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RESISTANCE TO AUTHORITARIANISM:

Lessons Learned from
Brazilian Civil Society

Summary

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Definition and Political Context	6
3. Restrictions on Civic Engagement and Participation	9
Context	9
Civil Society Engagement	10
Results	13
Impact on Organizations.....	14
4. Freedom of Expression and Silencing of Critical Voices.....	16
Context	16
Civil Society Engagement	18
Results	19
Impact on Organizations.....	20
5. Gun and Ammunition Control.....	22
Context	22
Civil Society Engagement	23
Results	25
Impact on Organizations.....	25
6. The Integrity of the Elections	27
Context	27
Civil Society Engagement	28
Results	30
Impact on Organizations.....	30
7. Final Considerations	32
Endnotes	34

1. INTRO- DUCTION



1. Introduction

An authoritarian movement is on the rise worldwide. Populist leaders are gaining power and systematically dismantling the democratic structures that put them there. They are making changes to the state apparatus that aim to centralize power and secure their time in office. Despite lacking a clear ideological preference, with authoritarians from both the left and the right using the same tactics, the rise of the far right has had significant global impacts.

Brazil is no different. The government of former President Jair Messias Bolsonaro, elected for a four-year term on October 28, 2018, was marked by attempts to consolidate power, silence opposing voices and ideas, co-opt law enforcement agencies, weaken the checks and balances that underpin democracy, dismantle public policies, and cling to power, whether by undermining faith in the electoral system or attempting to create conditions that facilitated the emergence of independent militias.

Against this backdrop, a strong and resilient civil society played a crucial role in confronting this authoritarian turn. The years 2019 to 2022 posed significant challenges, but resistance from civil society prevented further democratic erosion. Bolsonaro's defeat in the 2022 elections, along with the ongoing investigations linking him to the possibility of a coup,¹ has highlighted the potential risks and the severity of the plans to establish an authoritarian state.

Given the global scenario and ongoing threats in Brazil, this study aims to document Brazilian civil society's efforts to defend democracy and counter democratic erosion. We selected four emblematic cases to describe this process and analyzed how civil society mobilized to confront and resist these threats.

1. Restrictions on civic participation and engagement, marked by the dissolution of social participation councils, lack of government transparency, monitoring, and surveillance focused on non-governmental organizations, particularly those dedicated to environmental causes.
2. Attacks on freedom of expression, focusing on media actions and the criminalization of dissenting voices.
3. Loosening of gun and ammunition control and the possibility of forming an armed militia to defend Bolsonaro while he was still in power.
4. Attempts to undermine the integrity of democratic institutions and the electoral process.

This document was developed based on an extensive literature review, media analysis, and 18 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including representatives from highly active institutions in the study's topics of interest, such as civil society, donors, and government. Through qualitative analyses, this paper examines the tactics and strategies adopted by Brazilian civil society in this challenging political context. It also examines how democratic erosion and future preparedness impact the performance and evolving strategies of the involved actors.

The report is structured into six sections. The first section outlines the definitions and political context relevant to this study. The subsequent four sections are devoted to analyzing selected cases and highlighting key strategies and outcomes. In the final section, we offer concluding remarks that focus on critical considerations for sustaining, enhancing, and actively promoting a robust and a solid democracy in Brazil.



2.

DEFINITION AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

2. Definition and Political Context

This study regards Bolsonaro's authoritarianism as a gradual dismantling of liberal democracy,² marked not by dramatic ruptures in existing structures but by a subtle undermining of democratic institutions.³ Thus, the former president's autocratic practices go beyond classic authoritarianism, characterized by the use of brute force and direct violence.

Neoliberal authoritarianism encompasses subtle strategies aimed at isolating institutional policies and practices from confrontations with dissidents and social and political opponents, using legal instruments to legitimize such actions.⁴ As a result, there has been an increase in the prominence of members of the judiciary in response to initiatives by the Brazilian executive and its allies in the legislature.⁵

The intensification of an anti-rights movement has also been fueled by increased social and political polarization, declining public trust in democratic institutions, and state persecution of social organizations and human rights activists, as well as growing rejection of the expansion of the rights agenda.

Bolsonaro's anti-democratic beliefs were well-known long before his presidency – as a congressman, he called Brazil's 1964 military coup the second Independence Day⁶ and praised torturers.⁷ Once elected president, he threatened to reinstate AI-5,⁸ a dictatorship-era instrument that, among many other restrictions, closed Congress and suspended *habeas corpus*.⁹

Bolsonaro also engaged in hate speech, openly displaying misogyny and discrimination against women and other disadvantaged groups, and took pride in publicly insulting his opponents. The so-called "Cabinet of Hate," an unofficial structure led by one of his sons,¹⁰ orchestrated digital attacks, defamation, harassment, and intimidation against various opposition groups. Thus, the government's intention to consolidate power under a single state perspective became clear, creating a hostile environment for dissenting voices. For this reason, we argue that, as in other countries, Bolsonaro's actions were taken from an authoritarian playbook that included strategies such as:

1. Restriction of civic space and press freedom, mostly governing by decree.
2. Administrative opacity, through the classification of previously-accessible documents as confidential and the weakening of the Access to Information Act, thereby impacting the availability of open data and transparency.
3. Censorship, through restrictions on academic freedom and artistic and cultural projects, and harassment of civil servants.
4. Intensified State surveillance, using intimidation and blackmail.
5. Political interference in the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, in order to impede investigations against family members and allies.
6. Persecution of political opponents through the public security apparatus and criminal justice system.

7. Politicization of the police and army, with over 6,000 military personnel occupying civilian positions in the federal executive branch during his term, a number exceeding the total recorded during the 20 years of military dictatorship.
8. Orchestration of legal actions against journalists and influential peoples through government-aligned groups.
9. Weakening of key institutions by undermining their mandates, including the Ministries of Education, Environment, Foreign Affairs, Human Rights, as well as secretariats for Black and Indigenous people.

Bolsonaro's actions led to serious democratic erosion and power imbalances, accompanied by restrictions on civic space, defined as the layer between the State and society where individuals, organizations, and other entities act to influence state structures and public policies.¹¹ Thus, an active and open civic space is essential for a strong representative democracy, especially in a country like Brazil where historically-marginalized groups face significant challenges in representation and political participation.¹² This context forced civil society organizations to adapt and reinvent themselves to face the urgent threats to their very existence.

To analyze the main strategies used by Brazilian civil society organizations, the Igarapé Institute created a typology¹³ of these strategies and began to monitor daily attacks on civic space and, consequently, Brazilian democracy. From January 2021 to December 2022, the Igarapé Institute detected 3,088 attacks on civic space, with the dissemination of fake news and disinformation campaigns accounting for 37% of cases. Intimidation and harassment tactics against critics and opponents corresponded to 19% of the total, followed by abuses of power (13%).

The manipulation and power concentration strategies combined to compromise the democratic values and individual freedoms that are essential for a just and equitable society.

For this publication, we selected four emblematic cases from the Bolsonaro government that illustrate tactics commonly employed by authoritarian governments worldwide. The goal is to highlight the resistance strategies adopted by Brazilian civil society. The strength of this civil society prevented the worsening of democratic erosion or, worse, its becoming permanent.

A network diagram with blue dots and lines is overlaid on a background of people. The dots are connected by lines, forming a complex web. The background shows a group of people, with a woman in the foreground looking to the right.

3.

RESTRICTION ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

3. Restrictions on Civic Engagement and Participation

Context

A defining feature of the Bolsonaro administration was the closure of official dialogue channels with civil society, in addition to attempts to discredit dissenting voices critical of the government. In this case study, we highlight actions to weaken environmental protection, promote a narrative against civil society participation, and neglect transparency and accountability.

Among the government's initial actions was an effort to increase supervision and control over civil society organizations,¹⁴ restricting consultations and dissolving participatory councils.¹⁵ In the first 100 days of the administration, Bolsonaro's Chief of Staff declared that the number of participatory councils would need to drop from 700 to fewer than 50 in order to reduce the "ideological vision of previous administrations" in these spaces.¹⁶ The dissolution of these councils was announced at an event attended by ministers, legislative, judicial, and military authorities. It was broadcast live on the political channel TV Brasil, highlighting the measure as a symbolically successful milestone.

Indigenous populations and environmental groups, including governmental agencies dedicated to these issues, were particularly affected. For example, there were changes in the composition of commissions responsible for indigenous and environmental advocacy groups participation. Additionally, significant budget cuts in the National Indian Foundation (Funai)¹⁷ compromised deforestation control, reporting channels, and the protection of indigenous territories and peoples.¹⁸

It is also essential to highlight the persecution campaigns against activists¹⁹ and public officials who were not aligned with the president's directives.

In May 2019, a decree reduced and altered the composition of the National Environmental Council (Conama), the main advisory body to the Ministry of the Environment responsible for defining criteria for environmental licensing and norms for control and maintenance of environmental quality.²⁰ In February 2020, another decree removed the participation of indigenous representatives and other civil society organizations from the National Biodiversity Commission²¹ and the Advisory Council of the National Environmental Fund (FNMA),²² favoring a corporate and military perspective. In April 2020, during a taped interministerial meeting, the Minister of the Environment suggested using the distraction caused by the Covid-19 pandemic to "let the whole herd through"²³ and change environmental protection regulations, clearly revealing the Bolsonaro administration's view on environmental protection.

To control information and monitor critical opinions, the government restricted access to public information, including appointing military personnel to key positions and extending their influence in the executive branch.²⁴ It also issued a provisional measure restricting and weakening the country's Access to Information Act and expanding the secrecy of official records.²⁵ Moreover, under the pretext of the pandemic,²⁶ it extended deadlines for responding to requests for official information. At the same time, civilians who criticized and disclosed data became targets of legal actions led by Justices of the Federal Supreme Court (STF)²⁷ and the Prosecutor General (PGR).²⁸

Also noteworthy was the creation of an Investigative Parliamentary Committee (CPI) against NGOs,²⁹ which ended up investigating six organizations and culminated in a request for the indictment of the ICMBio president.³⁰

This CPI, which served to discredit civil society organizations in the Amazon, ended in December 2023. It reflected a view propagated during Bolsonaro's government that the third sector had economic interests³¹ in the region.

