

CAF Podcast ep.1/2023 Jean Wyllys

Eight days have passed since the assault on the Plaza de los Tres Poderes. Many perceive that the situation in the country remains extremely sensitive. This attempted coup has enjoyed the complicity of several members of the police forces and, as the courts will address, perhaps also the tacit consent of an institutional structure in neglect of its duties, that of the Federal District of Brasilia.

The presidential term looks set to be a turbulent one. Lula has returned with an uncontested victory, but by the slimmest of margins, and is at the head of a coalition government supported by a highly fragmented congress and facing the daunting challenges of leading a polarized and impoverished country. Justice is already investigating former President Bolsonaro after suspending the executive capacities of Governor Ibaneis Rocha and arresting the head of security of the Federal District, the former Minister of Justice, Anderson Torres.

Effective judicial action and the firm response of the institutions are now fundamental. And all eyes are on Alexander de Moraes, judge of the Supreme Court, of the Electoral Tribunal, and one of the main targets of the Bolsonarista smear campaign, which has led to this uprising. Which, by the way, has settled with 1200 detainees in preventive custody.

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Now that the issue has had more time to settle down and the institutions are showing muscle, we would like to know what your feelings are about the images of the assault on the headquarters. Do you see it as a turning point? Is it representative of that other Brazil we don't quite know if it is more pro-Bolsonaro than it is anti-Lula?

JW: Well, I would say that it is a turning point, but it will not be the last one. First of all because what is happening in Brazil is not Brazil-specific, it is not an isolated case from the rest of the world. All over the planet, we see a rise of the far right and its methods, which are harassment, political violence, and the use of terrorism. The events of January 8 are very similar, though not the same, to what happened in the United States two years ago, after Biden's victory. And when I say that it will be a turning point but not the last, I mean that Bolsonarismo is not going to disappear. It may disappear with that name, with the arrest of Bolsonaro or the main leaders of his cult. But fascism will not. Because bolsonarismo is a type of fascism, an expression of fascism that will not disappear. We in Brazil have to deal with something that Europe has

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We really can't talk about the fight against corruption if we don't frame it in the fight against capitalism. And this is a conversation that many don't want to have. Because to talk about corruption as a moral problem and as an individual crime is very easy, but to approach it as a structural element of capitalism...

already been facing for a long time: with a segment of the population that is openly fascist, that organises itself and manages to reach parliaments and thus infect public discourse. It is not necessary for the extreme right to reach the executive power, it is enough for it to enter the legislative to infect the whole discourse. On the other hand, it must be said that in Brazil we will continue to face a form of fascism that has always existed. In the 1930s, Brazilian fascism was called integralismo, and there is a verifiable historical relationship between bolsonarismo and the latter. What we can do is perhaps to build cordons sanitaires and institutional barriers to limit its strength. To create methods and ways to protect democracy. But as I say, it is not so easy for it to disappear. Bolsonaro has already fallen from grace. He has fled to the US and fears immediate arrest if he returns, because there is evidence to arrest him, his sons, and the military who have collaborated with his government. And I want to emphasise that we are talking about a terrorist movement. This word may seem harsh to many, but it is not. What we saw last January 8 was terrorism. They tried to destroy a city that is first and foremost a political city. Brasilia was built to be the seat of politics, of the polis. Attacking and destroying it is only the symbolic prolongation of the breakdown of the political covenant. One, moreover, framed in war rhetoric. And there where institutions can no longer mediate because the political covenant has been actively breached, a war has been declared, which can only be responded to with force. Being forced to exercise the legitimate use of force against terrorism is not the most desirable challenge to begin a presidential tenure, but it is what Lula's government has had to face. It is understandable that this generates hesitation in the most progressive circles, because the left has often been in the opposition and has experienced in its flesh the abuse of state violence, a force that the government now needs. But we should celebrate that the government has not flinched in the face of these attacks. If it were to cower now, fascism would triumph. It would impose its false narrative that the elections were a fraud. And the response has come not only from the government but also from the other powers of the republic. In the figure of Judge Alexander de Moraes, the Federal Supreme Court has made justice the most resilient power against fascist attacks. Despite all the criticism that we on the left make of the STF, we must recognize that without its reaction, democracy in Brazil would not be on its feet.

Of course, in a country like Brazil, trust in the justice system is essential to reinforce the rule of law and also to fight against violence and organised crime... But even though right now we perceive that it is thanks to the role of the Supreme Court that trust in the justice system can be restored and that after the whole process that took place with the imprisonment of Lula, there can be hope in the rule of law; how do we fight corruption when it is instituted as a political weapon, as was done with the President?

