

Bolsonaro poses a serious threat to higher education

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The election of Brazil's new far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, has already seen the beginning of a witch-hunt against academics. Further attacks on higher education, including budget cuts, curriculum changes and the abolition of affirmative action policies, are likely to be next.

Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's ultra-right-wing president-elect, is not only a threat to democracy, women, Afro-Brazilians, indigenous people, gays and the Amazon Rainforest – the 28 October election of the retired army paratrooper also spells very bad news for Brazilian higher education.

While on the campaign trail, Bolsonaro vowed to crack down on academic freedom by reigning in “leftist proselytising” and to abolish the Western hemisphere's most sweeping affirmative action policies for universities.

The seven-term former federal congressman has proposed slashing funding for higher education and investing in an expanded vocational high-school system under army control.

In addition, he has announced plans to merge the Higher Education Ministry with the Ministry for Science, Technology, Innovation and Communication, a cost-saving measure that could undermine Brazil's current role as Latin America's scientific powerhouse. Before plunging into economic recession in 2015, Brazil spent 1.3% of its gross domestic product on science and technology research – by far the largest share in the region.

Witch-hunt

Already, there are signs of grim days ahead for Brazilian universities. Since defeating leftist Fernando Haddad in second-round voting, Bolsonaro and his supporters have unleashed an anti-communist witch-hunt in the country's public education system, including universities.

For many academics, the campaign is a throwback to Brazil's 1964-85 military dictatorship, when hundreds of leftist militants (many of them students and professors) were killed and thousands more were tortured, jailed or forced into exile. The military government also cracked down on freedom of expression, rewrote Brazilian history texts and introduced mandatory school subjects in support of the military.

Last Tuesday, a young lawmaker from Bolsonaro's conservative Social Liberal Party urged students to denounce teachers who speak out against the president-elect. Ana Campagnolo, a high school history teacher who was elected to the Santa Catarina state congress in early October, invited her more than 70,000 Facebook followers to upload videos of “indoctrinating teachers”. The same day, a YouTube video of Bolsonaro railing against professors who seek to “brainwash” students flooded the web.

The crackdown on “illegal proselytising” began during the election campaign, when military police raided university classrooms and seized electoral material in support of Haddad. The police were presumably acting on the orders of the outgoing conservative president, Michel Temer.

In one case, police banned a planned lecture entitled “Fighting Fascism” at the Federal University of Grande Dourados. At the Federal University of Campina Grande they seized copies of a declaration by a professors' association in defence of public universities and freedom of expression.

In response, several of the country's top institutions of higher education, including the University of Brasilia and the João Pinheiro Foundation in Minas Gerais state, cancelled some classes last week for fear of retribution from Bolsonaro supporters or police detentions.

Moral and civic education

The campaign against freedom of speech is part of a broader ideological battle for the hearts and minds of Brazilians. Under Temer, the government took initial steps to reduce the influence of the social sciences and philosophy in the public school system in a bid to root out so-called Marxist teachings.

Bolsonaro plans to go much further. His supporters have introduced a bill in Congress that would establish a new curriculum under the banner of “school without [political] party”. It entails making social science and philosophy courses optional and banning sex education while reintroducing the dictatorship-era courses “moral and civic education” and “social and political

organisation”.

Bolsonaro himself is an outspoken apologist for military rule. In August 2016, he dedicated his vote on behalf of impeaching former president Dilma Rousseff to Carlos Ustra, the military general who ordered Rousseff’s torture during the dictatorship.

Rousseff, a former leftist guerrilla who went on to become former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s chief of staff, was removed from office on charges of “budgetary irregularities”, in what many Brazilians view as a right-wing political coup. She was succeeded by her vice-president, Temer, who later turned against her in the impeachment trial.

Bolsonaro’s pick for vice-president, retired general Antônio Hamilton Mourão, has suggested tearing up and rewriting Brazil’s constitution. His choice of economy minister, Paulo Guedes, lived in Chile during the 1973-90 military dictatorship and has proposed introducing many of the same neoliberal recipes designed for former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet by the ‘Chicago Boys’.

Those policies could have a major impact on Brazilian higher education. Already under Temer, the government imposed a 20-year freeze on social spending, including on education and health, as part of a radical fiscal austerity programme. The cutbacks have taken a toll on public universities and research centres, some of which have seen their budgets slashed by as much as 50%.

The changes represent a radical break with the progressive policies implemented by former presidents Lula da Silva (2003-10) and Rousseff (2011-16), of the leftist Workers’ Party. Haddad, a former mayor of São Paulo and federal education minister under Lula, oversaw the implementation of nationwide affirmative action policies for underprivileged students.

Today, half of all seats at the country’s 63 federal universities, as well as large percentages at state and private institutions, are reserved for public school graduates and Afro-Brazilians. Under Lula and Rousseff, the government also tripled spending on higher education and sent more than 100,000 STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) students abroad under the Brazilian Scientific Mobility Program (previously called Science without Borders).

Bolsonaro has vowed to end all policies favouring underprivileged groups, including Afro-Brazilians, whom he has described as “too lazy even to procreate”. Instead, his election platform outlines a pro-business agenda for higher education, with an emphasis on technological training, distance programmes and industry incubators.

At stake is not only Brazil’s progress in expanding access to universities for the least fortunate. If the current witch-hunt is any indication, the effects of Bolsonaro’s presidency on higher education as a whole will be devastating.

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