



Brazil: 'On the left, traditional structures have weakened at the same time as new, more local and autonomous forms of organisation have emerged throughout the country'



Following the many protests seen in Brazil in 2017, CIVICUS speaks to Jose Henrique Bortoluci, professor at the Centre of Research and Documentation of Brazil's Contemporary History (CPDOC) at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation, in São Paulo, Brazil. Jose Henrique is PhD in Sociology at the University of Michigan, in the United States, and specialises in social movements, urban studies, and social theory, with a focus on Brazil.

1. How much mobilisation was there in Brazil in 2017? Which were the main mobilised groups and what were the main causes for their discontent?

2017 was a very contradictory and uneven year in terms of the performance of civil society in Brazil. On the one hand, social movements were not able to sustain a national movement in opposition to the government led by Michel Temer, which many consider to be illegitimate. The president continues ruling the country, despite having reached power as a result of a highly contentious impeachment process - a parliamentary coup, according to a section of public opinion - and pushing forward reforms that are in almost every aspect the opposite of the government programme selected in the 2014 elections.

Despite all of this, in 2017 Brazilian civil society grew increasingly dynamic, with the emergence of social movements advocating for the renewal of politics, which were especially popular among younger sections of the population, who generally feel quite excluded by the political system as it is currently organised. These dynamics became clearer and deepened with the [great protests of 2013](#), and got stronger with the [movements of school occupations](#) in 2015, the mobilisations against the [World Cup](#) and the [Olympic Games](#) (which were held in Brazil in June-July 2014 and August 2016 respectively), the actions undertaken by urban activist movements and the substantial growth, in both size and importance, of the feminist and LGBTI movement over the past three years.

In sum, I would say that the current scenario is characterised by both deep politicisation among various sectors of society, and a lack of connection, either because of lack of strength

or because of political or strategic disagreements, among these movements at the national level.

2. How has the government responded to protests, and how has civil society reacted to civic space restrictions?

It is usual in our country, particularly since 2013, for the government to react quite violently in every case where there are confrontations with demonstrators. Most recently, this is what happened during the [April 2017 strike](#). Many activists point out that since 2013, and also as a legacy of the World Cup and the Olympics, police forces have become more efficient in repressing protests and using maximum force quite frequently, thereby making it strategically difficult for major protests to materialise. This has been the case, in particular, in cities where there have been large numbers of movements with national impact in recent years, notably Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

Besides this, another form of government reaction has often been deliberately to disregard public opinion and strengthen even further its alliance with the Congress and certain sectors of the economy and the press. Throughout 2017, Temer had the lowest approval rates of any president in Brazilian history, and certainly one of the lowest in the world, which did not prevent him from staying, albeit without any legitimacy, in power.

For its part, civil society is still seeking new forms of action to resist the prospects of closing institutional channels. New social media have played a crucial role in spreading new political grammars among the population, both on the left and the right, as shown by the feminist movement, on one hand, and the networks supporting an extreme right-wing candidate like [Jair Bolsonaro](#), on the other.

On the left side of the political spectrum, the Workers' Party (PT), the Unified Workers' Central (CUT), the main trade union federation in Brazil, the Landless Workers Movement (MST) and the National Union of Students (UNE), which played a predominantly hegemonic role over the past decades, have weakened at the same time as new, more local and autonomous forms of organisation have emerged throughout the country, in the form of neighbourhood movements, youth groups from urban peripheries and students' movements not aligned with political parties.

3. In April 2017, Brazil had one of the most massive general strikes in its history. What triggered this protest? What made it so massive, and what has changed as a result?

The big strike of April 2017, which virtually paralysed the country for a whole day, resulted from the combination of two factors. The first was the crisis that overcame the Temer administration as evidence was released of the involvement of Temer himself, as well as several ministers and other politicians very close to him, in major corruption scandals. The other factor was the government's attempts to impose two reforms that will have a harsh impact on workers: a [new labour law](#) (which was signed by the president in July 2017) and a [pension reform](#) (which is still pending in Congress). Other social movements opposed to the

government, as well as left-wing movements (students, feminists, LGBTI, urban activists) joined the protests. However, in spite of its enormous importance, this big movement did not gain momentum throughout the year, at least not as a unified national anti-government and anti-neoliberal movement.

4. What can we expect for 2018, as elections approach with former President Lula Da Silva leading the polls?

The scenario is still quite open, and any prediction is highly uncertain. The first important question is whether Lula will be able to compete in the October elections – in case he is not convicted in the second instance. In July 2017, Lula was [sentenced to nearly 10 years in prison](#) after being found guilty of corruption and money laundering charges, but his appeal is still pending. Even if his appeal were settled against him, some jurists still claim that he could be a candidate until the Supreme Federal Court upholds the verdict.

Other initiatives on the left are still rather timid, including the beginnings of a movement around the figure of [Guilherme Boulos](#) (the leader of Brazil's most significant housing movement, the Movement of Homeless Workers, MTST) and [Ciro Gomes](#), a politician who takes nationalist positions and is more acquainted with quite traditional political practices.

A similar uncertainty affects the right and the centre as well. It is quite likely that the governor of São Paulo, the uncharismatic Geraldo Alckmin, will run, probably on a platform that is liberal on economic matters but conservative on cultural and public safety issues. Jair Bolsonaro is expected to be the first openly right-wing candidate with any chance of reaching the run-off election.

In any case, the fight ahead appears to be a tough one and no candidate has clear chances of a victory in the first round. Moreover, in spite of the emergence of new movements preaching a renewal of politics, Brazilian electoral legislation makes it immensely difficult for any renewal to take place in Congress, one of the actors that are most responsible for the current political crisis and for the progress made by the conservative agenda.

- Civic space in Brazil is rated as 'obstructed' in the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), indicating serious restrictions in civil society rights.
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