The narrative against civil society's environmental actions worsened Brazil's already fragile environmental protection framework. One example is the legislative measures known as the "Destruction Package,"³² a term coined by civil society. This package, which continues to raise concerns even with Bolsonaro out of office, comprises over 14 bills that directly threaten ecosystems, local communities, and the climate. It promotes setbacks on land ownership, traditional communities' rights, land grabbing, pesticide regulation, environmental licensing, mining, and the construction of hydroelectric dams on indigenous lands. With the support of Bolsonaro, his ministers, and allies in the legislature, the package advocated highly-destructive economic activities, favoring large enterprises at the expense of the environment.

At the same time, the revival of the "Marco Temporal" thesis in the legislature also raised concerns, impacting the rights of indigenous peoples and the environment. Suspended in 2022³³ and declared unconstitutional by the Federal Supreme Court (STF) in 2023,³⁴ thanks to civil society activism, the "Marco Temporal" thesis stipulated that indigenous peoples would only have the right to land demarcation if they were in possession of the land on October 5, 1988, the date the current Brazilian Constitution was enacted. Though not initiated under Bolsonaro, he vigorously promoted the thesis, openly supporting it and rejecting any adverse judicial decisions.³⁵ The debate on the "Marco Temporal" continued into the subsequent Lula administration, with Congress passing laws contrary to the STF's ruling of unconstitutionality.³⁶

Civil Society Engagement

Among the environmental organizations, the difficulty of dialogue and the constant sense of insecurity, especially among those in the Amazon, was a common experience. As one interviewee pointed out, *"We are not in Brasília or São Paulo talking about the Amazon, miners, loggers, land grabbers."*³⁷ Organizations focused on environmental issues in the Amazon are used to facing challenges and difficult situations – some described this period as being in "combat" and "in the trenches," where "every day brought a new absurdity."³⁸ The regional context of the Amazon contributed to this, as the area is marked by an institutional void that facilitates coexistence with illegal actors and the use of questionable tactics, even endangering the safety of those on the front lines. This reality existed even before the rise of an authoritarian government.

The organizations consulted emphasized that one of the main difficulties was the disruption of communication channels with governmental bodies, which hindered constructive dialogue for inclusive and evidence-based public policies. In this context, some organizations saw the need to adopt different approaches, shifting from focusing on direct influence over key executive positions to acting through the legislature, litigation, or even protests and demonstrations. Physical safety was also a concern.

The common goal of active environmental organizations was to regain legitimacy for their cause, whether through scientific production, public opinion, or international visibility, to exert pressure on policymakers. Although a wide variation was observed, most of the strategies employed in this case study are bottom-up, reflecting the historical and social context of social movements in environmental protection.

The main strategies used by these organizations include:

Climatic Litigation

Climate litigation encompasses a series of legal actions initiated by individuals and organized groups. These actions aim to stimulate discussions and hold parties accountable for environmental damages caused or intensified by climate change, as well as for potential damages resulting from natural phenomena exacerbated by these environmental changes.

Civil society organizations employed this strategy to block or challenge legislation that threatens the environment, hold economic actors accountable, and encourage the active participation of civil society in addressing these issues, among other goals. For example, they judicialized public protection programs that ceased functioning during the Bolsonaro administration and involved the STF in response to approving or processing of legislative bills, such as the "Destruction Package" and the "Marco Temporal" thesis.

In addition to these litigations, holding the Brazilian National Bank of Social Development (BNDES) accountable is noteworthy. This involved initiating discussions about a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to guide the institution's investments in line with the targets set by the Paris Agreement and the National Policy on Climate Change.³⁹ Also noteworthy is the action against "climate pedaling,"⁴⁰ aimed at penalizing the government for circumventing its responsibilities under the Paris Agreement and attempting to increase its greenhouse gas emissions by 400 million tons by 2030.⁴¹

International Advocacy

International advocacy involves a series of coordinated actions by an individual or group to influence policies and actions at the global level. In this context, advocacy actions were used to influence governments and international bodies, pressuring the Brazilian government, as well as publicizing initiatives that were inconsistent with previously assumed commitments, thereby posing reputational risks to the country.

The interviewed groups cited successful examples, including using the Conference of the Parties (COP) as an international platform to amplify marginalized voices and highlight the Bolsonaro government's role in environmental degradation. Furthermore, these organizations have also raised grievances in various forums and influenced public policies worldwide, such as engaging with the European Parliament and the Greens⁴² on the ongoing negotiations between them and the Brazilian government.⁴³ In 2022, as an example of the violations committed in the country, the European Parliament even discussed a resolution⁴⁴ condemning President Jair Bolsonaro for his environmental and human rights policies. The resolution agenda included the deaths of the indigenous rights activist Bruno Pereira and journalist Dom Phillips,⁴⁵ both of whom were active in the fight against environmental crimes in the Amazon region.

A concrete example was the negotiation process for Brazil's entry into the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). One of the organizations consulted reported that it sent letters of complaint and demanded improvements in the country evaluation process, including criteria for human rights and environmental preservation. As a result, the OECD included specific criteria based on the organizations' remarks and requested clarifications on the mentioned violations.

Collaboration with Other Civil Society Organizations

Collaboration with other civil society organizations involved increasing cooperation and joint mobilization among groups using diverse strategies. This approach was mentioned in all the interviews conducted, including engagement with grassroots, community, and identity-based movements, such as indigenous organizations, which added greater legitimacy to their demands. Several working groups were established to promote joint, participative, focused, and highly coordinated actions. The coalition of civil society organizations fostered by the Pact for Democracy was cited as crucial in supporting some of these efforts.

Working with Artists and Influencers to Increase Visibility

Engaging with artists and influencers to sway public opinion and enhance visibility became a strategy to affect public policies. This approach included involving celebrities in awareness and advocacy campaigns. Key initiatives featured partnerships between indigenous collectives and artists who used their platforms to publicize violence and environmental degradation. Additionally, organizations used artistic interventions in urban spaces to raise awareness about forest fires and organized international exhibitions to highlight urgent environmental preservation issues.⁴⁶

Public Demonstrations and Marches

Beyond maintaining an online presence, staging public demonstrations draws attention to and denounces important issues. This type of action, particularly involving Indigenous peoples in Brasília is common, as seen in the discussions on the “Marco Temporal” and during the Terra Livre Camp.⁴⁷ However, this strategy was enhanced by the collaboration between organizations from different fields and with a strong international presence, as seen in the Act for the Earth against the “Destruction Package,”⁴⁸ in Brasília on March 9, 2019. In this mobilization, more than 50 artists went to the Federal Supreme Court and Congress, bringing the issues to the streets and creating an alliance among hundreds of organizations to strengthen networks and keep the discussion alive.

Production of Scientific Data and Historical Records

Amid the widespread dissemination of fake news, producing reliable information based on scientific evidence from trusted sources was identified as a critical strategy. This information not only underpinned other strategies, such as international advocacy, strategic communications, and legislative advocacy, but it was also crucial in combating the spread of misinformation. Several platforms for visualization, publications, technical reports, analytical reviews, and other resources highlighted the importance of accurate and trustworthy data. For instance, the production of data on greenhouse gases highlighted Brazil’s failure to meet the commitments set by the National Policy on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement, fueling numerous national and international discussions on the subject.⁴⁹

Strengthening Strategic Communication

Strategic communication served various purposes, from raising awareness of specific issues to ensuring legitimacy and giving a voice to traditionally silenced relevant actors. This approach allowed these actors to take ownership of the narratives surrounding them.

This strategy highlighted three key points:

1. Enhancing communication with indigenous peoples through indigenous languages and other means, such as radio, proved a successful example of information dissemination during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to clarifying health-related issues, this communication strengthened education on rights. It facilitated coordinated actions and collaborations to influence public authorities and combat misinformation and manipulation in remote territories.
2. Partnerships with national and international traditional media brought attention to the worsening of environmental crimes in the Amazon.
3. Organizations needed tactics to strengthen digital communication and engage with key stakeholders. They learned to adjust the tone of their communication to interact, including with Bolsonaro-aligned politicians, without necessarily adopting an aggressive stance that could close potential spaces for dialogue.

Institutional Political Engagement

Historically underrepresented and excluded from decision-making environments, marginalized populations have adopted a strategy of competing for and holding political offices. The formation of the Indigenous caucus Bancada do Cocar (Feathered Headdress Caucus),⁵⁰ which elected a record number of indigenous members to the Chamber of Deputies, along with the election of black women, exemplifies this more systematic movement aimed at gaining representation and creating institutional checks and balances.

Results

Despite numerous attempts by the government to discredit, obscure, and censor groups working for human rights and environmental preservation, and in the face of advancing environmentally harmful policies, the civil society organizations consulted considered their actions relatively successful. Even with the challenges of civic participation, these organizations reorganized themselves and, although they could not directly influence public policies, they managed to halt some harmful measures, such as the "Destruction Package" and the "Marco Temporal."

First, these organizations positively influenced Brazil's international negotiations by linking these processes to environmental protection criteria and respect for human rights. Second, despite ongoing disinformation campaigns, they took control of the narrative about the civil society's role and the legitimacy of traditionally marginalized groups, mainly through partnerships with national and international traditional media, thus positively impacting both Brazilian and global public opinion. Finally, the collaboration between groups adopting different strategies lent greater credibility to the movement, enhancing their actions.

Impact on Organizations

The actions of civil society in an environment hostile to non-governmental organizations and to constructive dialogue in public policy formulation have had several impacts, as outlined below:

1. Formalization of Civil Society

Organizations: The political context and donor demands led to an increase in the formalization of civil society organizations that were previously informal movements. While they faced government control and repression, formalization ultimately helped ensure transparency and legitimacy for their activities.

2. Harassment against Organizations and Personal Risk Situations for Leaders:

Leaders and organizations in this field faced harassment, particularly online, as well as personal and institutional persecution. They experienced direct impacts, such as unfounded accusations, investigations, arrests, and attacks on the reputation of organizations and their leaders. The severity of these actions varied by geographic location and the specific operational situation. For instance, organizations in the Amazon encountered direct hostility from the government and personal risks.

3. Adoption of Tools for Managing Mental Health Impact:

Exhaustion and anxiety significantly affected mental health well-being, exacerbated by the pandemic context. The challenging political landscape led to daily setbacks and difficulties in developing long-term projects. This prompted organizations to adopt support measures such as providing access to psychologists, introducing days off, and employing communication tools for remote work, such as Slack, to maintain mental balance without compromising work effectiveness.

4. Building Networks Between

Institutions: Forming a broad front of organizations with diverse strategies enabled networked action, strengthening and increasing the visibility of grassroots social movements, such as those of indigenous peoples. With the current disorganization of civil society – many members have become part of the new federal government administration – some battles continued their course and suffered subsequent defeats, even regarding the "Destruction Package" and the "Marco Temporal."

