit gay' mesmo desmentido", *Nexo*, 29 October 2019.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, congressman from the Rio de Janeiro State Congress, November 2021.

⁸ Pastor Silas Malafaia, leader of the church Assembleia de Deus Vitória em Cristo, wrote in 2010: "The [Third National Human Rights Program] was sent to Congress by the President of the Republic on 12/21/2009, and it is a shame that, in this document, in several points, there was only a retreat in issues related to violent pressure from the Catholic Church. The [Program], yes sir, is the responsibility of the Lula government and the Workers' Party". Extract from a letter sent by the Pastor Silas Malafaia to the Workers' Party in September 2010.

the evangelical movement in return gave the former military officer a tremendous boost in public reach and popularity. His baptism ceremony to become part of the evangelical denomination Assembleia de Deus in May 2016 in Israel further consolidated this partnership.⁹

Bolsonaro was already popular with low-ranking and retired soldiers, but he had remained widely distrusted among senior military commanders because of his campaigning for better working conditions while in the forces. His opposition to the Workers' Party human rights plans nevertheless began endearing him to the top brass. Senior commanders were particularly aghast at the creation of a Truth Commission to study crimes under the military dictatorship perpetrated both by the government and insurgents.¹⁰ Many officers saw the Commission as an anti-military witch hunt in disguise organised by former guerrillas now in government, starting with Rousseff herself.¹¹ After the Commission began its work, Bolsonaro stood out as nearly the sole member of Congress to attack its proceedings with venom, boosting his reputation with senior officers and establishing a strong bond with many of them.

Bolsonaro also strengthened his relationship with the police by providing unconditional backing to the security forces, particularly in his hometown of Rio de Janeiro.¹² His unflinching support for the police contrasted sharply with the critical stance

⁹ Brazil's evangelical movement has undergone astonishing growth, rising from 7.8 million adherents in the early 1980s to 42.3 million in the 2010 census – accounting for over 22 per cent of the Brazilian population. Major evangelical groups have bought hundreds of radio stations, small newspapers and magazines, heavily invested in the gospel music industry and acquired a TV network. Evangelical leaders control two political parties – the Republican Party and the Christian Social Party – and have built the largest congressional caucus, comprising 194 members of the House and eight senators. A number of associations also give support to its political representatives and propose legislation, such as the National Association of Evangelical Jurists. Bolsonaro quietly spent his first years as a presidential hopeful securing support from the evangelical political and communication apparatus, a move that passed nearly undetected by most pundits and the mainstream media. As a result, over 60 per cent of Brazilian evangelicals preferred Bolsonaro in the 2018 election, more than twice the number who supported the Workers' Party nominee Fernando Haddad. See "Eleições 2018", Datafolha Institute, 25 October 2018.

¹⁰ The Commission met between May 2012 and December 2014. Its final report documents human rights violations during the military regime, identified 377 perpetrators, classified levels of participation in those crimes and proposed 29 recommendations, including: public recognition by the armed forces of their part in human right violations; prohibition of public events that celebrate the military dictatorship; stripping identified perpetrators of any public award; and demanding that the Federal Prosecution Office investigate the whereabouts of 102 people who disappeared during the dictatorship but are not included in the official record of victims. For more information on the Commission and to view its final report, see the Commission's website.

¹¹ Rousseff joined the Revolutionary Marxist Workers' Party at the age of 16, before forming part of the National Liberation Command and, lastly, the Palmares Revolutionary Armed Vanguard, all of them armed groups resisting the dictatorship. According to her own account, she did not engage in armed actions, but was dedicated to enlisting student organisations and labour unions in fighting the regime. Rousseff was arrested on charges of subversion, for which she was imprisoned for almost three years. She was tortured for an extended period while in jail. "Lula diz que Comissão da Verdade não é caça às bruxas", *Congresso em Foco*, 15 January 2010.

¹² Bolsonaro has applauded police violence, when most Brazilians condemn it. A telling example was his public praise for the Rio de Janeiro officers responsible for the massacre of 28 people in the Jacarezinho *favela* in 2021. See "Bolsonaro parabeniza policiais por massacre do Jacarezinho", *Deutsche Welle*, 10 May 2021.

adopted by many left-wing politicians and civil society groups toward forces that are often accused of corruption and using excessive violence.¹³ Growing calls from right-wing politicians for a tough approach to crime have been matched by a sharp rise in the number of elected members of Congress and the Senate with a background in the police forces, many of whom profess loyalty to Bolsonaro.¹⁴

Bolsonaro also attracted rising support from rural landowners and frontiersmen (known in Brazil as *garimpeiros* and *madeireiros*) because of his opposition to the Workers' Party's proposal for land reform and ties to advocates for the rural poor, such as the Landless Workers' Movement.¹⁵ This movement has occasionally occupied farms it deems unproductive to press for land redistribution, prompting Bolsonaro to refer to the activists as terrorists and argue that landowners should be allowed to repel such invasions with deadly force.¹⁶ Bolsonaro's disregard for environmental regulation, his preference for allowing extractive industries to proceed unchecked and his criticism of the demarcation of native Brazilians lands' have made him into a firm ally of rural elites and those who oppose any form of land redistribution or imposition of limits on land use.¹⁷

By 2014, Bolsonaro had begun to combine these positions in a cohesive conservative platform, and his political profile soared as a result.¹⁸ That year, Bolsonaro was elected to Congress with the highest tally, at over 400,000 votes – nearly four times his average over the previous five legislatures. Between 2014 and 2018, Bolsonaro would work to refine his rhetoric and anti-establishment stance, gain new followers and become the leading adversary of the ruling Workers' Party.

III. Polarisation and the Road to Victory

Although support for Bolsonaro rose constantly after he announced that he was running for president in 2016 (he was polling second a year after declaring his candidacy), the campaign was transformed by two pivotal yet largely unexpected episodes. First,

¹³ Maurício Dias, "Polícia Militar se tornou a força mais corrupta e mais letal do Brasil", *Carta Capital*, 23 March 2019. Leonel Radde, "A Polícia Militar tem que acabar?", *Carta Capital*, 4 December 2019.

¹⁴ The 2018 elections gave seats to 32 members in the lower house and five senators who had professional experience in the police. See Lapper, *Beef, Bible and Bullets*, op. cit., p. 147.

¹⁵ Frontiersmen is a catch-all term used in Brazil that includes workers in extractive industries, such as loggers and miners.

¹⁶ "Bolsonaro diz que MST está mais fraco por causa de liberação de armas", *Istoé Dinheiro*, 14 April 2019.

¹⁷ Bolsonaro's land and environmental policies are a source of intense controversy. The president does not believe in climate change and considers it unnecessary to limit the environmental impact of extractive economies. He holds that native ecosystems are untapped economic frontiers that should not be preserved but exploited. This approach has placed his administration at loggerheads with indigenous groups and their demands to preserve their lands. Bolsonaro has been rolling back a number of existing protective policies, loosening environmental policies, and defunding and dismantling watchdog institutions. See "Bolsonaro anistia grilagem, freia novas áreas indígenas e estaciona reforma agrária", *Folha de São Paulo*, 4 January 2020.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Brazilian political analyst, October 2021.

Lula da Silva, the favourite to win, was arrested six months before the voting.¹⁹ After Lula was replaced on the Workers' Party ticket by Fernando Haddad, former mayor of São Paulo, Bolsonaro found himself catapulted to first place in opinion polls. Secondly, in September 2018, a mentally disturbed person tried to kill Bolsonaro with a knife. The assassination attempt, during a rally in the state of Minas Gerais, galvanised the wounded candidate's loyalists, increased public sympathy for him and, crucially, enabled him to excuse himself from debates with other hopefuls and campaign instead via social media. Bolsonaro eventually defeated Haddad in the election's second round with 55.13 per cent of the vote.

