



THE TRIALS OF A CONTINENT

AS PROVAÇÕES DE UM CONTINENTE

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ABSTRACT:

This is an article about the contemporary struggle for democracy in South America. It is told through the inauguration of Yamandú Orsi, in Uruguay, the conviction of Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil, and it finishes with an epilogue about the kidnapping of Nicolás Maduro, in Venezuela. As South America tries to ascertain its sovereignty as a self-determining political bloc, it flounders and flourishes through the transnational quality of its politics.

In late 2025, Jair Bolsonaro's conviction was seen as a positive shift away from right-wing politics in South America. Paired with a younger class of leftist leaders in Uruguay and Chile, and the growing discourse around economic sovereignty in Colombia, it was a symbol of maturity from the continent. But only a few months later, following conservative victories in Bolivia, Chile and Ecuador, political analysts warned of a "broader shift to right-wing politics in Latin America." Why did the tide roll back so quickly?

By pondering this debate, the article centers geopolitical discussions about South America not in the foreign readings of its politics, but in the cause and effects felt by significant events within the continent itself. Though Javier Milei, José Antonio Kast and Daniel Noboa have the support of the Trump administration, we cannot read their rule as success stories by the simple nature of the alliances they strike.

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Brazil is the largest economy in South America, it's one of the most influential countries in the recently expanded BRICS, and it's the entryway for the Global South into the Americas. Wherever the political tides are shifting, Brazil may not be the pioneer, but it can function as a microcosm for the continuous developments of the continent. Bolsonaro's arrest and subsequent conviction created a vacuum of leadership and influence at the top of conservative politics in South America. Today, as we contend with victories from other right-wing leaders and their attempts to fill that vacuum, we also witness the mounting rejection against the worn-out projects of the right through protests in the streets and online manifestations by the left of the continent.

KEYWORDS: International Politics. Democracy in South America. Elections in South America and the Trial of Jair Bolsonaro. Political Sovereignty in South America and the Attacks against Democracy. Election of Yamandú Orsi.

RESUMO:

Este artigo trata da luta contemporânea pela democracia na América do Sul. A narrativa desenrola-se a partir da posse de Yamandú Orsi, no Uruguai, e da condenação de Jair Bolsonaro, no Brasil, culminando com um epílogo sobre o sequestro de Nicolás Maduro, na Venezuela. À medida que a América do Sul busca afirmar sua soberania como um bloco político autodeterminado, a região oscila entre tropeços e florescimentos, refletindo a natureza transnacional de sua política.

No final de 2025, a condenação de Jair Bolsonaro foi vista como um movimento positivo contra políticas conservadoras na América do Sul. Aliada a uma nova geração de líderes de esquerda no Uruguai e no Chile—bem como ao crescente discurso em torno da soberania econômica na Colômbia—a condenação de Bolsonaro pode ser lida como um símbolo de maturidade do continente. Contudo, apenas alguns meses depois, após vitórias conservadoras na Bolívia, no Chile e no Equador, analistas políticos alertaram para uma “guinada mais ampla rumo à política de direita na América Latina”. Por que a maré recuou tão rapidamente? Ao debruçar-se sobre esse debate, o artigo centra as discussões geopolíticas sobre a América do Sul não nas leituras políticas estrangeiras, mas sim nas causas e efeitos gerados pelos eventos de maior relevância ocorridos dentro do próprio continente. Embora figuras como Javier Milei, José Antonio Kast e Daniel Noboa contem com o apoio da administração Trump, não podemos interpretar seus governos como histórias de sucesso baseando-nos apenas na natureza das alianças que estabelecem.

O Brasil detém a maior economia da América do Sul, figura entre os países mais influentes do recém-expandido bloco BRICS e atua como porta de entrada do Sul Global nas Américas. Independentemente da direção para a qual as marés políticas estejam se deslocando, o Brasil—ainda que não seja o pioneiro—pode funcionar como um microcosmo dos contínuos desdobramentos do continente. A prisão de Bolsonaro e sua subsequente condenação criaram um vácuo de liderança e influência no topo da política conservadora sul-americana. Hoje, enquanto lidamos com as vitórias de outros líderes de direita e com suas tentativas de preencher esse vácuo, testemunhamos também uma rejeição crescente aos projetos desgastados da direita, manifestada por meio de protestos nas ruas e mobilizações online protagonizados pela esquerda no continente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Política Internacional. Democracia na América do Sul. Eleições na América do Sul e o Julgamento de Jair Bolsonaro. Soberania sul-americana e os Ataques à Democracia. Eleição de Yamandú Orsi.

1. INTRODUCTION

This story starts in a city by the sea and ends in a landlocked one. It's a story about the continuous struggles for democracy in South America told through two events that happened in 2025, in two of the continent's capital cities, Montevideo and Brasília. The inauguration of Yamandú Orsi, and the conviction of Jair Bolsonaro cannot be read as standalone events, when South America, in trying to prove its sovereignty as a self-determining political bloc, still flounders and flourishes through the transnational quality of its politics.

On September 5th, two days before Independence Day in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, the former president of Brazil was tried and sentenced to 27 years in prison for an attempted coup d'état and as the leader of an armed criminal organization. The left-wing party in Brazil, PT - the Worker's Party, who is now in power, was able to arrest the counterpart to Donald Trump in the Global South. Bolsonaro, who ruled over the country for four years, and presided over the COVID-19 pandemic which led to over 700,000 deaths in Brazil, was found guilty on several criminal charges, and was put on house arrest.