A woman with short dark hair, wearing a dark sleeveless top, is shown in profile, shouting into a large megaphone. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The background is a light pinkish-purple with a crumpled paper texture.

4. FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND SILENCING OF CRITICAL VOICES

4. Freedom of Expression and Silencing of Critical Voices

Context

The combination of vigilantism and surveillance, along with the state's distancing and suppression of civic participation, resulted in the use of state apparatus to criminalize dissenting voices. This created an atmosphere of fear, leading to self-censorship and the demobilization of critical opinions. In this scenario, civil society, journalists, and artists became primary targets. Persecuted for their opinions and stances, these individuals faced legal harassment and online persecution, including the use of bots, which led to tangible impacts such as moral, psychological, and physical violence, especially against journalists, and extending beyond the virtual space. Critical thinking became a threat to the State, which then used its apparatus to repress and discredit these groups and the public policies, actions, and rights they advocate for.

One of the first examples of state apparatus being used to target critics was against the NGO Saúde e Alegria. Their staff and volunteer firefighters were accused of starting forest fires in Alter do Chão, Pará. Their offices were raided, and four volunteers were detained for four days. Despite international criticism of his hostile action towards civil society, Bolsonaro continued to propagate narratives against NGOs in the region, claiming that the fires were intentional⁵¹ and supported by international donors, such as Leonardo DiCaprio.⁵²

This was the first in a series of incidents in which the executive branch coordinated harassment and intimidation⁵³ against political opponents, media outlets, independent journalists, academics,⁵⁴ artists, and activists.

The so-called "Cabinet of Hate,"⁵⁵ run by the president's sons,⁵⁶ carried out defamatory attacks through official digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), YouTube, and WhatsApp, fostering a hostile environment that led to threats and physical violence.⁵⁷

In addition to misinformation and persecution campaigns, the government used intelligence data to map and monitor individuals misaligned with official positions. For example, in 2020, a confidential dossier was disclosed targeting federal and state employees identified as members of the "antifascism movement,"⁵⁸ along with a list of "detractors"⁵⁹ compiled by a company hired by the Ministry of Economy, containing names of opinion leaders, teachers, and journalists. These documents included personal data, profile clarifications, professional history, positions, sensitive issues, photos, and social media addresses to be monitored.

During the period analyzed, several symbolic attacks carried out by the president and his allies stood out. They often resorted to sexist and misogynistic insults as a way to discredit and intimidate women, especially journalists investigating his family.⁶⁰ A notorious example was the cancellation of the appointment of Ilona Szabó, who serves as president of the Igarapé Institute, to the National Council of Criminal and Penitentiary Policy (CNPCP). This action came as a response to criticism from supporters of President Jair Bolsonaro⁶¹ on social media, due to her advocacy for gun control and her views on drug policy. Flávio Bolsonaro accused her of attempting to sabotage the government by accepting the invitation.⁶²

This episode reflects a recurring pattern of attacks on women, exemplified by cases involving various journalists. For instance, Constança Rezende was falsely accused of trying to link Flávio and Jair Bolsonaro to criminal practices in order to provoke an impeachment.⁶³ Miriam Leitão was associated with armed guerrilla activities during the dictatorship, and the description of her torture session was mocked and minimized by the president⁶⁴ and his son Eduardo.⁶⁵

Both politicians were also protagonists of a hate campaign launched with the endorsement of false testimonies against Patrícia de Campos Mello, accusing her of exchanging sex for journalistic information.⁶⁶

The onset of the pandemic significantly increased attacks against the press, exacerbating the president's attitude towards journalists covering events to gather information on the virus spread and the government's containment strategies.⁶⁷ Direct hostility became apparent, manifested in the creation of an unhealthy work environment for journalists during the pandemic, where the president often appeared without a mask,⁶⁸ and incidents of violence were frequent.⁶⁹ It was an aggressive and violent period, especially when his supporters gathered to attack the press.⁷⁰ Bolsonaro's rhetoric⁷¹ symbolically validated press equipment destruction by his supporters.⁷²

According to a report monitoring attacks against journalists, in 2021, 469 different aggressions against journalists and media outlets were recorded,⁷³ with 74.6% involving stigmatizing speeches and 62.5% occurring in a virtual environment. Of these aggressions, 69% involved state authorities as aggressors, with 19.6% perpetrated by President Bolsonaro and 59.8% by his relatives and allies. Also notable were episodes in which the National Security Law (LSN) was used against critics, such as in the case of YouTuber Felipe Neto,⁷⁴ who was summoned after calling the president "genocidal" due to his irresponsible management of the pandemic.

Before Bolsonaro, the LSN – created during the dictatorship to suppress opposition to the military regime – had been applied only once since re-democratization. The frequency of this

law's use under the Bolsonaro government was widely criticized for its symbolic meaning and the inappropriateness of the cases, questioning whether they genuinely constituted crimes against the president's honor, as specified by the Penal Code. Utilizing the LSN was a way for the government to declare the need to repress members of society who were seen as enemies in the name of national security.

Meanwhile, Congress was discussing Bill 2,630/2020, known as the Fake News Bill, aimed at regulating digital platforms and increasing the transparency of internet providers in Brazil.⁷⁵ However, the bill faced opposition from right-wing groups and technology companies, who criticized the potential restrictions on freedom of expression and the implementation challenges. As a result, the bill's text underwent multiple revisions and discussions were temporarily paused while civil society opposed amendments that could allow the spread of fake news without consequences. The debate included discussions on the concept and definition of freedom of expression to justify hate speech and human rights violations.

Other State mechanisms were also used to criminalize press activities, such as the use of the Federal Attorney General's Office (AGU) to initiate police inquiries and actions against journalists and cartoonists.⁷⁶ This type of approach has a symbolic and threatening effect, leading to self-censorship by media professionals, especially when there are public threats to initiate legal proceedings.⁷⁷ This generates widespread fear that affects freedom of expression, leading to concerns over potential legal reprisals and raising concerns about the independence of the press and the protection of democratic principles.

Civil Society Engagement

Despite the historical legacy of the dictatorship and the systematic rights violations during that era, particularly the suppression of freedom of expression and the disregard for the physical integrity of Brazilian citizens, both civil society and the press seem to have been caught off guard by the direct attacks from the Bolsonaro government. The 1988 Citizen's Constitution guaranteed civic participation, and there was a considerable expansion of organized civil society during the democratic transition. This expansion included more collaborative interactions between civil organizations, universities, and the government, strengthening independent media, and increasing governmental transparency. However, the development of the virtual environment intensified attacks, directly impacting daily life.

Among the main strategies in this case, we highlight national and international litigation as the primary form of defense. In this context, the positions taken by civil society, the press, and other affected groups were largely reactive. We detail the main strategies below:

Legal Support Network

Due to the judicial harassment faced by journalists, artists, and civil society leaders critical of the government, litigation became a necessary defense for those unjustly accused. The urgency for legal action intensified as lawsuits were often initiated by State agents themselves, including members of the Federal Supreme Court (STF), the Prosecutor General's Office (PGR), and the Federal Attorney General's Office (AGU). Consequently, litigation was primarily used in a reactive manner but also served as a means to safeguard freedom of expression and protect dissenting voices, with pro-bono lawyers playing key roles in defending such cases.

An example of proactive litigation was the lawsuit filed by the São Paulo Journalists' Union, which sought to convict Bolsonaro for collective moral damages to journalists. The lawsuit highlighted 175 attacks in 2020 alone and argued that the former president's behavior encouraged his supporters to attack the press. The union sought compensation of 50,000 reais.⁷⁸

Strategic Communication

Strategic communication involves disseminating news at critical moments in order to control the narrative. A crucial lesson in this context was recognizing the right time to release certain cases and deciding to keep others out of the public sphere to avoid retaliation. For instance, some organizations choose not to disclose certain lawsuits until after a judicial decision is made, rather than publicizing all ongoing legal cases. With numerous issues being debated simultaneously, this strategy helped keep the public focus on specific topics for extended periods while also protecting those involved in undisclosed cases from persecution and misinformation campaigns until verdicts were reached.

Network Collaboration

In this environment of restricted information access and attacks on academic, journalistic, and artistic production, organizations intensified their collaboration, distributing tasks to avoid overlapping actions and mitigate team exhaustion. Joint action also provided protection, as it prevented isolated organizations from becoming single targets.

Despite the inevitable internal disputes and disagreements in the field, a spirit of unity prevailed that required overcoming these differences, involving professionals, unions and associations. As a result, networks for defense and coordination among media outlets emerged, including initiatives like a consortium for disseminating information about the pandemic⁷⁹ and fact-checking.⁸⁰

Data Production

In addition to collaboration in the production of different contents, professionals also joined forces to compile evidence of attacks, seeking to increase the visibility of these cases. Thus, monitoring reports of attacks on journalists⁸¹ and institutions dedicated to combating misinformation, hate speech, and extremism, including on social media, were developed.

Self-Protection Manuals and Tips for Activists

Due to the risks faced by activists, journalists, artists, and other civil society critics, legal, material, physical, and psychological protection protocols were established for both online and offline environments. These protocols included security guidelines and advice on handling potentially violent situations to prevent and mitigate harm to those exposed to several forms of hostility.

Internacional reporting

Complaints were filed through strategic litigation in international courts, as well as international advocacy, to disseminate information about persecutions faced at the national level. The main international bodies used for reporting were the Inter-American Court of Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS), the United Nations (UN), and the International Criminal Court (ICC).⁸² Among the cases are complaints related to Bolsonaro's handling of the pandemic⁸³ and attacks against female journalists,⁸⁴ with civil society organizations presenting 54 cases of government attacks against these professionals.

Results

Although most actions in this case were reactive, they successfully provided legal support to those wrongly accused. This bolstered freedom of expression and the right to critical thinking despite the persecutions faced by those who dared to speak out and suffered from fear and self-censorship. It is important to highlight that, unlike in other contexts of intense polarization and authoritarianism, civil society, the media, and other actors played a significant role in curbing the use of state apparatus for repression.⁸⁵ Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge that platforms for disseminating information, such as social media, have had a strong impact on the reputation and legitimacy of traditional media as the primary source of information.