The map of election results from the second round paints a clear picture of Brazil's polarisation, with voting patterns reflecting the deep economic differences that make Brazil the most unequal country in Latin America. Bolsonaro managed to dominate a majority of cities in the Central West, Southeast and South regions, which are wealthier and more conservative (although featuring extreme inequality and containing large low-income populations), while Haddad secured nearly all cities in the North and Northeast regions, traditionally poorer parts of the country which had benefited more from the welfare programs introduced by the Workers' Party government. According to surveys conducted on the eve of the second round, Bolsonaro's support was notably stronger among certain demographic segments, above all those who were middle-aged, white, male, with higher education, evangelical, heterosexual, with above average income and living in the South or Southeast regions.²⁰ This profile accurately describes his core support base to this date.

Bolsonaro's meteoric ascent atop a new majority coalition had been overlooked by many pundits, who dismissed him as a loudmouth with little name recognition.²¹ The political party that supported his candidacy, the Social Liberal Party, also had no national presence, made no significant alliances and had a budget strikingly smaller than that of other contenders.²² But Bolsonaro's conservative agenda and his partnership with evangelical leaders raised his popularity with a highly mobilised and committed social base. At the same time, general animosity toward the Workers' Party,

¹⁹ At the time of his imprisonment, there were eight cases against Lula da Silva. Between 2017 and 2019, he was found guilty of having received two properties as bribes. In the wake of the Supreme Court's 2016 decision that a suspect could be sent to prison after conviction in the first appeals court – even if he or she still has the right of appeal in higher courts – Lula was arrested on charges of corruption and money laundering in April 2018. In 2019, the Supreme Court determined that he could be freed until his appeals were exhausted, leading to his immediate release. See “Entenda a situação de cada processo de Lula na Justiça com a reviravolta no STF”, *Folha de São Paulo*, 8 March 2021.

²⁰ “Eleições 2018”, Datafolha Institute, 25 October 2018. On heterosexual and LGBTQ+ voting patterns, see “Entre LGBTs, Haddad lidera com 57% e Bolsonaro tem 29%”, *Folha de São Paulo*, 26 October 2018.

²¹ Brazil allots national TV time for free campaign ads for presidential candidates in two blocks of twelve and a half minutes, three times per week, divided among all the candidates according to the size of the sponsoring party's delegation in Congress. Bolsonaro had only eight seconds of TV time per block before the first round, compared to five minutes and 32 seconds for Geraldo Alckmin and two minutes and 23 seconds for Fernando Haddad.

²² His campaign spent a little over \$320,000, against \$6.5 million by Haddad and \$9.5 million by Alckmin. See Luiza Damé, “Meirelles e Alckmin movimentam mais recursos do que Bolsonaro e Haddad”, *Agência Brasil*, 29 October 2018.

which was drowning under accusations of corruption, gave him a crucial boost at the polls.²³ Bolsonaro was able to capitalise on the discontent by portraying himself as the most outspoken opponent of left-wing ideology and “politics as usual”. The campaign #NototheWP (#PTNÃO) presented Bolsonaro as a face of renewal many Brazilians wanted.²⁴

Bolsonaro also became particularly deft at using online media as a way to reach his constituents directly. During President Rousseff’s first term, the Workers’ Party had invested heavily in creating a network of progressive digital influencers supporting the government. By way of response, between 2013 and 2015 a number of new media outlets and social media channels displaying unabashed hostility toward the government and the political left began to appear. Bolsonaro not only became a reference point for this new right-wing virtual activism, but also raised an army of influencers and digital profiles to act as vehicles for his communication strategy.²⁵

On his road to victory in 2018, Bolsonaro morphed into the candidate best able to articulate the values of major constituencies across Brazil, even though his claim to represent these principles might not have always stood up under scrutiny. His tough line on security, including overt support for the actions of death squads, has proven consistent.²⁶ Less convincing was his self-portrayal as a politician driven by religious belief, since he had never formally been a member of the evangelical caucus. He claimed to be a political outsider, in spite of having spent almost 30 years as a member of Congress, and a committed opponent of the Workers’ Party, even though at one point he was part of the coalition supporting Lula’s presidency. Despite his track record of favouring nationalist policies and an interventionist state, in the campaign he positioned himself as an economic liberal.

Bolsonaro’s supporters, however, saw in him a candidate willing to break the mould of Brazilian politics and deliver on his promises. They respected him as a man with simple tastes, unlike most politicians with their lavish lifestyles, and as a leader unafraid to speak his mind. They considered him incorruptible. A senior military officer described Bolsonaro as “an honourable man who, despite his past controversies, has

²³ Crisis Group interview, Brazilian social scientist, October 2021.

²⁴ The #PTNÃO initiative was launched by as a counterweight to the highly popular social media campaign #EleNÃO, created to voice opposition to Bolsonaro.

²⁵ See Lapper, *Beef, Bible and Bullets*, op. cit., pp 45-47. Widely called a “virtual militia” by the media, this group has allegedly disseminated fake news, launched personal attacks on political figures and institutions, and even hacked into their online profiles. Supreme Court Judge Alexandre de Moraes has initiated an investigation into these tactics. See Giovanna Galvani, “6 pontos para entender a investigação de fake news no STF que chegou a Bolsonaro”, CNN, 4 August 2021. It is now widely accepted that misinformation was rampant during the 2018 campaign. According to research conducted by Avaaz, 98 per cent of Bolsonaro’s voters were exposed to false news and 89 per cent believed in at least one fake data point they had seen online. “90 dos eleitores de Bolsonaro acreditaram em fake news diz estudo”, *Folha de São Paulo*, 2 November 2018.

²⁶ Bolsonaro said in a speech to Congress in August 2003: “I want to say to my comrades in Bahia – I recently heard a congressman criticise death squads – that as long as the state does not have the courage to adopt the death penalty, the crime of extermination, in my opinion, will be very welcome. If there is no space for him in Bahia, he can go to Rio de Janeiro. If it depends on me, they will have my full support, because in my state only innocent people are decimated. In Bahia, from the information I have – of course they are illegal groups – marginality has decreased. Congratulations!” See “Em discurso, Bolsonaro apoiou grupo de extermínio que cobrava R\$ 50 para matar juvenes de periferia”, *Congresso Em Foco*, 13 October 2018.

shown that he was different from the common politician. He has shown that he was not afraid to put his life in danger to defend the country [from the left and corrupt politicians].²⁷

In the final analysis, the linchpin holding these different positions together would seem to be a general Brazilian patriotism combined with a renewed fear of communism and its allegedly insidious spread through society.²⁸ Patriotism and anti-communism in effect became the foundation of the *bolsonarista* movement.²⁹ Bolsonaro was able not only to appropriate Brazilian national symbols, which protesters used in the 2016 campaign to impeach Rousseff, but also to revive the dormant Cold War bogeyman. He argued on the campaign trail that communism is Brazil's most significant threat, endangering the country's future as well as society's core values. According to a supporter, "Bolsonaro has been fighting communism since he was a teenager in his hometown. He has a history of defending the country, in the army and now at the presidency. Nobody understands better than him [the danger of communism]."³⁰

IV. Bolsonaro's Shifting Support Base

Since assuming the presidency, Bolsonaro's controversial opinions and collisions with prominent figures have reshaped his social base. Moderates have tended to abandon him, particularly as a result of his mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, but devoted supporters remain unreservedly loyal, while he has cultivated new sympathisers in the poorest parts of Brazilian society.

A. Losing Moderates, but Winning over Others

In the three years since becoming president, Bolsonaro has largely lost the support of voters attracted by his anti-corruption message, many of whom did not care for the extreme planks of his platform but were keen to punish the Workers' Party for its mistakes in government. The president's claim to probity was undermined when the courts filed corruption charges against one of his sons, and then again, when Justice Minister Sergio Moro resigned in protest after Bolsonaro interfered in police appointments bearing on cases of misinformation involving others in his family.³¹ These events

²⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior army officer, April 2022.

