Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Competitive authoritarians, not military coups, are the biggest threat to democracy

Media coverage of the trial of Brazil's former president, Jair Bolsonaro, tends to focus on the striking similarities between his case and the career of US President Donald Trump.

Both are far-right outsiders who governed during the pandemic, proudly embracing medical and climate denialism.

Both publicly declared that they would not accept electoral defeat, and, after losing at the polls, incited their supporters to storm their respective national legislatures to overturn the results.

But today, one of them is sitting in the defendant's seat and is likely facing conviction by his country's Supreme Court. The other governs the United States.

As The Economist concluded in a sentence that would have been unthinkable a few years ago: "Temporarily at least, the role of the Western hemisphere's democratic adult has moved South."

Understanding how this happened is crucial to addressing the main challenges today's democracies confront.

Bolsonaro's platform was rooted in authoritarianism

Bolsonaro emerged as a politician in the first election held under Brazil's 1988 Constitution, which restored democracy after more than two decades of military dictatorship. His platform was rooted in authoritarianism.

Early in his career, Bolsonaro claimed that Brazil's military dictatorship failed by not killing enough leftists.

He also argued that Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Brazil's president from 1995 to 2002 (and the first to be reelected), should have been executed, and promised to shut down Congress if elected to the post.

As a member of the Chamber of Deputies during the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, he dedicated his vote to the colonel who oversaw her torture during the dictatorship.

> Bolsonaro was a product of democracy despite decades attacking it

These and countless other examples demonstrate that Bolsonaro was a product of democracy despite decades attacking it.

Trump's trajectory was different. He rose to prominence in the 1980s as a political bomb thrower, calling for the death penalty for five Black and Latino teenagers wrongly accused of rape in New York.

And while he burnished his identity as a reality television plutocrat, he built his political brand and based his presidential campaign on an appeal to a variety of economic and cultural grievances.

Although Trump has never been committed to liberal democracy, his sharpest disdain has often been aimed at the courts.

In Trump's worldview, wealth and power ensure that legal institutions are never obstacles – a belief he carried into business and politics, where in his second term as president he is seeking to undermine the Constitution, end the independence of the US Federal Reserve, rig the electoral system, and redefine citizenship.

The integrity of Brazil's elections

Both Trump and Bolsonaro were defeated at the ballot box when they sought re-election for the first time. But there the similarities end.

Brazil's electoral system is more robust and centralized than the US system.

Overseen by the country's federal judiciary, elections are held nationwide on one day, with equal access to voting for all – from Indigenous Amazonian villagers to farmers in the Pampas. Results are announced within hours.

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Bolsonaro was the first candidate to challenge the integrity of Brazil's elections in decades, undermining a system that had united the country in trust.

This stands in contrast to the fragmented US electoral system, which Trump exploited to erode his supporters' faith in democracy and pave the way for the January 6, 2021, insurrection. He also pressured state officials to falsify results.

Bolsonaro went further. Investigations revealed that he and close aides discussed a draft decree to block President-elect Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's inauguration – a plan that failed only because the military was divided.

Another involved assassinating Lula, Vice President Geraldo Alckmin, and Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes – a plot aborted at the last moment, again due to lack of military support.

Following the election, Bolsonaro's supporters camped outside army barracks demanding military intervention, while government officials encouraged escalation.

A week after Lula's inauguration they violently invaded the seats of all three branches of government.

Competitive authoritarians

In the US, the political winds shifted after Trump incited the mob that assaulted the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Trump faced criminal charges, but the most serious were rendered moot when the US Supreme Court ruled that presidents enjoy near-total immunity from prosecution.

His victory in the 2024 election effectively ended all attempts to hold him accountable.

By contrast, Bolsonaro faced far greater resistance from the legal system. One of his main targets during his presidency was Brazil's Supreme Court.

While no country can fully defend against democratic erosion, Brazil's post-dictatorship constitution built strong safeguards

When Brazil's Attorney General – a position more independent from the executive than its US counterpart – brought charges against him, it marked a turning point in Brazil's history of impunity for military coup attempts.

Bolsonaro is now on trial for attempting to abolish the democratic rule of law – a crime clearly defined in Brazilian law, unlike in the US.

Importantly, Brazilian law explicitly criminalizes coup attempts, based on the presumption that a successful one would undermine legal accountability.

Bolsonaro's claim that he merely considered the idea, but did not act on it, is now under judicial scrutiny.

Trump and Bolsonaro are emblematic of the contemporary era of competitive authoritarianism.

Both skillfully wield disinformation, rely on

anti-science and anti-rights rhetoric, and are contemptuous of democratic institutions.

But Bolsonaro carries the unmistakable imprint of twentieth-century authoritarianism. His political ideal is the military dictatorship that ended in the 1980s.

While no country can fully defend against democratic erosion, Brazil's post-dictatorship constitution built strong safeguards.

Bolsonaro is being judged because he could not restrain himself and await the slow dismantling of democracy. He attempted a classic coup – and found a country prepared to reject it.

As a Brazilian whose family members were arrested or exiled by the military regime, it is reassuring to see Bolsonaro on trial, especially when no military leader was ever convicted of crimes during the dictatorship.

But today, it is competitive authoritarians, not military coups, that most threaten our freedoms. In Brazil, the US, and elsewhere, we must halt the gradual decay of democratic institutions that enables them to come to power.

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