Impact on Organizations

As in the previous case, this scenario had a significant impact on the individuals, organizations, and actors involved, many of whom faced various types of violence. The main impacts include:

1. Self-Censorship and the Need to Invest in Security:

Many people felt unsafe and at risk, leading them to withdraw and self-censor. Civil leaders and organizations, as well as the press, increased their security precautions, including measures in the digital environment, resulting in additional financial costs.

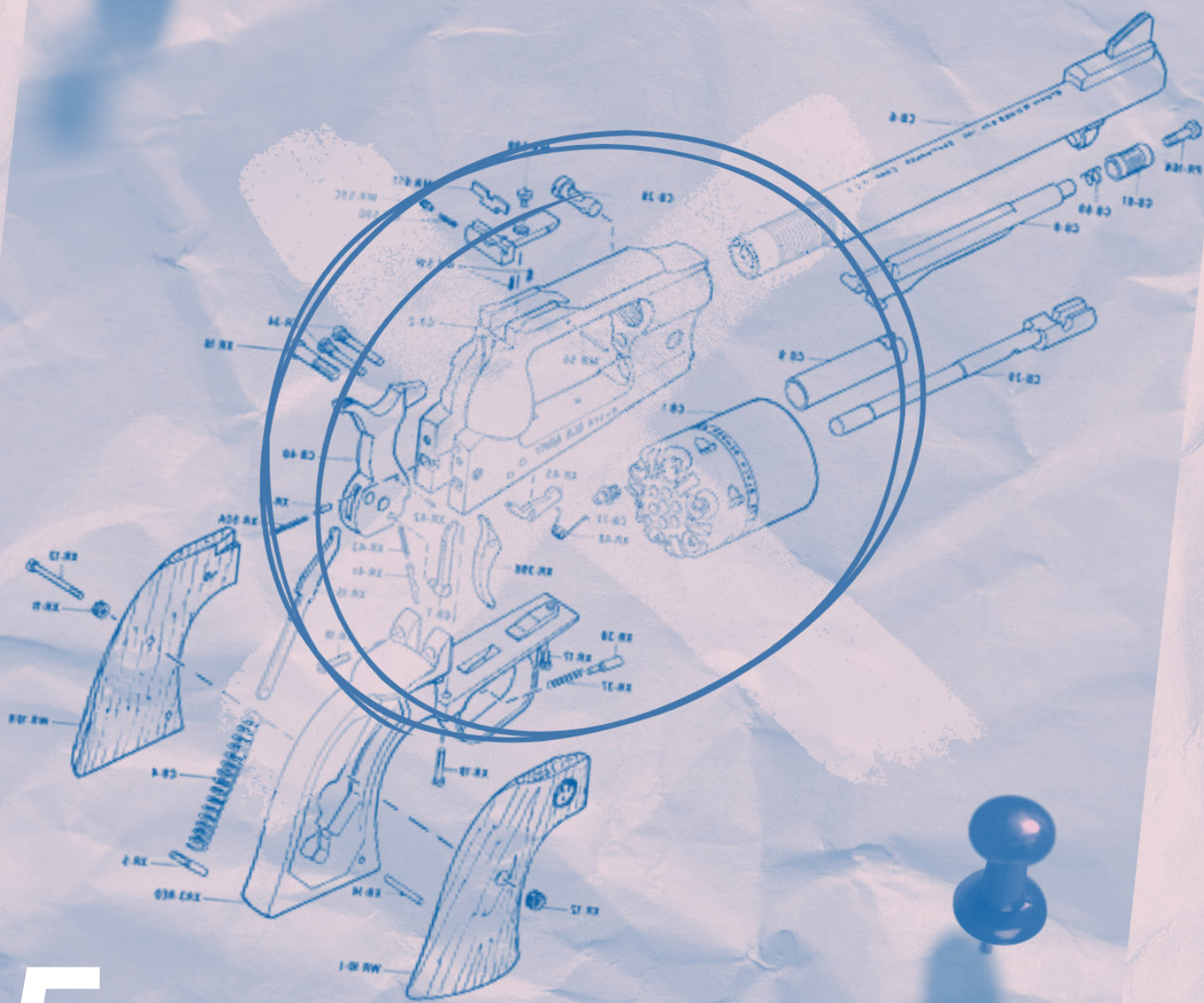
2. Collaboration Across Sectors:

Alliances between unlikely actors, including large law firms, corporations, and leaders of civil society organizations and movements, emerged as a significant outcome of this scenario. This collaboration continued even after the end of the Bolsonaro government, although with less intensity.

3. Overall Loss of Credibility in Journalism:

Despite coalitions preventing greater tragedies and Brazilian journalism experiencing less severe setbacks compared to countries with similar governments, the damage and signs of diminished media credibility are evident. Journalism diversified and developed strategies on social media, such as fact-checking agencies and digital journalism. However, anti-media sentiment and a lack of trust in institutions, including journalism, persist. This reflects a perception of hidden relationships with power, leading people to seek alternative information sources. Consequently, misinformation sources emerge that manage to impose an agenda regarding communication and freedom of expression, fueling distrust. Behind this, there is a political and economic agenda that benefits from the spread of misinformation.⁸⁷

5. GUN AND AMMUNITION CONTROL



5. Gun and Ammunition Control

Context

The dismantling of gun and ammunition control policy was one of Bolsonaro's electoral promises and became one of his main agendas during his administration. Behind this agenda was the intention to create independent and armed militias, ready to be activated in the event of a coup.⁸⁸ This narrative emerged in subsequent investigations into draft plans for a state coup aiming at breaking the Brazilian Democratic State of Law through the declaration of a State of Defense.

In this context, should Bolsonaro lose the 2022 elections, these militias could be activated by the president, who on several occasions proclaimed that "armed people shall never be enslaved."⁸⁹ Investigations indicate that Collectors, Sport Shooters and Hunters (CACs)⁹⁰ could play a vital role in this armed branch.⁹¹

Although the plans were revealed in 2024, Federal Police investigations showed that the groundwork for forming these militias had been laid since Jair Bolsonaro's administration began. In Brazil, gun control policy is governed by Law 10.826/2003 and is further regulated by several regulations. However, between January 2019 and August 2022, 43 normative acts were issued, including decrees, resolutions, normative instructions, ordinances, and bills aimed at expanding access, trade, and circulation of firearms and ammunition.

The use of regulatory decrees to alter the rules established by law exceeded the powers of the Executive Branch and occurred unconstitutionally. This may have been the case in which the Bolsonaro government most challenged the democratic limits of checks and balances among the powers of the Republic.

The issuance of normative acts represents a form of constitutional hardball, which involves "political actors exploiting procedures, laws, and institutions to achieve partisan gains, thereby violating pre-established norms and testing the limits of legality. Such actions can undermine the shared understanding of democratic norms and the expectation of mutual compliance".⁹² In addition to excluding civil society participation in a necessary and responsible discussion on the subject, the president bypassed the Legislative branch, which is responsible for lawmaking.

Among the main modifications made through presidential decrees, the following stand out:

- The relaxation and simplification of the process for obtaining firearm ownership authorization for ordinary citizens.
- An increase in the number of firearms an ordinary citizen can own.⁹³
- A change in Brazil's permitted calibers of firearms, allowing ordinary citizens to acquire weapons previously restricted, such as rifles.
- An increase in the number of weapons that CACs could own, allowing up to five weapons of each model for collectors, 30 for hunters, and 60 for sport shooters, including a limit of 30 rifles, without the need for justification or prior authorization.
- The easing of the transit permit for CACs, which allowed the transportation of loaded weapons without restrictions on route and time under the justification of going to or returning from their homes or places of practice and competition.

The facilitated access to firearms and ammunition had several impacts. Firstly, the number of firearms owned by individuals and CACs increased from 696,909 in 2018 to nearly 2 million (1,897,782) by July 2022. This means that since 2019, more than a million firearms have been acquired by civilians.⁹⁴

Additionally, there was a significant increase in the number of people registered as CACs, rising from 238,439 in June 2020 to 673,818 in July 2022.

This number exceeds the total of military police⁹⁵ officers (406,300) and army personnel (357,000) in service in the country.⁹⁶ Concurrently, there was a substantial increase in the number of gun shops and shooting clubs operating nationwide, growing from 1,862 to 2,937 gun shops and from 1,092 to 2,095 shooting clubs during the same period. This ease of access to firearms, without strict control,⁹⁷ allowed radical far-right groups to arm themselves,⁹⁸ increasing the risk of a democratic breakdown.

The lack of firearm control also provided opportunities for supplying weapons and ammunition to organized crime, resulting in diversions recorded in more than ten states involving groups such as First Capital Command (PCC), Comando Vermelho, militias, and other criminal organizations.⁹⁹ Many of these weapons were used in common crimes and by highly organized criminal groups, such as bank robberies. For example, Army data reveals that the average number of firearms diverted from CACs increased from 32 per month in 2015 to 112 in 2022.¹⁰⁰

Regardless of the threats and the formation of militias, gun and ammunition control is a crucial public security policy for a country as violent as Brazil, where 71% of murders involve the use of firearms.¹⁰¹ Additionally, firearms disproportionately impact Black people: a Black man is 3.5 times more likely to be shot to death than that of a non-Black man.¹⁰² Among the murders of Black women, 53% involve firearms, compared to 44% among non-Black women.

Civil Society Engagement

The organizations involved in gun and ammunition control have a long-standing, recognized, and robust record in this sector. They analyze data and produce evidence while focusing on decision-makers. This background allowed them to accurately read the forthcoming scenario and quickly reposition themselves in a context where the Executive branch limited civic participation and bypassed the Legislature. Their strategy included engaging with various decision-makers and opinion leaders, explaining the implications of the regulations, the risks to public safety, and the maintenance of Brazilian democracy.

The group of organizations had a strategic vision about the risks of loosening gun and ammunition controls beyond just insecurity, managing to convey this message to key individuals. Despite this, much of the group's actions aimed to curb the uncontrolled distribution of firearms, in a context where existing legislation was being modified daily by new normative acts. Among the strategies used were:

Strategic Reading of the Scenario and Identification of Priorities (Non-Negotiable Points)

To avoid burnout and the simultaneous expansion of various fronts, the consulted organizations highlighted that they frequently conducted a strategic reading of the political scenario, identifying the non-negotiable points and focus areas for action. In addition to monitoring the national debate, these groups also considered global perspectives, understanding the influence that similar armament movements in other countries could have on Brazil. One priority, for example, was preventing the authorization of carrying firearms,¹⁰³ which involved coordinating a series of different actors to block its approval.