²⁸ "Now, the universities, that is another story, they have been wanting to spread socialism. They have been trying to spread this ideology [socialism]. They have even tried to include socialism in the [military academy's] curriculum. ... In the end, what you have to understand is that the left has been persecuting people on the right for years". Crisis Group telephone interview, senior army officer, April 2022.

²⁹ The *bolsonarista* movement is inspired by the ideas of the late Olavo de Carvalho, a philosopher who was also a prolific disseminator of political conspiracy theories and misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine effectiveness. Carvalho reportedly had considerable influence over the Bolsonaro clan, especially the president's youngest son, Eduardo. He died in the U.S. in January 2022 after having been hospitalised due to COVID-19 complications.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, right-wing digital influencer, October 2021.

³¹ See "Sergio Moro pede demissão e acusa Bolsonaro de interferência na PF", CNN, 24 April 2020. Moro is a former justice and public security minister, who won fame as the judge leading the *lava jato* case, which focused on corruption surrounding the Brazilian oil company Petrobras. As part of

weakened Bolsonaro's grip on the *lavajatistas* – supporters of the *lava jato* probe of the Workers' Party government – who regard Moro as a hero for defying the former ruling party and arresting Lula.³² According to a member of the *lava jato* prosecution team, “[Bolsonaro had] the worst possible stance ... aggravated by his desire to interfere in the Rio Federal Police, a sign that he intends to subordinate the public interest to his private, understandable but irrelevant interest of protecting his son”.³³

Meanwhile, Bolsonaro's anti-democratic tendencies have alienated centrist supporters. Over the course of the pandemic, the president has participated in several marches calling for the closure of Congress and the Supreme Court. The protesters demanded the arrest of several lawmakers and Supreme Court justices for allegedly impeding Bolsonaro's rule. They pressed as well for the military's return to government and the reintroduction of authoritarian legislation from the military dictatorship era.³⁴

Bolsonaro has questioned the 2018 election results more than once, claiming that he should have won in the first round, and complained as well that Brazil's electronic voting system suffers flaws that cast doubt upon the final tally's accuracy – giving him fewer votes than he deserved. He has expressed unease about the integrity of the 2022 vote, which he says will most probably be rigged, and has suggested the election will be invalid if authorities do not use paper ballots and include public scrutiny of the count, or allow the armed forces to verify it in parallel.³⁵ A constitutional reform that would have made paper ballots mandatory for all elections, proposed by Bolsonaro loyalist Bia Kicis, was rejected by the lower house of Congress in August 2021. The proposal's defeat means that the state can no longer make major reforms to the voting system in time for the October poll, though similar bills may emerge in the legislature before then. The push for electoral reform, along with Bolsonaro's constant spats with members of Congress and the judiciary, has sown division among his right-wing supporters.

Yet it is Bolsonaro's stance against social distancing measures and lockdowns to control the spread of COVID-19 that has been the most divisive issue of his tenure, placing him at odds with most state governors and city mayors. He has also faced resistance from medical authorities after raising doubts as to the effectiveness of vaccines and defending the use of medicines such as hydroxychloroquine to treat coronavirus patients, against the World Health Organisation's advice. Brazil has the

this probe, Moro was also responsible for Lula's arrest. With the 2022 race approaching, he launched a bid for the presidency, but he called off his campaign in April.

³² Bolsonaro's standing among Brazilians whose major concern is corruption deteriorated even further after the arrest of Fabrício Queiroz, who allegedly ran a money laundering scheme for Flávio Bolsonaro (the president's eldest son). Queiroz, a close friend of the family for over three decades, had been hiding for almost a year in a country house owned by Flávio's attorney. See “Caso Queiroz e família Bolsonaro: quem depositou dinheiro para quem”, BBC, 25 August 2020.

³³ “Queiroz faz Bolsonaro perder apoio lavajatista”, *Correio Braziliense*, 8 September 2019.

³⁴ See “Brazil's Deadly Calm”, Crisis Group Commentary, 20 November 2020. Bolsonaro has supported the reintroduction of Institutional Act n.5 (AI5), a 1968 decree issued during the military regime. It suspended constitutional guarantees, allowed the president to intervene in states and municipalities, outlawed public gatherings without police authorisation and gave the president the power to impose a forced recess on federal and state legislatures.

³⁵ “Bolsonaro: ‘Ou fazemos eleições limpas no Brasil, ou não teremos eleições’”, *Correio Braziliense*, 8 July 2021. “Bolsonaro pede apuração paralela feita por militares ‘para a gente confiar nas eleições’”, UOL, 28 April 2022.

world's second highest death toll from COVID-19 (over 660,000) and one of the highest mortality rates for countries with populations of 30 million or more.³⁶ The president's tendency to dismiss appropriate public health measures and downplay the disease's risks; his constant interference in the work of the Health Ministry, which has seen four different ministers since 2020; and accusations of a major corruption scheme to buy overpriced vaccines prompted Congress to create a commission of inquiry to investigate the government's responsibility for the devastation that the pandemic has caused.³⁷

But if the president has seen moderate constituencies abandon him, he has shored up support elsewhere. He has managed to win some backing from the private sector, largely because of his concern with economic conditions and resistance to closing businesses even at the peak of contagion. His business friends include large firms, but also middle-class small entrepreneurs who have limited cash reserves and were already struggling. These sectors see in Bolsonaro an ally helping keep business afloat, in contrast to the politicians who favour lockdowns.³⁸

Bolsonaro's popularity has also risen among the poorest Brazilians thanks to a series of cash transfer initiatives, even though the president had been a fierce critic of these programs when they were developed under the Lula administration.³⁹ In April 2020, the government announced an emergency welfare scheme (*Auxílio Emergencial*), lasting to the end of the year, to compensate for income lost in the pandemic. The program's generous terms helped boost support for Bolsonaro after many families saw the economic gains they had made in Lula's tenure erased during the first weeks of the pandemic.⁴⁰ In 2021, the program was cut back and subsidies halved, leading to a sharp rise in poverty rates.⁴¹ Subsequently, the government increased basic wel-

³⁶ See "Coronavirus Resource Center", Johns Hopkins University.

³⁷ In addition to the controversial decisions mentioned, the Commission identified other specific moves by the government that weakened the country's ability to respond effectively to the pandemic, including the government's failure to provide oxygen during a shortage in Amazonas state, resulting in dozens of deaths; ignoring early vaccine offers from laboratories such as Pfizer, resulting in a delay in the vaccination campaign; and accusations of fraudulent studies conducted by the hospital chain and insurance company that were used by the president to advocate for the use of hydroxychloroquine. For more details, refer to the Report and final documents from the Commission, see "Relatório da CPI da Pandemia", Federal Senate.

³⁸ According to Junior Durski, owner of the Madero fast food chain, "the country cannot take it. It cannot stop like this. People have to produce and work. We cannot [stop] because of five or seven thousand people who are going to die. This is serious, but the consequences that we will have economically in the future will be much greater than the people who will die now from the coronavirus". Erick Mota, "Brasil não pode parar 'por 5 ou 7 mil mortes', diz dono do Madero", *Congresso em Foco*, 23 March 2020.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Brazilian political scientist, October 2021.

⁴⁰ The pandemic cash transfer program, which lasted until late 2020, has been described by one author as "by far the most generous COVID-19 assistance provided by any developing country". See Lapper, *Beef, Bible and Bullets*, op. cit., p. 230. See also "Brazil's Deadly Calm", op. cit. *Auxílio Brasil* aims to benefit over 15 million families by providing them with a fixed income. The amount each family receives varies depending on the number of people per household and criteria such as whether children participate in sports and how they perform in school. A family can receive up to \$75 per month. For more details, see the official program website, *Receber o Auxílio Brasil*.