JW: The issue of the fight against corruption is very complex, and we should not oversimplify it. We really can't talk about the fight against corruption if we don't talk in terms of fighting capitalism. And this is a conversation that many don't want to have. Because to talk about corruption as a moral problem and as an individual crime is very easy, but to approach it as a structural element of capitalism... And indeed, it is a necessary conversation. We are a country born of the brutality of colonisation. A republic proclaimed by a military confronted with aristocrats, that is, designed and built by political oligarchies. The powers of the republic have always been colonised by the elites. The economic elites in Brazil are also the political elites and since the 1980s, they have become the financial elites. And this power has always corrupted the political system. Politicians are elected on the basis of their membership to oligarchies, often family dynasties, or by their willingness to be financed by international corporations such as agribusiness, big pharma, the arms industry, etc. And it goes without saying that a politician elected through these means is not there to defend the interests of the people, but their own. And when workers and minorities organise politically,

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then they are criminalised by all the powers that these people control. In order to speak of corruption, therefore, one must come to this juncture: recognizing a political system that has always been corrupt, and in which economic power determines who gets elected. Corruption is evident when, for example, sectors of the justice system act as parties, practising lawfare (mainly against leftist politicians or representatives of minorities), and twisting the law to criminalise those who seek a democratic transformation. In the case you mention, Lula was arrested and imprisoned for non-existent corruption. The public discourse to justify getting him out of the way was this alleged corruption when the reality was it was the justice system itself was being corrupted to do so. But not only Lula. Let's talk about the murder of Marielle Franco in 2018, which remains unsolved, or my own exile. I am exiled because those political forces we are talking about do not tolerate change, they do not tolerate those of us who organise from outside the oligarchies and do not cater to the economic interests of the big corporations. Whenever we try to transform those systems we become victims in some way, be it through imprisonment, exile, or assassination. Lula's government has a great challenge ahead: to confront this historical systemic corruption. So that people understand that the fight against corruption goes beyond individual responsibilities and moral arguments. And it is a great challenge because Lula has had to make a deal with sectors of the political oligarchies to create a broad democratic front against fascism. And this fascism, on the other hand, is closely related to sectors of the same oligarchies. Politics in Brazil is not simple, so we cannot ask for simple answers. We must address it from complexity, and as I was saying, one of the main challenges of this government will be to face systemic corruption by dealing with corrupt agents.

Indeed. Let us remember that Jair Bolsonaro at the time was the candidate of a significant part of these economic elites, but also that he presented himself as anti-establishment when he had already been in Congress for decades with limited electoral success... In politics, charisma is worth everything, but profile is built and it is built with media, with money, and with the visibility that money gives. As a journalist, in this process and in this complexity that you refer to, how do you see the possibility of rehabilitating the journalistic media in Brazil? Because the whole case against Lula, which resulted in his imprisonment, is manufactured by them through a narrative that, as you remember, first portrays Sergio Moro as an anti-corruption hero, and then have no choice but to expose him as a fraud. And many of the president's detractors still believe in it. We often make the mistake of pretending that disinformation is a spontaneous phenomenon, exclusive of small digital media, bot militias, and paid militant trolls; and that it only spreads through social networks and messaging apps. In this complexity, we cannot argue that technological factors are decisive, but the distrust towards journalistic work that has brought us to this point is also motivated by decades of malpractice in professional media and coexistence with these oligarchic political interests.

JW: I completely agree with that analysis. My research on the phenomenon of disinformation points to very similar conclusions. The press has always been an instrument of power. The media belong and have always belonged to political oligarchies, to big communication companies that have monopolized information and therefore have power over the construction of public imaginary. And obviously, there is always resistance. In communication, we have senders, what in Portuguese we call *endereçamento*, and receivers, among whom this resistance can occur. The senders do not always control the meaning of the messages. But now we live under platform capitalism, or what sociologist Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism. Mass communication today takes place under a global superstructure of algorithm-controlled communication in which the same message no longer needs to be addressed



Jean Wyllys is a journalist, researcher, former member of the Brazilian Congress and LGBTQIA+ activist. After the victory of Jair Bolsonaro in the Brazilian general elections of 2018, he resigned from his position and, after receiving death threats, sought exile in Europe, where he continues his work in social justice and the defence of civil rights, especially those of the LGBTQIA+ community.

to thousands of people, but can now be addressed to almost every individual. And this allows for even more successful disinformation. Not that it starts with social networks or digital culture, but it finds in them fertile ground on which to thrive. But yes, the mass media have been practicing disinformation forever. And they continue to practice it. In Brazil, for example, anti-Petismo, that feeling of aversion to the PT and its causes, the causes of the poor, has been built by the press and by the families to which it belongs. And that is a scandal, that in a country of continental dimensions, communication is concentrated in the hands of so few, with the capacity to build and destroy reputations... And Lula is a survivor. A sort of phoenix. Because although he has been attacked for decades since he started in public life back in the 70s, he has survived as a charismatic political force that no media has been able to destroy completely. And if we compare, for example, the organic, natural strength of Lula with Sergio Moro, who is a fantoche, a pure media construct, we observe that in fact there are things that are beyond the press' control. Political animals like Lula survive disinformation. And perhaps what most provokes fury in part of the Brazilian elite is precisely that they have not been able to destroy him. Even when they managed to make part of society hate him, look what has happened in the last four years. A good deal of those who were convinced to hate him have gone on to re-elect Lula in the face of the misery into which fascism has plunged us.