Information Production

Data analysis and dissemination of information to influence evidence-based public policies were already primary forms of action for these groups. Additionally to these efforts, they started to systematically monitor the Federal Official Gazette,¹⁰⁴ identifying normative acts that threatened the fragile system of arms and ammunition regulation and enabling them to respond promptly and technically. Collaboration among organizations for data collection and the production of rigorous analyses was essential to support all other strategies. The production of information on the uncontrolled access to firearms in a context of democratic threat influenced the adoption of preventive measures by bodies such as the Superior Electoral Court (TSE).¹⁰⁵

Strategic Litigation

One area in which these organizations began to operate was strategic litigation, bringing issues related to modifications through Federal Government normative acts directly to the Supreme Federal Court (STF). This approach was not part of the traditional strategies of these organizations but proved essential to reversing a series of unconstitutional measures.¹⁰⁶

Collaboration with the Media

In addition to strategic communication, the media played a crucial role as a partner to these organizations, using the collected data to generate reports published at specific times. The organizations also conducted opinion polls to identify the best way to communicate the observed setbacks. In this context, several reports addressed changes in gun and ammunition control in-depth, with appropriate framing, such as establishing connections between access to firearms, militia activities, and Brazilian democracy itself.¹⁰⁷ The main goal of keeping these issues in the spotlight was to raise public awareness of the proposed policies risks and increase the political cost of such decisions.

Building Unlikely Alliances

As part of this strategy, initiatives were undertaken to influence congress members by establishing open communication channels with legislators from various political spectrums. The goal was to expand the coalition of parliamentarians working on this cause, such as Senator Eliziane Gama, who led the Arms and Ammunition Control Front, and to promote alliances and collaborations between politicians with histories of involvement in this issue, even if they belonged to different political spectrums. For instance, Senator Eduardo Girão, who had been working with civil society for nearly a decade on gun control, joined the coalition of parliamentarians despite the high political cost of being part of it while being a government ally, playing a crucial role in keeping the agenda of discussions active. The consulted organizations attribute the legislative victories that prevented setbacks to these strategic political alliances. They highlighted the central role of civil society's behind-the-scenes coordination in forming these coalitions, as such a diverse group of parliamentarians would have been unlikely to come together without this intervention.

Working with Local Governments

The strategy to circumvent the limitations imposed by the federal government, partnerships at the local and state levels were established. This approach aimed to develop effective policies for firearms control and tracking, strengthen police stations, provide services to victims, and address other relevant issues in collaboration with the states.

Discreet Diplomacy

Discreet diplomacy involves behind-the-scenes efforts to provide information to opinion leaders and decision-makers who may need a deeper understanding of the issue, its implications, and consequences. During the Bolsonaro administration, meetings were held with various groups to highlight the connection between

uncontrolled arms and the democratic threat. It was necessary to clarify the intent behind forming armed militias, presenting evidence to demonstrate how these organizations were established. This was vital for people who needed to become more familiar with the subject in order to be able to actually understand the risk involved. A successful example was engaging individuals concerned about the delay of the STF in addressing and ruling on various executive normative acts related to firearms decrees that were considered unconstitutional.

Results

The strategies implemented by civil society organizations led to significant impacts, considering the difference of power among the involved actors. As evidenced by the analysis of the context, the Bolsonaro government effectively promoted the relaxation of gun and ammunition control, leading to a disproportionate increase in the number of firearms in circulation. However, through strategic networking and rigorous information production, the limited victories in the legislative and judicial branches represent achievements that helped mitigate more significant and irreversible damage.

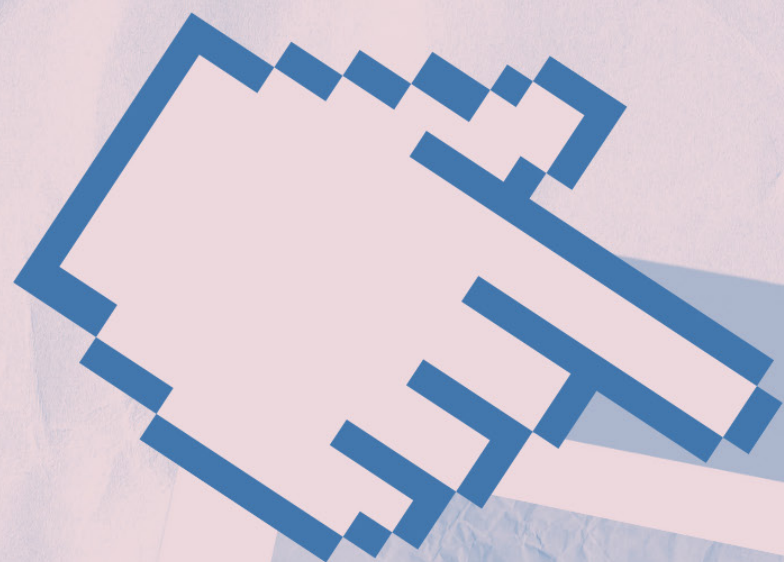
It's important to note that the first act signed by the Lula government was a decree reversing some of the deregulatory measures on guns and ammunition implemented by the Bolsonaro government. Additionally, a working group was established, including the Federal Police and the Army, in collaboration with representatives of civil society and the Legislative branch. The goal of this group was to discuss and propose measures to make gun control in the country more effective.

Impact on Organizations

The four main impacts from an organizational perspective are as follows:

1. **Rapid Shift in Institutional Stance in Response to the Political Context:** The need to address attacks and sudden changes in the political environment forced organizations to shift from a dialogue-based stance to one of resistance. This required quick adaptation and a capacity to be constantly ready to respond to threats against gun and ammunition control policies.
2. **Adoption of New Strategies:** Given the regulatory changes and the need to protect specific agendas, organizations adopted strategies that were previously less common to them, such as strategic litigation.
3. **Intensification of Cooperation Between Organizations:** Increased collaboration and partnership were observed, with efforts to seek consensus in the formulation and execution of joint projects between organizations.
4. **Increased Workload and Impact on Team Mental Health:** Organizations faced physical exhaustion and deterioration of team mental health well-being due to an increased workload and the need to remain constantly vigilant in the challenging context.

6. THE INTEGRITY OF THE ELECTIONS



6. The Integrity of the Elections

Context

The rapid spread of fake news and conspiracy theories poses a threat to both freedom of expression and the electoral process.¹⁰⁸ According to recent findings from an investigation into a coup attempt, the dissemination of false information aimed at discrediting the electoral system was part of a planned strategy to create turmoil and garner support for an eventual coup to keep Jair Bolsonaro in power.¹⁰⁹ Since 2014, the increasing population connectivity to the internet and dissatisfaction with the political landscape have facilitated the emergence of various disinformation campaigns in Brazil.¹¹⁰ This issue intensified during the 2018 election, which was marked by polarization and the intensive use of social media in political campaigns, leading to the rise of far-right populist candidates, such as Jair Bolsonaro for the presidency.

Bolsonaro won the presidency by circumventing conventional media channels and solidifying his presence in the digital space by engaging voters on platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), Telegram, and WhatsApp. During this period, conservative narratives and defamatory campaigns against opposition candidates and journalists proliferated,¹¹¹ accompanied by accusations of electoral fraud and questioning the reliability of electronic voting machines.¹¹²

The speed at which these narratives spread across social media allowed misleading messages to reach alarming proportions, catching Brazilian institutions off guard. Voters were flooded with an unprecedented wave of misleading and conspiratorial content, overwhelming the justice system and challenging the public trust and the resilience of the electoral system.

In 2020, claims of mistrust in the electoral system swamped digital platforms.¹¹³ Although quickly neutralized, discredited, and dismissed by experts, cyberattacks, including against servers of the Superior Electoral Court (TSE),¹¹⁴ heightened suspicions about the integrity and security of elections, reinforcing the narrative of supposed electoral fraud.¹¹⁵

During the electoral campaign, the TSE acted proactively by expanding partnerships with platforms and establishing agreements with fact-checking agencies.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, Brazilian electoral authorities were unable to cope with the unprecedented wave of disinformation that peaked during the 2022 presidential elections.

The widespread use of social media, messaging platforms, and unfiltered communication channels is testing the limits of democratic governance. Beyond written posts, right-wing channels achieved record engagement by spreading disinformation through live streams, interviews, and video podcasts,¹¹⁷ advocating for "freedom of speech" to justify false accusations and hate speech.¹¹⁸

With the substantial spread of these narratives through WhatsApp and Telegram groups, Bolsonaro's supporters began to gather in front of military headquarters, calling for military intervention, especially after the election results were announced.¹¹⁹ With the intense flow of messages reinforcing protests and mobilizations, many dissatisfied individuals sought refuge in a parallel universe, believing that military intervention, the arrest of Justice Alexandre de Moraes, and the cancellation of the fraudulent elections were imminent.

With the growing wave of disinformation, the 2022 Brazilian elections offer valuable lessons on how to ensure free and fair elections, as well as how to mitigate some of the negative consequences generated by the global disinformation machinery.

It's important to note that despite the presidential race favoring candidate Lula, it is not surprising that some of the most vocal figures on the right, including Federal Deputy Carla Zambelli and then-candidates Gustavo Gayer and Nikolas Ferreira, turned misinformation campaigns¹²⁰ into impressive electoral results. Nikolas Ferreira, a fervent supporter of Jair Bolsonaro and a 26-year-old former city councilor, received 1.49 million votes for federal deputy, more than any other congressional candidate.

Civil Society Engagement

The role of misinformation in eroding democracy has been extensively studied and countered by various sectors of society. As it is a relatively new issue, civil society's involvement, in partnership with other bodies, especially the TSE, tested various successful strategies that positively impacted the integrity of the electoral process in Brazil. One such strategy was the development of technical capabilities to monitor social media and the implementation of programs for this systematic monitoring.

In this case study, we better understood the factors that led to the current scenario. More organizations outlined proactive measures, acknowledging the significant impact of fake news on democracy and aiming to address the root causes of polarization and misinformation. For instance, initiatives were developed to promote active citizenship and restore public trust in institutions.

Next, we describe the main strategies used:

Strategic Reading and Prospective Scenarios

Given the severity of a potential breakdown of the Brazilian Democratic State of Law, civil society organizations prepared for various scenarios. The main ones were as follows:

1. In the event of a Bolsonaro victory in the 2022 elections, the areas that would be most affected were identified, and options and strategies for action were assessed.
2. In anticipation of a Lula victory and a challenge to the results, potentially leading to a declaration of a state of siege, viable legal options for resistance were outlined.
3. The least concerning scenario is the current one, where Lula won the elections without any official dispute over the results. In this case, a mapping of actions that should be undone in the first 100 days of the new government was conducted.