⁴¹ "Brasil: bajan el valor del auxilio de emergencia y 61,1 millones vuelven a la pobreza", *Brasil de Fato*, 26 April 2021.

fare support and rebranded Lula's successful cash transfer scheme, Bolsa Familia, as Auxílio Brasil, although the handouts have not been enough to offset steep rises in living costs.⁴² These measures helped Bolsonaro gain ground among the neediest Brazilians, though recent polls show that 63 per cent of the poorest voters support Lula, while 23 per cent back the incumbent.⁴³

B. *Hardcore Supporters*

According to a recent study, the president's most loyal supporters make up 11 per cent of the electorate (down from 17 per cent in 2020) and, importantly, show signs of moving rightward in their political positions.⁴⁴ The predominant characteristics of the *bolsonaristas* have remained the same since the president started his campaign for the top office: they are typically white males, older, wealthier and more educated than the Brazilian average. Evangelicals still compose a third of the president's base and he retains strong support among the armed forces, police and the private sector.

The connection between Bolsonaro and his adherents goes beyond a shared agenda: they have established an emotional link, strengthened by the perception that the president is the only "authentic" politician. "We needed a mad man in politics", said a senior official in the armed forces. "Someone who was brave or crazy enough to stand up against the powerful. No other politician has the guts to speak his mind, whatever it takes. He is not afraid to tell the truth".⁴⁵ As his supporters see it, Supreme Court justices, academics and media figures attack Bolsonaro due to his determination to clean up Brazil's venal politics. General Augusto Heleno, head of the Institutional Security Office of the Presidency, declared via social media that: "You either trust Captain Bolsonaro, who had the vision and courage to ... take on the system and give us hope of change, or you can keep attacking him and hand Brazil back to the left in 2023". Referring to Argentina's 2019 polls, in which Peronist Alberto Fernández prevailed over the centre-right Mauricio Macri, he added, "Argentina is right over there to prove me right".⁴⁶

Alongside the perception that Bolsonaro is uniquely equipped to purify Brazilian politics and block the left from returning to power, many of his supporters also see in the president a champion of their particular conception of freedom, a term he uses frequently. Bolsonaro's interpretation of liberty revolves around an absolute freedom from restrictions. It comes in striking contrast to his embrace of a tough law-and-order approach. In effect, he appears to believe that those persons or groups he deems to be in the right should enjoy undiluted freedom; others should face the harshest

⁴² "Auxílio Brasil ainda não melhora percepção sobre economia, avalia presidente do Ipespe", Valor Investe, 27 January 2022.

⁴³ "Eleições 2022", Datafolha Institute, 30 May 2022.

⁴⁴ "Bolsonaristas fiéis representam atualmente apenas 11%", *Diário do Estado*, 17 September 2021. According to these pollsters, *bolsonaristas* are those who voted for Bolsonaro in both rounds in 2018, say they trust everything he says, approve of the government and intend to vote for him in the next presidential election.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior army officer, April 2022.

⁴⁶ See tweet by General Augusto Heleno, @gen_heleno, 3:33pm, 23 January 2020. A little over a month before Heleno sent this tweet, President Fernández had assumed office in Argentina. Fernández is generally perceived as a left-wing leader, in keeping with a significant part of the populist Peronist movement established by the former president, Juan Domingo Perón.

penalties possible. For instance, he has defended illegal loggers razing forests in the Amazon as acting within the permissible bounds of economic liberty.⁴⁷ At the same time, a hungry person who steals food is, according to Bolsonaro's reasoning, a thief who should feel the full weight of the law.⁴⁸

This selective conception of freedom is undeniably attractive to parts of Brazilian society, not least low-income groups (especially those working in the informal sector) who sometimes feel that officialdom impinges upon their ability to earn a living with burdensome regulations, while doing little to protect them from violent crime. The idea of unrestricted liberty extends to other parts of the president's agenda, such as the right to own and carry weapons. Bolsonaro has advocated for more ordinary citizens to have weapons so that they can better defend themselves from criminals with easy access to guns.⁴⁹

V. Potential Dangers Ahead

With the presidential vote approaching in October, Bolsonaro's hostility toward institutions that oppose his policies, ambivalence toward democratic norms and scepticism about the integrity of the country's election system have raised concerns that he may seek to thwart or subvert the electoral process. His low standing in opinion polls until mid-2022 intensified these concerns, while the presence of numerous senior military officers in the government, as well as the president's vocal support for the former military dictatorship, has heightened fears that he may seek to embroil the armed forces in an effort to retain power.⁵⁰ Risks of unrest or instability will likely hinge on the stance taken by his most loyal supporters.

A. *Disregard for Democracy?*

Bolsonaro's contempt for democracy is well documented. On more than one occasion, he has stated that he would only leave the presidency "dead, arrested or victorious [in the 2022 elections]... and I will never be arrested", or that "only God could remove him from Brasilia".⁵¹ He has not shied away from praising the military dictatorship, which he has associated with honest rule, economic dynamism and an orderly society.⁵² He has

⁴⁷ "Bolsonaro defende exploração mineira na Amazônia devido a efeitos da guerra na Ucrânia", Agência EFE, 2 March 2022.

⁴⁸ For a deeper understanding of Bolsonaro's conception of liberty, see "As três vivas à liberdade de Jair M. Bolsonaro", *Open Democracy*, 17 June 2021.

⁴⁹ See Cintia Acayaba and Thiago Reais, "Brasil dobra o número de armas nas mãos de civis em apenas 3 anos, aponta Anuário", *O Globo*, 15 July 2021.

⁵⁰ "The Might and the Right: How Far Will Brazil's Military Back Bolsonaro?", Crisis Group Commentary, 1 July 2021. The head of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency reportedly aired concerns about the effects of Bolsonaro's distrust of the voting system on the country's democracy in a meeting with senior Brazilian government officials in 2021. "CIA chief told Bolsonaro government not to mess with Brazil election, sources say", Reuters, 5 May 2022.

⁵¹ "Eu nunca serei preso!", afirma Bolsonaro em discurso na Paulista", *Correio Braziliense*, 7 September 2021.

⁵² Paula Adamo Idoeta, "Bolsonaro 'fantasia' retorno a 1964, mas cenário não permite golpe, opina cientista político", BBC, 6 September 2021.

also said democracy opened the floodgates to myriad problems, such as endemic corruption and economic mismanagement, while enabling former criminals and terrorists to run the country. Bolsonaro regularly curtails transparency (he often classifies non-essential government information), attacks the rights of minorities and human rights, and shows little basic civility to political opponents. On one occasion, he suggested that former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso should face a firing squad for trying to privatise some of Brazil's state-owned companies.⁵³

Much of this anti-democratic posturing has taken clear aim at institutional targets, particularly the Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Court.⁵⁴ Brazilian law states that attempts by the executive to curtail the free exercise of the powers of the courts or of Congress constitutes a "responsibility crime", which could lead to impeachment. Even so, Bolsonaro has continuously clashed with Supreme Court judges and has tried to find ways to skirt their decisions. When the Court, for example, tried lawmaker Daniel Silveira for his verbal attacks on the judges, the president announced he would not accept a decision unfavourable to his ally. After the sentencing, he signed a decree pardoning Silveira, which according to many lawyers is an impeachable offence.⁵⁵

In a letter sent by 80 Brazilian lawyers to the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, the jurists claim that Bolsonaro has used informal and formal mechanisms to assail the courts.⁵⁶ The president has repeatedly made false claims aimed at whipping up hostility to the Court, saying, for example, that Judge Roberto Barroso (who was then chief justice of the Superior Electoral Court) defended paedophiles.⁵⁷ Formal mechanisms used to weaken the Supreme Court include an attempt to impeach one of the judges and mobilising his supporters in Congress to lower the mandatory age for the retirement of judges, which would have allowed him to select two new members to the court.