Digital Skills Training

Adopting this as their primary strategy, organizations entered a new area of expertise. According to the organizations consulted, training sessions covered several topics, such as navigating the digital environment, identifying and addressing fake news and disinformation, understanding legislation, and monitoring social media.

Social Media Monitoring

Given the unprecedented scenario, organizations developed new skills for navigating digital outlets. This included monitoring social media to identify clusters of fake news and disinformation, as well as tracking specific actors previously defined as risky. The information gathered was then relayed to the TSE and other relevant bodies to inform their strategies and anticipate potential challenges.

Networked Approach to Social Media Monitoring

Monitoring social media not only represents a new area of focus but also demands significant effort. As a result, various organizations have formed a networked collaboration to report fake news and shut down websites that disseminate disinformation, among other actions.

Strategic Communications

The communication strategy primarily focused on creating content to clarify misinformation, bolstering support and trust in institutions, and promoting active, engaged, and well-informed citizenship.

International Advocacy

Efforts in this area focused on legitimizing the election results. This strategy involved liaising with foreign governments through embassies or international visits to seek immediate recognition of the elections to validate the electoral process.

Collaboration between Media, Civil Society, and TSE

The strategic collaboration among these actors represents an unprecedented milestone in the Brazilian context. There was an exchange of technical information with the TSE, legal contributions to agreements with digital platforms, and active civic vigilance, among other initiatives. A notable example occurred in 2021 when the TSE launched the Permanent Program to Combat Disinformation in Electoral Justice.¹²¹ Its main goal was to mitigate the harmful effects of disinformation related to electoral justice, electronic voting machines, and the electoral process. This initiative sought to protect the integrity, credibility,

and legitimacy of the electoral process by adopting a collaborative approach and establishing strategic partnerships with various stakeholders, including media outlets, fact-checking organizations, political parties, and research institutions.

The program operated on three main fronts: informing, training, and responding. Its activities included disseminating official information, media training, educational actions, and training programs for both the internal and external public of the Electoral Justice, as well as the implementation of response and prevention strategies against misinformation. For the 2022 electoral cycle, the TSE expanded its actions to include a network for disseminating truthful information, a WhatsApp chatbot, awareness campaigns, a fact-checking coalition, misinformation monitoring, and partnerships with security agencies.

In contrast to the TSE's actions in 2018, which were largely reactive, the Permanent Program to Combat Disinformation adopted a proactive and long-term approach. It aims to establish a dedicated and skilled structure and implement continuous actions to combat disinformation. This shift reflects the lessons learned in recent years: institutions need to be prepared, have robust planning, and have a network capable of providing official information quickly and effectively.

Meanwhile, civil society organizations united to form a civic vigil,¹²² led by the NGO coalition Pacto pela Democracia and held at the São Paulo office of the Brazilian Bar Association (OAB-SP). The goal was to support the TSE and coordinate efforts to ensure the integrity of the electoral process throughout Brazil, bringing together leaders from the third sector, the legal industry, and the business community. Additionally, prominent personalities created and recorded videos with support messages to emphasize the importance of this collective effort.

Lessons Learned from Other Cases

The analysis of the international context, especially of the United States, was crucial in defining the strategies adopted in this case study. This analysis allowed for a proactive approach based on the premise that there was a real risk of a break with democracy. An article published in *Time* magazine¹²³ on the role of misinformation in the Capitol invasion served as a wake-up call for many interviewees about possible developments in Brazil.

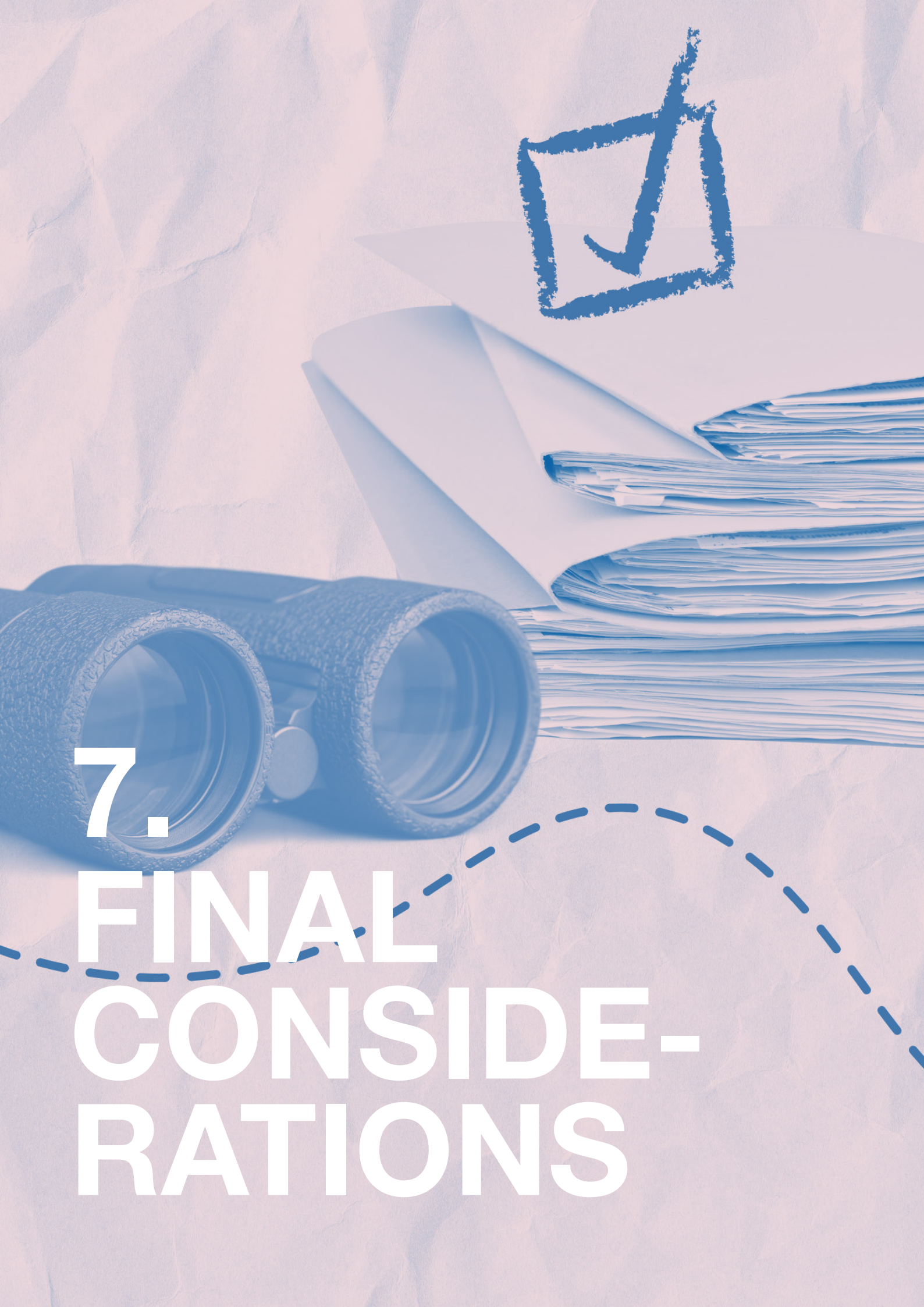
Results

It is undeniable that Brazilian democracy faced a real risk during this tumultuous period. Ongoing investigations have revealed a series of schemes and plans to keep Bolsonaro in power, highlighting the severity of the situation. President Lula's victory amid persistent misinformation and fake news campaigns reflects the broad mobilization of society in defense of democracy.

However, challenges persist. Extreme polarization and the difficulty of establishing constructive dialogues across political spectrums remain significant obstacles. The lack of collaboration between political parties, especially leftwing ones, within the democratic environment increases the risk for future elections. Organizations have highlighted several issues, including the difficulty of creating spaces for broader dialogue to ensure that political disputes occur within constitutional limits. Additionally, the withdrawal of financial support by some donors, who believed that the challenges to democracy in Brazil had been overcome, underscores the need for continued attention and efforts.

Impact on Organizations

The primary impact observed among the consulted organizations was the adoption of new focus areas and the need to develop skills to address existing threats. This situation led to unprecedented collaboration between civil society organizations and other sectors, including the TSE. However, this collaboration dissipated after the elections and the previously highly competitive environment within the organizations was reinstated.



7.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

7. Final Considerations

The analysis of these cases revealed a series of deliberate actions by the government to centralize power in the Executive branch, as well as portray critical voices as enemies of the state, and create favorable conditions for forming an armed group to support keeping Bolsonaro in power. Despite these challenges, civil society successfully mobilized different government segments from various political spectrums in defense of democracy and collaborated with other sectors committed to democratic ideals. Although there is a sense of exhaustion and awareness that many actions were reactive among most interviewees, it is crucial to recognize the numerous achievements accomplished. This includes preventing the emergence of future authoritarian regimes in Brazil, even amidst persistent challenges.

No organization relied solely on a single strategy of action. Success stemmed from using multiple strategies at key moments. For example, effective coordination among civil society organizations and cooperation with major international multilateral bodies played a crucial role. These bodies included the European Parliament, the Organization of American States, the United Nations, and conferences like the COP. Collaboration extended to bilateral relations with embassies in Brasília, partnerships with traditional media, strategic communication on social media, and advocacy with other public bodies, especially in the legislative and executive branches at the state and municipal levels. There was also significant interaction with the judiciary, mainly through strategic litigation, acquiring technological solutions and technical knowledge to monitor and neutralize attacks on the integrity of elections, along with constant intelligence gathering and political scenario analysis to determine the most appropriate strategy at each moment.

Most strategies adopted were reactive, responding to specific attacks. Considering the breadth and diversity of measures implemented by the Bolsonaro government, little progress was made in preventive initiatives against a return to a context of democratic erosion. Preventive measures were more common among organizations focusing on election integrity.

Among the few proactive/preventive strategies, the following stand out:

1. Conducting community political education courses to foster active, well-informed, and conscientious citizenship.
2. The Superior Electoral Court led an institutional strengthening program focused on restoring public trust in the institution's integrity and role and educating about the electoral system's functioning, among other objectives.
3. Attempts to create platforms and networks for coordinating actions among organizations.
4. Studies on communicating strategically with radical individuals, seeking to establish constructive dialogues.