His supporters have blamed the court for overreach and for undermining the president: "If the Court had not gotten in his way so much, Bolsonaro would have governed much better and would have done so much more. The members of the Court ... are against the current government and they are harming the country. They don't have the country's wellbeing as a priority; they respond to the political forces that elected them. They are just a problem".⁵⁸ Bolsonaro has also attacked the Electoral Court on numerous occasions, directly accusing judges of manipulating votes despite having no proof of wrongdoing.⁵⁹

⁵³ "Governo impõe sigilo de cem anos sobre acesso dos filhos de Bolsonaro ao Planalto", *O Globo*, 31 July 2021. "A minoria tem que se curvar à maioria", *RRV+*, 7 September 2018. Victor Farias, "Bolsonaro manteve discurso contrário aos direitos humanos, diz Anistia", *Congresso em Foco*, 29 February 2020. Denise Madueño, "No Clube da Aeronáutica, Bolsonaro falou em 'fuzilamento' do presidente", *Folha de São Paulo*, 30 December 1999.

⁵⁴ "Bolsonaro revela que fez banco cancelar contrato importante com a Globo", *RD1*, 28 October 2021.

⁵⁵ "Advogados apontam possibilidade de crime de responsabilidade de Bolsonaro", *Consultor Jurídico*, 21 April 2022.

⁵⁶ "Threats to democracy, disinformation and attacks on the Brazilian Judiciary", *DEMOS*, 17 May 2022.

⁵⁷ "Bolsonaro ataca Barroso e liga ministro à pedofilia", *Poder 360*, 10 July 2021.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, Brazilian gun activist, 24 May 2022.

⁵⁹ According to Bolsonaro, "He [Roberto Barroso, the Supreme Electoral Court's president in 2021] wants elections that can be manipulated or at least that can generate doubts in the future. (...) Half a dozen civil servants, together with ... Barroso, cannot count the votes in a secret room. He announces

This disregard for democratic values and mechanisms could become perilous if Bolsonaro decides to go outside the bounds of constitutional procedure in order to achieve his political and ideological goals. Some of his loyalists argue that “exceptional actions” are needed to save the country: “This is the only way to fix the system. One cannot make omelettes without breaking some eggs”, said a supporter.⁶⁰

So far, Brazilian institutions have a mixed record in the face of the president’s attacks. Some have shown a certain degree of resilience, fending off some of his accusations: the Supreme Electoral Court, for instance, created a transparency committee to address charges of fraud in the electoral system. Yet in other regards, these institutions have proven more circumspect and reluctant to confront the president and his backers. Lawmakers have lodged a total of 143 impeachment requests in Congress, yet none has moved beyond the stage of initial assessment.⁶¹ The Supreme Electoral Tribunal has also backed down from its invitation to the European Union to send electoral observers for the October poll, reportedly after the government expressed its aversion to the move.⁶² That said, according to analysts consulted by Crisis Group, while the judicial and legislative institutions have backed down at times to avoid escalating confrontations with Bolsonaro, any brazen attempt to thwart the democratic process is likely to meet a firmer response.⁶³

Even if Bolsonaro does not seek or manage to overturn democratic decisions to seize power, his fierce criticism of the electoral system, which he has not yet backed up with substantial proof, has already served to corrode the public’s trust in the electoral system.⁶⁴

B. *The Military and Police*

The bonds linking the military and police with Bolsonaro have strengthened since he came to power. His calls for law and order, attacks on progressive causes and defence of gun ownership for “good citizens” have resonated with members of the security forces.⁶⁵ Many officers profess strong attachments to Bolsonaro’s conservative values, patriotism and preference for tough law enforcement. They also see Bolsonaro as the first politician who treats them as favoured partners rather than an “enemy”.⁶⁶ “Police officers die a lot in Brazil, their salaries are generally very low and, in many states, their working conditions are terrible”, said one former officer. “Bolsonaro, and later

the result he thinks is the true one, because the polls are not auditable, and that’s it”. “Bolsonaro acusa presidente do TSE de agir para manipular eleições”, *Correio Braziliense*, 2 August 2021.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, former Rio de Janeiro police sergeant, 26 April 2022.

⁶¹ It is the prerogative of the speaker of the house to bring impeachment requests to a vote and the current speaker has chosen not to do so. “Bolsonaro tem mais pedidos de impeachment em 2021 que Dilma em todo mandato”, UOL, 9 December 2021.

⁶² “Brazil cancels invite for EU observers after Bolsonaro objection”, Reuters, 3 May 2022.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Brazilian social scientist, October 2021; expert on Brazilian politics, March 2022.

⁶⁴ Ricardo Della Coletta, “Horas após derrota do voto impresso, Bolsonaro critica TSE e diz que eleições de 2022 não serão confiáveis”, *Folha de São Paulo*, 11 August 2021. Vitória Queiroz, “57% confiam na contagem de votos; há 1 ano, eram 64%”, *Poder 360*, 8 January 2022.

⁶⁵ “Ministro da Justiça: ‘Cidadão de bem tem que ter o direito de ter arma de fogo em casa’”, *Correio Braziliense*, 30 April 2021.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, former Rio de Janeiro police sergeant, 26 April 2022.

his sons, knew how to exploit this feeling of abandonment of the police, above all the military police".⁶⁷

The president has been assiduous in his efforts to build loyalty in the police and armed forces. He has regularly attended graduation ceremonies for police and military recruits, and he has sought to provide tangible material benefits for officers.⁶⁸ Wages for the Federal Police have risen, while programs such as Pra Viver aim to reinforce the social safety net for police officers. Bolsonaro has also been a firm supporter of "qualified immunity" (*excludente de ilicitude*), a proposal which would offer a legal safeguard to police officers who kill on duty. A police strike in 2020 in the state of Ceará enjoyed Bolsonaro's veiled backing.⁶⁹

More significantly, the armed forces also now have major political and material stakes in the government, with serving and retired officers reported to occupy over 6,000 civilian federal positions. Military personnel have benefited from wage hikes, special pension schemes and a low-interest housing program.⁷⁰

The military itself provided a public demonstration of the alliance in August 2021, when the navy organised a parade in Brasília, including dozens of armoured cars, while Congress was debating the return to paper ballots in the 2022 election, a move that Bolsonaro defended stoutly. Although the official reason for the parade was to deliver to the president an invitation to a military exercise, the unusual display was widely read as a show of force.⁷¹

This privileged status has fuelled concern as to how the armed forces might react in the event that Bolsonaro clings to office or contests an apparent electoral defeat.⁷² Several political figures, including Lula but also two other former presidents, José Sarney and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, have asked generals for reassurances that the military will not intervene if Bolsonaro loses at the polls.⁷³

That said, concerns that the military as an institution could exercise a decisive intervention on a defeated Bolsonaro's behalf are probably unwarranted. The top brass is adamant in rejecting the notion of taking part in a coup and support within the ranks for a rupture in Brazil's constitutional order appears to be scant.⁷⁴ As a senior army officer put it, "It is true that some more extremist individuals, especially in the

⁶⁷ The former police officer is interviewed in "7 de setembro: os três pontos que motivam o apoio da polícia a Bolsonaro", BBC, 7 September 2021.

⁶⁸ In his first three years in office, Bolsonaro spent nearly \$3 million attending dozens of ceremonies across the country. "Bolsonaro gastou R\$ 13,7 milhões com viagens a eventos de militares, evangélicos e policiais", *Gazeta do Povo*, 20 March 2022.

⁶⁹ "Bolsonaro e Moro não condenam greve da PM no CE", *Jornal de Brasília*, 20 February 2020.

⁷⁰ "The Might and the Right", op. cit. Rafael Barifouse, "Militares planejam se manter no poder 'com ou sem Bolsonaro', diz coronel da reserva", BBC, 12 June 2001.

⁷¹ "Brazil's Congress blocks changes to voting system despite military show of force", Reuters, 11 August 2021.

⁷² Luiz Franco, "Possibilidade de golpe de Bolsonaro em 2022 é real, alertam especialistas", *O Dia*, 7 January 2021.

⁷³ "Ex presidentes consultam generais sobre risco de golpe no País", *Estadão*, 22 August 2021.

⁷⁴ Adamo Idoeta, "Bolsonaro 'fantasia' retorno a 1964", op. cit. Vicente Nunes, "Comandante da Aeronáutica diz a Gilmar Mendes que 'nunca se cogitou golpe militar'", *Correio Braziliense*, 4 August 2021. "Diante de ameaças de Bolsonaro, interlocutores de Lula consultam militares sobre risco de golpe", *Globo G1*, 6 May 2022.

police, might cause trouble, even violence. But not the institutions. Both the army and the police are aware of their duty and their hierarchies are solid”.⁷⁵

A more realistic concern is the chance that the military and police might not respond if called upon to contain violence or even an attempted uprising by Bolsonaro loyalists, perhaps including members of these forces.⁷⁶ Some police and military personnel have openly misused their authority to political ends. On occasion, police officers have not only taken part in protests in support of the president, but also favoured *bolsonarista* protesters by letting them breach police blockades while responding violently to anti-Bolsonaro protests.⁷⁷ “I can see some policemen dragging their feet a little if they face a protest in favour of Bolsonaro, especially if the election is stolen from us”, said a former Rio de Janeiro police officer. “He’s certainly not bashing those who are protesting for him when he cannot”.⁷⁸

This concern is all the greater because the military and police appear to share Bolsonaro’s distrust of the electoral system, at least to an extent.⁷⁹ As part of the Supreme Electoral Court’s transparency commission deliberations, the armed forces sent a document demanding assurances that the election would be secure and proposing changes to the system.⁸⁰ The perception that someone will likely tamper with the results seems to be widespread in the ranks, and a significant number of officers appear to have been won over by Bolsonaro’s mistrust of the voting system. The day after Bolsonaro assured U.S. President Joe Biden, at the Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles, that he would not interfere with the election, his defence minister said the courts were not properly acknowledging the military’s concerns and published 29 recommendations the security forces think are indispensable to guarantee electoral transparency.⁸¹ The security forces’ reaction to a Bolsonaro defeat will likely be guided by the response of not only the president, but also his hardcore supporters and the media outlets that sympathise with him.

C. *Bolsonaro’s Loyalists*

The highest risk of violence around the election at present seems to rest on the possible reaction of Bolsonaro devotees in the event of an adverse electoral result or a decisive challenge to his political authority.

Demonstrations of support for Bolsonaro have not yet become violent, but his backers have used intimidating tactics both on social media and in the streets. On

⁷⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior army officer, 28 April 2022.

⁷⁶ “Bolsonaro vai recusar eventual derrota em 2022 e preparar golpe”, *Diário de Notícias*, 13 June 2021.

⁷⁷ “7 de setembro: PM permitiu que bolsonaristas furassem bloqueio em Brasília?”, BBC, 7 September 2021. “Polícia reprime ato contra Bolsonaro em Recife e governador promete investigar responsáveis”, *El País*, 29 May 2021.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, former Rio de Janeiro police sergeant, Rio de Janeiro, 26 April 2022.

⁷⁹ “Bolsonaro’s new ally in questioning Brazil’s elections: The military”, *The New York Times*, 12 June 2022.

⁸⁰ In response, Supreme Court Judge Luis Roberto Barroso said: “And now the intention is to use the armed forces to attack? Kindly invited to participate in the process, are they being guided to attack the [electoral] process and trying to discredit it?” “Barroso diz que Forças Armadas são orientadas a ‘atacar’ processo eleitoral”, CNN, 24 April 2022.

⁸¹ “Ministério da Defesa diz que Forças Armadas não se sentem prestigiadas pelo TSE”, *Valor Globo*, 10 June 2022.

social media, they have called for removing Supreme Court justices, among other things. In April, the Court sentenced a pro-Bolsonaro lawmaker to over eight years in jail for “coercion, incitement to violence, violations of the rule of law and democratic institutions and attempting to prevent their operation by serious threat”.⁸² On 7 September 2021, Brazil’s Day of Independence, tens of thousands of *bolsonaristas* gathered in response to the president’s call. The turnout was far lower than the millions many had expected, but neither the protesters’ number nor their message was innocuous: they demanded that the president close Congress and the Supreme Court, which they accused of constraining his ability to govern. Addressing Bolsonaro, an activist said ahead of the protest: “This is the last chance you have to save your country”.⁸³ Many evangelical pastors backed the marches as defending voting on paper ballots and freedom of expression.⁸⁴

Brazil does not yet have large-scale militias geared toward right-wing objectives, such as the Oath Keepers in the U.S. or former paramilitary groups in Colombia. But there are several groups that might conceivably turn pro-Bolsonaro disturbances violent in the event that the president disputes the election result. One is the neighbourhood militias that have imposed their coercive version of security on parts of Rio de Janeiro plagued by gangs and drug trafficking since the 1990s.⁸⁵ Exasperated by crime, residents and politicians alike viewed these outfits favourably at first – in 2006, Rio’s mayor described them as “the lesser evil” – but many have changed their minds as the militias evolved into another set of criminal groups vying for territorial control.⁸⁶ The suspects in the assassination of outspoken left-wing councillor Marielle Franco and her driver in 2018 are believed to have had ties to the militias in Rio, although progress in solving the case has been slow.⁸⁷ Media reports and judicial probes

⁸² “Brazil’s Supreme Court sentenced a Bolsonarist deputy to eight years in prison for several videos he uploaded to his networks”, Infobae, 21 April 2022.

⁸³ The pro-Bolsonaro truck drivers’ leader Ze Trovão made these comments in an interview. “Sérgio Reis fala sobre a paralisação no 7 de setembro, em entrevista ao jornalista Oswaldo Eustáquio”, video, YouTube, 16 August 2021.

⁸⁴ “Pastores fazem ‘mega chamado’ para ato no dia 7 de setembro”, Pleno, 24 August 2021.

⁸⁵ The Rio de Janeiro militias, often made up of former policemen, began by charging to patrol the streets in poor neighbourhoods and later diversified into ventures such as drug trafficking and licit business. Estimates suggest that they control 60 per cent of the city’s territory. Despite their strength in local politics, mainly through their support for city councillors, as well as their imposition of social discipline, they have no clear ideological or national agenda. See Bryan Harris, “Militias, corruption and Covid: Rio de Janeiro’s deepening crisis”, *Financial Times*, 7 March 2021. “The rise of Brazil’s neo-Pentecostal narco-militia”, *Open Democracy*, 6 May 2021.

⁸⁶ “Lesser evil: How Brazil’s militias wield terror to seize power from gangs”, *The Guardian*, 12 July 2018.

⁸⁷ Ronnie Lessa and Élcio Queiroz, former military police officers, are in jail awaiting trial on charges related to the murders. Lessa, along with four others including his wife and brother-in-law, were sentenced in July 2021 to four years in prison for destruction of evidence. His accomplices are in an open prison regime, but Lessa remains in a maximum-security facility pending resolution of the murder case. Queiroz received a 5-year sentence in 2020 for possession of firearms and ammunition when he was arrested. They have both protested their innocence. “Judge upholds trial by jury for man accused of killing Franco”, Agência Brasil, 15 March 2020. “Ronnie Lessa, réu pela morte de Marielle, fala da arme do crime”, Veja, 12 May 2022. “Justiça do Rio pede inclusão de Rogério Andrade na lista da Interpol”, Agência Brasil, 10 May 2022.

point to links between Bolsonaro's family and the militias, though the president has denied any such connection.⁸⁸

A number of signs suggest that Bolsonaro's anti-democratic vitriol may at some stage congeal into justifications for acts of violence. Between 2018 and 2021, a study conducted by a local NGO identified more than 2,500 Brazilian websites promoting hate speech.⁸⁹ Disinformation on social media has challenged the reliability of the electronic voting system in keeping with the widespread perception among Brazilian far-right groups that the 2020 U.S. presidential election was stolen.⁹⁰ Distrust in the electoral process has become a near consensus among *bolsonaristas*, who could follow the example of Trump supporters in trying to overturn the election result if they felt there was enough evidence of fraud.⁹¹ Bolsonaro, in fact, said in interviews following the 6 January 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol that distrust in the Brazilian electoral system was such that "in 2022 the situation could be worse than it is in the U.S."⁹² Early in 2022, he said in a speech that "if needed, we will go to war".⁹³