It is vital to highlight that organizations focused on environmental issues, especially in the Amazon, were already dealing with a context of extreme insecurity and had experience in communicating and operating in an environment marked by personal and institutional threats. Despite predominantly reactive responses to daily challenges, grassroots and identity-based organizations appropriated the local narrative. This shift manifested in participation and political engagement.

It is also worth noting that the extensive and well-established trajectory of organizations working on firearms and ammunition control was crucial for effective behind-the-scenes coordination. This experience resulted in a solid

production of knowledge that helped decision-makers form opinions and base their choices, aiding in resisting the ongoing dismantling of arms control policies. Additionally, these organizations provided essential data on the potential impact that advancing this agenda could have on the Brazilian Democratic State of Law.

In defending freedom of expression and the integrity of elections, new organizations and essential alliances emerged, fostering unprecedented collaboration between diverse sectors. This broad collaboration and coordination of efforts occurred in an environment where organizations often compete and diverge. This scenario is identified as one of the significant challenges for the future, and resolving this dynamic is seen as essential to address potential emerging threats.

Overall, litigation proved to be a crucial strategy, with the Judiciary serving as a democratic anchor during this period. This approach was implemented at various levels, including internationally. It effectively prevented the abusive use of state apparatus to silence critical voices and hinder the advancement of policies that contradicted the constitutional prerogatives of the rule of law.

Finally, it is necessary to pay close attention to one of the main impacts observed by all the organizations consulted: the team's mental health well-being. This impact was felt not only because of the increased workload due to the growing frequency of attacks but also by the challenges of remote work during and after the pandemic, as well as the aggressive nature of the attacks themselves. There was significant frustration over the necessity of acting against the government without being able to maintain constructive dialogue within a democratic regime.

Aiming to strengthen the Brazilian Democratic State of Law, we outline some points that deserve attention, according to the organizations consulted:

1. A lack of trust in public institutions persists, alongside ongoing polarization and networks of fake news, disinformation, and the spread of hate speech.
2. Coordination between left-wing and right-wing parties operating within the democratic field remains limited. In the absence of a common enemy, constructive dialogue has not resumed, and preparations for the upcoming elections are proving to be inadequate.
3. Although far-right representatives are not in federal executive power, many have been elected to the Legislative branch and other local and state executive positions..
4. The imbalance of powers remains, particularly in the Legislature, which, with the “secret budget” (*orçamento secreto*),¹²⁴ holds disproportionate power to its prerogatives. In the current configuration, it is possible that democratic erosion could be promoted from there.
5. Civil society coordination has regressed, and a competitive environment has returned to dominate relationships among organizations.
6. Funding for civil society has declined, especially for projects to strengthen democracy and civic space.
7. Actions focused on reversing the trends that facilitated Bolsonaro's rise remain limited.

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21. Although it is an advisory body, the National Biodiversity Commission was no longer being consulted to identify and suggest priority actions in areas such as research and conservation of biological diversity, and the monitoring, evaluation, prevention, and mitigation of impacts. For more information, read the article from WWF (2020): [Em ano de Conferência da Biodiversidade, governo esvazia mais um conselho na área ambiental](#)
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29. *Poder 360* (2023). [CPI das ONGs pede indiciamento do presidente do ICMBio em relatório](#)
30. The Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBio), an agency affiliated with the Ministry of the Environment, has the mission to protect and manage biodiversity in the country's conservation units. In addition to executing public policies for environmental preservation, ICMBio is responsible for the creation, implementation, and management of protected areas, including national parks, extractive reserves, and environmental protection areas, ensuring the protection of ecosystems and endangered species.
31. Agência Senado (2023). [CPI das ONGs aprova relatório, que sugere seis projetos e um indiciamento](#)
32. Observatório do Clima (2022). [Pacote da destruição: O que dizem os projetos de lei em pauta](#)
33. *Veja* (2022). [Em 'vitória' a Bolsonaro, STF suspende marco temporal das terras indígenas](#)
34. Portal STF (2023). [STF derruba tese do marco temporal para a demarcação de terras indígenas](#)
35. *CNN* (2023). [Bolsonaro diz que pode não cumprir decisão do Supremo sobre Marco Temporal](#)
36. Agência Senado (2023). [Congresso derruba veto de Lula ao marco temporal das terras indígenas](#)
37. Interview conducted by the Igarapé Institute on November 29, 2023, for this study.
38. Interview conducted by the Igarapé Institute on December 1, 2023 for this study.
39. Conectas Direitos Humanos (2022). [Conectas cobra na Justiça redução de emissões do BNDESPar](#)
40. The expression "climate pedaling" refers to a type of maneuver carried out by the Executive Power to meet environmental targets, making it appear as it has maintained a balance between emissions and offsets in Brazilian territory.
41. WWF (2021). [Jovens processam governo por "pedalada" climática](#)
42. The Greens/European Free Alliance is a political group in the European Parliament consisting of Members of Parliament from two ideologically distinct parties, the European Green Party and the European Free Alliance, along with some independents.
43. *BBC* (2019). [Bolsonaro é "infantil" e política ambiental brasileira ameaça acordo UE-Mercosul, dizem deputados alemães](#)
44. *UOL* (2022). [Parlamento Europeu coloca em votação moção para condenar Bolsonaro](#)
45. *G1* (2022). [Bruno Pereira e Dom Phillips: a cronologia do caso, desde o início da viagem](#)
46. *CNN* (2021). [Em clima de urgência ambiental, artistas brasileiros fazem alertas em obras](#)
47. The [Terra Livre Camp \(ATL\)](#) is the largest Assembly of Indigenous Peoples and Organizations in Brazil, held since 2004, usually every April in Brasília. It emerged from a mobilization to discuss the New Indigenous Policy during the first Lula administration.
48. Greenpeace (2022). [Caetano Veloso, artistas e organizações se reúnem em Ato Pela Terra contra Pacote da Destruição](#)
49. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Removal Estimates System (SEEG). [Análise das emissões brasileiras de gases de efeito estufa e suas implicações para as metas climáticas do Brasil: 1970-2020](#). 2021.
50. Agência Câmara de Notícias (2023). [Bancada do cocar toma posse na Câmara com festa e promessa de resistência](#)
51. *The Guardian* (2019). [Jair Bolsonaro claims NGOs behind Amazon forest fire surge – but provides no evidence](#)
52. *The New York Times* (2019). [Brazil's Leader Falsely Blames Leonardo DiCaprio for Amazon Fires](#)
53. The purpose was to undermine the credibility and personal and institutional reputation of civic actors, as well as to encourage some groups to self-censor for fear of being targeted.
54. *The Guardian* (2019). [Brazil space institute director sacked in Amazon deforestation-row](#)
55. *O Globo* (2020). [Deve-se rastrear o dinheiro público no 'gabinete do ódio'](#). *The New York Times* (2020). [Brazil's Troll Army Moves Into the Streets](#)
56. *UOL* (2021). [PF aponta como o 'gabinete do ódio' se expandiu além do Palácio do Planalto](#)
57. *UOL* (2022). [10 anos do Porta dos Fundos: o que se sabe sobre ataque à sede do canal](#)
58. *UOL* (2020). [O que é, quem fez e quem está no dossiê antifascista](#)
59. *UOL* (2020). [Veja a lista de jornalistas e influenciadores em relatório do governo](#)
60. Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji), 2020. [Mulheres jornalistas sob ataque](#)
61. *G1* (2019). [Moro revoga nomeação de Ilona Szabó para conselho após "repercussão negativa"](#)
62. *Poder 360* (2019). [Ilona Szabó aceitou convite de Moro para sabotar governo, diz Flávio Bolsonaro](#)
63. *O Estado de S. Paulo* (2019). [Site bolsonarista exibe tuíte falso em novo ataque contra jornalista do Estado](#)
64. *G1* (2019). [Globo repudia em nota ataques de Bolsonaro a Miriam Leitão](#)

65. G1 (2022). [Conselho abre processo sobre deboche de Eduardo Bolsonaro à tortura sofrida por Miriam Leitão](#)
66. Folha de S. Paulo (2021). [Justiça condena Hans River a indenizar repórter da Folha em R\\$ 50 mil por danos morais](#)
67. UOL (2022). [Deboche, irritação e 'tchutchuca': 10 momentos de Bolsonaro no cercadinho](#)
68. O Estado de S. Paulo (2023). [Coronavírus: relembre o que Bolsonaro já falou sobre a pandemia.](#)
69. G1 (2021). [Ano de 2020 tem recorde de ataques à liberdade de imprensa desde início da série na década de 1990, diz Fenaj](#)
70. Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji), 2020. [Veículos de imprensa suspendem cobertura presidencial na porta do Alvorada.](#)
71. O Globo (2020). [Com ataques à imprensa, aliados de Bolsonaro veem poucas chances de retomar "cercadinho" do Alvorada](#)
72. O Estado de S. Paulo (2022). [Ataques a jornalistas são constantes no governo Bolsonaro: relembre os principais casos.](#)
73. Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji), 2021. [Relatório: Monitoramento de ataques a jornalistas no Brasil.](#)
74. El País (2021). [Felipe Neto é intimado a depor com base em Lei de Segurança Nacional, herança da ditadura](#)
75. The main points of the project included mandatory content moderation, a ban on fake accounts and the use of bots, limits on message sharing, the requirement for identification of users sponsoring content, the creation of an Internet Transparency and Accountability Council, and penalties for companies that fail to comply with the law. Politize (2023). [PL das Fake News: os 10 pontos principais para entender o projeto de lei](#)
76. CNN (2020). [AGU defende no STF inquérito contra chargista que ligou Bolsonaro ao nazismo](#)
77. RFI (2020). [Associação internacional de cartunistas denuncia intimidações a Aroeira, Laerte e outros brasileiros](#)
78. G1 (2023). [Bolsonaro tem condenação definitiva na Justiça por ataques a jornalistas](#)
79. G1 (2023). [Criado para divulgar dados sobre Covid, consórcio de veículos de imprensa chega ao fim](#)
80. Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji), 2022. [Programa da Abraji incentiva criação de núcleos de checagem em 31 redações para o período eleitoral](#)
81. Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji), 2021. [Relatório: Monitoramento de ataques a jornalistas no Brasil](#)
82. UOL (2023). [Em Haia, denúncia contra Bolsonaro ganha força e mobiliza investigadores](#)
83. G1 (2020). [Bolsonaro é alvo de nova queixa no Tribunal Penal Internacional por atuação frente à pandemia do coronavírus](#)
84. Veja (2020). [Bolsonaro é denunciado na ONU por ataques contra jornalistas](#)
85. O Globo (2021). [Na Nicarágua, jornalismo fica entre exílio ou "leis do silêncio de governo opressor](#)
86. Ibidem.
87. Folha de S. Paulo (2022). [Youtube cita desinformação eleitoral e corta receita da Jovem Pan](#)
88. O Globo (2024). [Grupo ligado a Bolsonaro era a favor de braço armado em plano golpista e previa "apoio dos CACs", disse Cid à PF](#)
89. UOL (2022). ['Povo armado jamais será escravizado; comprem suas armas', diz Bolsonaro](#)
90. Collectors, Sport Shooters, and Hunters (CACs) are ordinary citizens authorized by the Brazilian Government to engage in firearm collecting, sport shooting, and hunting activities. Governo Brasileiro (2023). [Conceder Certificado de Registro Pessoa Física - Colecionador, Atirador Desportivo e Caçador \(CAC\).](#)
91. O Globo (2024). [Grupo ligado a Bolsonaro era a favor de braço armado em plano golpista e previa "apoio dos CACs", disse Cid à PF](#)
92. Igarapé Institute (2021). [Uma tipologia para entender as estratégias e táticas utilizadas para atacar o espaço cívico](#)
93. CNN Brasil (2021). [Desde início do governo, Bolsonaro mudou 31 vezes a política de armas no Brasil](#)
94. Data provided via Access to Information Act. Army/SIGMA Protocols: 60502002302201821 (2018); 60502000220201841 (2019); 60143004364202018 (2020); 60143006375202113 (2021); 60143005206202247 (2022). Protocolos LAI PF/SINARM: 086/2019-SIC/DIREX/PF (2018); 0282/2020-SIC/DIREX/PF (2019); 1572/2020-SIC/DIREX/PF (2020); 1445/2021-SIC/DIREX/PF (2021); 0758/2022-SIC/DIREX/PF (2022).
95. In Brazil, the Military Police (Polícia Militar) is a state-level police force that serves as a preventive police force, patrolling streets and maintaining public order. The structure and role of the Military Police are defined by Brazilian law, and each of the 26 states and the Federal District has its own Military Police force. They operate under the supervision of the state governments and are distinct from the Civil Police (Polícia Civil), which is responsible for investigative work. The Military Police are organized similarly to the armed forces, with a hierarchy and discipline system, and they can be called upon to support civil authorities during emergencies or crises.
96. The data were provided by the Army in June 2022, in accordance with a request made under the Access to Information Act. O Estado de S. Paulo (2022). ["CACs já superam total de PMs e de integrantes das Forças Armadas em todo o País: veja a evolução".](#)
97. Igarapé Institute (2021). [Boletim Descontrole no Alvo - Mais Grupos Armados, Menos Fiscalização](#)
98. UOL (2020). [O que é 300 do Brasil grupo de extrema-direita liderado por Sara Winter](#)
99. O Globo (2022). [Armados pelo governo Bolsonaro, CACs usam acesso a material bélico para fortalecer milícia e tráfico](#)

100. *Veja* (2022). [Furto e roubo de armas têm alta em meio à política belicista de Bolsonaro](#)
101. According to the 2021 report by the Sou da Paz Institute, in 2020, the Federal Government allocated 37 million reais from the Unified Health System (SUS) to cover the costs of hospitalizations caused by firearm injuries. The report [Custos de Violência Armada: estimação e análise dos gastos com vítimas de arma de fogo atendidas na rede hospitalar do SUS](#), detail this expenses.
102. Sou da Paz Institute (2022). [Report Violência Armada e Racismo: O papel da arma de fogo na desigualdade racial - 2ª edição](#)
103. *CNN Brasil* (2022). [Juizes de Nova York afrouxam leis de porte de armas após decisão da Suprema Corte](#)
104. The Federal Official Gazette (Diário Oficial da União), is the official journal of the federal government of Brazil. It publishes government decrees, laws, regulations, and official decisions, serving as the formal means of communication between the government and the public. It ensures transparency and legal validity by providing public access to official government actions and announcements.
105. The ministers of the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) ruled to prohibit the carrying of firearms at polling stations, electoral sections, and other electoral locations on election day, 48 hours before, and 24 hours after the election, within a perimeter of 100 meters. [Ao responder a consulta, TSE proíbe portar armas nos locais de votação no dia da eleição](#). Superior Eleitoral Court (2022).
106. Edson Fachin's decision suspended the effects of previous decrees and ordinances, establishing that the possession of firearms can only be authorized for individuals who demonstrate an "actual need" for professional or personal reasons, reverting to the policy prior to Bolsonaro administration. Additionally, the decision imposed restrictions on access to restricted firearms, such as rifles, and on the amount of ammunition available to Collectors, Shooters and Hunters (CACs), and civilians. However, no new limits were defined for the acquisition of firearms or ammunition by CACs. For more information, read the reports from *Folha de S.Paulo* (2022), [Fachin alega risco de violência eleitoral e suspende decretos de armas de Bolsonaro](#), and from portal *Poder 360* (2022): [Por 9 a 2, STF confirma restrições a armas e munições](#).
107. Igarapé Institute. ["Regulação de Armas e Munições."](#) See also Sou da Paz Institute. [Controle de armas](#).
108. Igarapé Institute (2023). [O Pulso da Desinformação](#)
109. *O Globo* (2024). [Grupo ligado a Bolsonaro era a favor de braço armado em plano golpista e previa "apoio dos CACs". disse Cid à PF](#)
110. According to a study by the FGV DAPP from the Getulio Vargas Foundation, between January 2014 and October 2020, there was an exponential increase in the frequency of messages demonstrating distrust in the electoral system, especially in 2018. On Facebook, the number of posts with links questioning electoral integrity was 10,083 in 2014, 12,557 in 2016, peaking at 32,052 in 2018, and then 17,958 in 2020. For more details, read the study by Marco Aurélio Ruediger and Amaro Grassi, coordinators. (2020). [Desinformação on-line e processos políticos: a circulação de links sobre desconfiância no sistema eleitoral brasileiro no Facebook e no YouTube \(2014-2020\)](#). Rio de Janeiro, Fundação Getúlio Vargas, DAPP, Policy Paper.
111. Castillo, Isabela Ribeiro (2020). [O uso de fake news nas eleições de 2018: Uma análise das notícias falsas checadas pelas agências Lupa e Aos Fatos sobre o jornalismo](#). Monograph presented to the Examining Board of the Faculty of Communications at the University of Brasília.
112. Until the first round of 2018, there were 1.1 million tweets with allegations of fraud in electronic voting machines. Between August and October of 2018, the last three months of the electoral campaign, 33 different narratives were identified and conclusively debunked as false. For more details, read the study by FGV DAPP, [Desinformação on-line e processos políticos: a circulação de links sobre desconfiância no sistema eleitoral brasileiro no Facebook e no YouTube \(2014-2020\)](#), organized by Ruediger, M. A. and Grassi, A., Rio de Janeiro, 2020.
113. Muggah, Robert; Francisco, Pedro Augusto P. e Hurel, Louise Marie (2020). [Digital misinformation not only threatens Brazil's municipal elections, it undermines democracy](#), Open Democracy.
114. The Electoral Justice, a specialized branch of the Brazilian Judiciary, is dedicated to ensuring free and democratic elections. It operates on three fronts: administratively by organizing and facilitating the conduct of elections; regulatory by establishing rules for the electoral process; and jurisdictional by adjudicating electoral matters, such as the non-compliance with these rules.
115. *Folha de S.Paulo* (2020). [Ataque hacker na eleição vira arma política de desinformação para bolsonaristas](#).
116. The "Program to Combat Misinformation Focusing on the 2020 Elections" works in partnership with agencies AFP, Agência Lupa, Aos Fatos, Boatos.org, Comprova, E-Farsas, Estadão Verify, Fato ou Fake, and UOL Confere. *UOL* (2020). [TSE firma parceria com agências de checagem de informações para as eleições](#)
117. In 2018, the majority of fake news was circulated in the form of images, accounting for 59.7%, followed by videos at 19.6%, texts at 12.5%, and audio at 8.2%. However, in 2022, data from the Federal University of Minas Gerais indicate a shift in the predominance of formats: videos led with 37.3%, followed by texts at 32.9%, images at 22.6%, and audio at 7.2%. Monitoring also reveals that videos from TikTok and Kwai are among the most shared content. *Folha de S.Paulo* (2022). [Fake news sobre urnas, pesquisas e TSE dominam eleição de 2022](#).
118. *UOL* (2019). [Quando a liberdade de expressão da extrema direita esbarra na lei](#)
119. Pro-Bolsonaro protesters remained in front of headquarters in various states for two months, calling for a military intervention to annul the election and prevent Lula from taking office. Only after the invasion of the National Congress, the Federal Supreme Court, and the Planalto Palace on January 8, was the eviction ordered by Federal Court Justice, Alexandre de Moraes. *CNN BRASIL* (2023). [Defesa calcula 5.000 manifestantes acampados em quartéis pelo Brasil, 6 de janeiro](#).

120. To illustrate, as of February 2023, some of the most prominent influencers on the right side of the political spectrum on platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram included Jair Bolsonaro with 57.8 million followers, Eduardo Bolsonaro with 11.5 million followers, Nikolas Ferreira with 11 million followers, and Gustavo Gayer with 3.1 million followers. On the left side, prominent figures included Lula with 26.6 million followers, André Janones with 12.8 million followers, and Felipe Neto with 78.6 million followers.
121. Superior Electoral Court (2022). [Programa permanente de enfrentamento à desinformação no âmbito da justiça eleitoral](#)
122. *O Globo* (2022). [OAB-SP e entidades da sociedade civil elaboram manifesto por reconhecimento do resultado das urnas.](#)
123. *Time* (2021). [The Secret History of the Shadow Campaign That Saved the 2020 Election.](#)
124. The "orçamento secreto," or "secret budget," refers to a controversial practice in Brazil where federal funds are allocated without transparency, allowing lawmakers to direct money to specific projects or regions without public oversight. This lack of transparency raises concerns about corruption and the misuse of public funds, as it enables politicians to distribute resources in ways that could benefit their own political interests rather than the public good, through legislative amendments. The practice undermines democratic principles by limiting accountability and fostering an environment where financial decisions are made behind closed doors.

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