The Brazilian right wing's apparent search for inspiration from the U.S. as to how to disrupt a peaceful transfer of power has alarmed observers. A study of almost 94 million posts on Parler, a social media platform attracting the hard right, revealed a network of right-wing profiles from Brazil second only to the U.S. in terms of organisation.⁹⁴ These groups, which openly support the attempted insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, have pushed the notion that fraud in Brazil's October election is inevitable.⁹⁵ Rising levels of gun ownership, following Bolsonaro's efforts to dismantle restrictions on bearing arms and give tax breaks to weapons importers, have also stoked fears that heightened partisan tensions could lead to acts of lethal violence. Gun rights have always been at the core of Bolsonaro's political platform and groups such as the Pro-Weapons Movement claim that this issue is central to the concept of freedom held by the president and his followers.⁹⁶

Even so, the risks of far-right backlash are mitigated by the brittleness of loyalties to Bolsonaro, making the prospect of a coordinated response to an electoral setback

⁸⁸ On the alleged links between Bolsonaro's family and the militias, see "La red que escondía a un aliado de los Bolsonaro revela la relación de la familia con milicias criminales de Río", *El País*, 20 June 2020. On Bolsonaro's denial of links, see "Bolsonaro nega ligação com milícia e acusa 'PM da Bahia do PT' de matar capitão Adriano", *Estadão*, 15 February 2020.

⁸⁹ "Crimes de apologia ao nazismo crescem no Brasil nos últimos dois anos", CNN Brasil, 20 October 2021.

⁹⁰ Tweet by Carla Zambelli, Congressional deputy, @CarlaZambelli38, 4:27pm, 6 November 2020.

⁹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior army officer, 26 April 2022.

⁹² "Bolsonaro comenta invasão do capitolio e diz que situação pode ser pior no Brasil em 2022", Notícias R7, 7 January 2021.

⁹³ "Inauguração de trecho da BR-487", video, YouTube, 3 June 2022.

⁹⁴ "The Global Far Right: Brazil Establishes Own Ecosystem on Parler and Mimics American Far Right Wing", Getulio Vargas Foundation, April 2021.

⁹⁵ The study found "mirroring of American arguments to the Brazilian context". Ibid., p. 7.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Brazilian gun activist, 24 May 2022. To date, Bolsonaro's administration has issued fourteen decrees, fourteen edicts and two bills reducing restrictions on arms. The number of imported arms reached record highs in 2021, up 33 per cent from 2020, while assault rifle and shotgun imports rose 570 per cent. Most of the illegal foreign guns in Brazil come from the U.S. See Leandro Prazeres, "Sob novas regras, importação de armas de fogo bate recorde no Brasil", BBC, 31 January 2022; "US biggest source of illegal foreign guns in Brazil: report", Reuters, 10 January 2019.

unlikely. Several of his more bellicose followers, such as Sara Giromini, leader of the hard-right group 300 do Brasil, already feel betrayed by Bolsonaro because the justice system has targeted them for alleged crimes while he was president.⁹⁷ Likewise, even as Bolsonaro was trying to whip up support for the 7 September marches, he called on an association of truck drivers to lift its blockades along the highways of several states, which it had set up to demand the removal of Supreme Court justices.⁹⁸ Bolsonaro reportedly feared that the economic damage caused by the blockade could affect his public standing.⁹⁹

Aware of the risks surrounding the elections, the army has taken the unprecedented step of altering its schedule to conclude all its normal exercises by September.¹⁰⁰ A senior officer said the army has been “practising since March for the elections. In September, we ... will rally almost everyone [soldiers] to be part of the operation ... We have been conducting drills to make sure nothing serious will happen, such as checkpoints, patrols, all to guarantee security on election day”.¹⁰¹ As in 2021, Brazilian Independence Day, on 7 September, could be an important moment to gauge the country’s political temperature, as Bolsonaro may try to use the occasion to galvanise support a month before the polls.

Increasing polarisation, greater availability of weapons and growing distrust of Brazilian institutions among a mobilised and ideologically committed part of the population pose dangers. In this highly charged environment, the eventual expansion of right-wing militias cannot be entirely discounted. One group wearing t-shirts emblazoned with the president’s visage was recorded in 2020 discharging weapons and chanting Bolsonaro’s name. The president’s second son, Carlos, shared the video on social media.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Allies of Bolsonaro who have found themselves embroiled in judicial cases include Congressman Daniel Silveira, the influencer Allan dos Santos and Giromini (aka Sara Winter), among others. Giromini’s group takes its name from the movie *300*, a fantastical recreation of the ancient battle of Thermopylae, depicting 300 Spartan warriors holding off thousands of Persian invaders. The film has influenced extreme right-wing movements around the world, which see it as portraying a small group of soldiers resisting the encroachment of tyranny. See “Daniel Silveira se diz abandonado e critica base do governo na PEC da Imunidade: ‘Fui boi de piranha’”, Yahoo Notícias, 25 February 2021. Paulo Motoryn, “Allan dos Santos critica Bolsonaro e Damares e chama Carlos de ‘covarde’”, *Poder 360*, 23 December 2020. “Abandonada pelo bolsonarismo, Sara Winter oferece delação premiada”, MSN Notícias, 9 April 2021.

⁹⁸ “Caminhoneiros se revoltam com recuo de Bolsonaro”, *O Antagonista*, 9 September 2021

⁹⁹ In an audio message sent to truck drivers’ WhatsApp groups, a voice that apparently is Bolsonaro’s said: “Tell the truck drivers there, who are our allies, that these blockades hinder our economy. This causes shortages, inflation and harms everyone, especially the poorest. So, tell those guys, if possible, to lift it up, ok? So we can get back to normality”. “Decepção’, ‘mensagem cifrada’ e ‘Adnet!’: a confusão sobre áudio de Bolsonaro em grupos de caminhoneiros”, *Globo G1*, 9 September 2021.

¹⁰⁰ “Temor de violência eleitoral faz Exército mudar planejamento para 2022”, *Portal da Noticia*, 6 January 2022.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior army officer, 26 April 2022.

¹⁰² Tweet by Carlos Bolsonaro, @CarlosBolsonaro, 7:17pm, 19 April 2020.

VI. Avoiding Turmoil

Though Bolsonaro has gained some ground, most surveys still indicate a comfortable margin of victory for Lula da Silva, meaning that the president may very well face the choice of whether to accept defeat or dispute the result. His rhetoric to date gives every indication that he could opt for the latter. The precise nature of a possible challenge is harder to foresee. Bolsonaro could seek to emulate Trump's behaviour in the U.S. and denounce the election as a fraud. He might contest the result in court, though he would have a difficult task since (unlike the U.S.) Brazil has a dedicated Superior Electoral Court outside the normal judiciary. This court is independent from the government and is headed by a Supreme Court justice on a rotating basis; in 2022, it will be overseen by Alexandre de Moraes, the most frequent target of Bolsonaro's ire among the judges. Efforts to reverse the election outcome through lawsuits or pressure on the courts are thus unlikely to gain traction.

A refusal by Bolsonaro to hand over power, or even an effort to engineer a full-fledged coup, appears at present to pose a somewhat lesser risk. A course of open confrontation would incur fierce opposition from nearly all state and judicial institutions and large parts of society, not to mention foreign powers, among whom Bolsonaro has few friends.¹⁰³ On the balance of evidence, the military – who represent the president's closest allies – would not support an overt violation of the constitution. Still, Bolsonaro seems unlikely to go quietly. It is completely plausible that he will incite his devotees to take to the streets, maybe even before the polls if he senses that defeat is unavoidable. How his supporters react to such a call could determine whether the election is peaceful or not.

Firm responses from Brazil's judicial and state institutions will be vital to containing a potential fracas. The Supreme Electoral Court, which has the primary responsibility for overseeing the election, should react swiftly to any groundless bid to contest the process or results. Other institutions, such as the Congress and the Federal Prosecution Office, will also have to remain vigilant and act rapidly in responding to any disruption.¹⁰⁴ As the electorate could be agitated, the media should seek to identify misinformation, especially if it is distributed by state authorities.

Social media platforms will also have a part to play in curbing "fake news" and denying a platform to baseless accusations of fraud. They have already made progress. Eight social media platforms, among them Facebook, Twitter and TikTok, have signed a deal with Brazil's Supreme Electoral Court to work with electoral authorities to remove disinformation.¹⁰⁵ In response to criticism during the 2018 elections, Facebook and WhatsApp, both owned by parent company Meta, have cracked down on Bolsonaro's ability to spread misinformation. Facebook has more aggressively removed misleading posts by the president – including a livestream in which he speculated that the COVID-19 vaccine causes AIDS – and WhatsApp has instituted forwarding

¹⁰³ Matheus Magenta, "G20: isolado, Bolsonaro tem agenda esvaziada e é ironizado pela imprensa italiana", BBC, 30 October 2021.

¹⁰⁴ It is difficult to ascertain how much support Bolsonaro has in Congress, even among his fellow Liberal Party members. He joined the party only recently, and in any case Brazilian legislators often lack party discipline, voting in response to individual financial or political incentives rather than the party line. The level of party support for the president has varied depending on the issue being voted upon.

¹⁰⁵ "Social media platforms pledge to fight fake news in Brazil vote", France 24, 15 February 2022.

limits that make mass-texting misinformation more difficult. Bolsonaro has responded by encouraging his supporters to abandon these platforms in favour of less regulated sites like Telegram and niche far-right forums.¹⁰⁶

Still, platforms should strengthen their responses to any potential misinformation campaigns. During the 2018 election, Facebook put in place a change that would boost “trusted sources” to a higher ranking on its news feed, which could help slow the spread of harmful content.¹⁰⁷ It should now make this change permanent. Making it slightly more laborious to share content related to elections – for example, by prompting users to click on links before they share them – can help reduce the reach of misinformation.¹⁰⁸ As Telegram becomes increasingly important to Bolsonaro, it should join with other social media platforms in signing an agreement with the electoral authorities to remove false content, particularly from the president’s own account.

Military or police support for the president in a coup attempt appears to be a remote prospect, but that does not remove all risk that members of these forces might pose. It remains possible that both military and police officers would drag their feet in responding to violence or unrest perpetrated by the president’s supporters. Dialogue between Congress, the Supreme Electoral Court and the Supreme Court, on one side, and the military and police, on the other, in order to establish a common understanding of how to handle an escalating electoral dispute and curb risks of violence, will be essential to the country’s stability. These institutions should also keep open communication channels with the military high command.

Meanwhile, the top brass of the three branches of the armed forces will have to remain vigilant toward the lower ranks, where Bolsonaro has for long cultivated his highest levels of support.¹⁰⁹ Active-duty soldiers could participate in political events, following the example of a former health minister, General Eduardo Pazuello, who joined a rally with Bolsonaro, for which he was not reprimanded by the army commander; some might attempt more forceful displays of support. Other cases have also gained attention, such as that of army major João Paulo da Costa Araújo Alves, who was arrested for spreading propaganda in favour of Bolsonaro and for claiming to be a candidate for Congress even though he was still on active duty.¹¹⁰ Curbing such actions and prosecuting each case according to the law and internal military rules will be vital to deterring further misconduct.

Ensuring the political neutrality of police forces will be harder due to their decentralised nature. Officers could transgress norms in various ways, from taking part in political activities, standing by in the face of provocation by Bolsonaro’s supporters or even responding abusively to those of his rivals. State governors and their respective security secretaries will remain the chief conduits to police commands, and they will

¹⁰⁶ Bryan Harris, “Bolsonaro crafts new social media strategy ahead of Brazil election”, *Financial Times*, 12 January 2022.

¹⁰⁷ “Q&A on Upcoming US and Brazil Elections”, Meta, 19 September 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Ellen P. Goodman and Karen Kornbluh, “Social media platforms need to flatten the curve of dangerous misinformation”, *Slate*, 21 August 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior army officer, April 2021.

¹¹⁰ “Ex-ministro Pazuello participa de ato ao lado de Bolsonaro sem máscara”, CNN, 23 May 2021. “Major do Exército é preso por desobediência após postagens pró-Bolsonaro”, *Folha de São Paulo*, 11 May 2022.

need to monitor their forces' actions closely. Likewise, NGOs, the media and civil society organisations will have roles to play in identifying and denouncing any wrongdoing.

Nonetheless, the most volatile constituency is Bolsonaro's hardcore supporters. Their diversity makes it hard to anticipate how they might react to an electoral setback or to a presidential incitement to protest. The sense of betrayal that some of their number felt following Bolsonaro's ostensible retreat from confrontation in September 2021 might discourage them from acts of aggression. But it is quite possible that individuals or small groups who are convinced that fraud has taken place, and have access to weapons, might assume a more combative posture.¹¹¹ The Federal Police should keep close watch on far-right groups, conducting investigations into their financing and practices and, if evidence comes to light that they have violent designs, making arrests that could result in these groups being dismantled. Furthermore, state police should prevent participants in demonstrations from carrying weapons and act swiftly to contain flare-ups of violence while rebutting malicious narratives surrounding such episodes.

Last but not least, Brazilian institutions will need firm support from foreign governments, both in Latin America and farther abroad, in the event that Bolsonaro or his backers attempt to disrupt the October electoral process. Along with international bodies, these governments should quickly and unequivocally denounce any such effort.

VII. Conclusion

The 2022 election is a milestone for Brazil, marking an acid test of the country's democratic stability in the face of a campaign likely to be dominated by two political veterans, coloured by ideological polarisation and conducted through vicious verbal attacks. Preventing unrest in the months ahead will pose a challenge for state and judicial institutions, especially those whom President Bolsonaro has either cultivated as close allies, such as the military and the police, or branded as enemies of his government, such as the Supreme Court.

While the risks of a full-fledged breakdown in Brazil's constitutional order appear remote at present, lesser dangers are still acute. Bolsonaro's rhetoric over the past few years and his ambivalence toward democratic norms are ample reason to fear he may not accept his defeat and that his supporters could take to the streets. The government's stout defence of conservative social norms as well as his embrace of tough law enforcement without doubt remain popular across much of Brazil, but his contempt for medical science has trimmed the size of its support base. That in turn appears to have galvanised Bolsonaro's remaining devotees and pushed them farther right. Acts of provocation or violence by his loyalists could accompany any effort by the president to prevent or dispute a fair election, putting strain on the military and police forces where support for Bolsonaro tends to run high.

¹¹¹ A number of Bolsonaro supporters claim on social media that the 2022 election will be rigged; some have organised an online survey urging prominent *bolsonaristas* to take a stand. See tweet by Anna, @NonaConta, 11:17pm, 23 February 2022; tweet by Guilherme Brandão, @guivbr, 8:06pm, 18 December 2021; and tweet by Ademar Aguiar, @AdemarAguiar3, 7:59pm, 27 July 2021.

Respect for the law in responding to cut-throat electoral rhetoric will be required in Brazil's courts, political elite, media and armed forces. Yet even if the elections end peacefully, and without major trauma, the currents reinforced by Bolsonaro's government may not be so easy to dampen. The increasing number of groups professing a hard-right ideology, with easy access to guns and a pointed sense of grievance, could pose a continuing threat of unrest, even if Bolsonaro is a diminished force in the country's politics. Sympathies for these beliefs among military and police personnel complicate matters further. Avoiding unnecessary friction with Brazil's conservatives while keeping, via the courts and Federal Police, a watchful eye on these groups will be crucial to ensuring that the Bolsonaro-era vitriol does not lead to more serious perils in the years ahead.

Rio de Janeiro/Bogotá/Brussels, 16 June 2022

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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June 2022

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