At the end of November, Bolsonaro tried to evade prison and attempted to break his ankle monitor. But because everything he touches turns not to gold, he couldn't get rid of the monitor, he ended up calling the police on himself and was conducted to a closed

penitentiary. At the same time, other members of Bolsonaro's high-coup-command tried to evade capture as well. His son, who's been living in Florida for the better part of a year, managed to bring over to the US the former secretary to the Brazilian Intelligence Services.

It was a streamlined, direct operation, which involved sending the spy through the Amazon, into Venezuela, so that he could charter a nondescript plane into Miami, where he took residence. Venezuela was an easy port of operations. The Trump administration's interest in the country shows it. The heightened awareness allows for things to get lost in the mix — especially those that don't seemingly have anything to do with the country right now.

Bolsonaro's conviction was seen at the time as a positive shift away from right-wing politics in South America. Paired with a younger class of leftist leaders in Uruguay and Chile, and the growing discourse around economic sovereignty in Colombia, it was a symbol of maturity from the continent. But only a few months later, following conservative victories in Bolivia, Chile and Ecuador, analysts are warning of a "broader shift to right-wing politics in Latin America."² Why did the tide roll back so quickly?

2. LANDLOCKED

The Supreme Court of Justice, in Brasília, is located on one end of the Three Powers Plaza. It sits across the more stately Planalto Palace, where the president works, and the more architecturally famous buildings of Congress. These three buildings, like most of Brasília, were all designed by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, who also penned the UN building in New York. Niemeyer designed Three Power Plaza as a public space at the center of government, where people could meet their leaders, talk about politics and the economy, or even just good old soccer, stay current on issues of the day, and make sure politicians didn't forget about the common folk.

When you fly into Brasília, however, you are surprised by how isolated it feels from the rest of the country. Below you there are expansive plantations, heads of cattle, uninhabited dry land, and rivers. And then you see the city.

Today, Brasília is the third most populated capital city in the country. It boasts a large metropolitan area and growing neighborhoods. But it was once just a blueprint, a project of president Juscelino Kubitschek, who wished to build a central hub of politics in the

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/15/who-is-jose-antonio-kast-chiles-newly-elected-far-right-leader>



country, not particularly tied to any specific regions, but equidistant for all Brazilians. Inaugurated in 1960, Kubitschek didn't get to use the city to its full potential. And its paradoxical outcome—it ended up separating the people from day-to-day politics—was later enjoyed by the military dictators who took power in a coup d'état against Kubitschek's vice-president and successor, the “communist”³ João Goulart.

On January 8, 2023, supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro gathered at Three Power Plaza to protest the results of the election that saw Lula victorious for a third time in the country's history. Clad in yellow and green shirts, with capes fashioned from the Brazilian flag, carrying iPhones to document their buffoonery, these protesters broke into the three buildings, they wrote on walls, trashed historic furniture, tore down pictures, smashed windows; they beat up police horses, they held prayer circles, they defecated on statues, they stole public art, they chanted and mocked; into their live streams they threatened the civil servants who were against their righteous cause, and they begged God or whoever was watching for a military intervention to rid Brazilians from the forces of evil.

This wasn't an accident, nor was it an isolated incident. In the months leading up to the 2022 election, and in the months after, Jair Bolsonaro sought to cast doubt on the judicial system and the electoral processes of the country. He had likely already understood that he wouldn't win the elections fairly, so he led rallies in which he spoke about his intention to keep his power by force, if necessary. (In 2024, one of Bolsonaro's supporters, and a former candidate from his party, inspired by his embittered rhetoric, exploded two car-bombs in Brasília. One in the parking lot of Congress, and the other in front of the Supreme Court.) With his cabinet and assistants, mostly made up of career military officers, Bolsonaro composed a document outlining the steps in his own coup d'état, which would be brought about by an intervention from the military, and would conclude with the assassinations of President Lula, his vice-president, Geraldo Alckmin, and the Supreme Court justice Alexandre de Moraes.

D-Day for the coup was January 8, 2023. A week after President Lula was inaugurated, he watched from a hotel screen, as thousands of Bolsonaro supporters invaded the presidential Palace, trashing his workplace and that of thousands of other Brazilians. But the military intervention never came. Later that day, after the vandals were stopped, Lula told the press that “there is no precedent for what these people did, and because of this, they must be punished. We will find out who financed these vandals that went to Brasília. We will find

³ <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/articles/c1rx9vv3lvno>



the financiers and they'll all be punished with the power of the law for this anti-democratic gesture, this gesture of vandals and fascists."⁴ Two years later, the attack on Brasília was ruled as an orchestrated attempt to overturn the government and install a military dictatorship led by Jair Bolsonaro.

Supreme Court cases are a great televised attraction in Brazilian households. I remember when, in 2013, people turned their TVs to the *Mensalão* trial. The *Mensalão* was a corruption scheme centered on the buying of votes to pass bills in Congress. Politicians across the ideological spectrum were implicated—from former Lula Chief of Staff, José Dirceu, to the current leader of Bolsonaro's party, Valdemar Costa Neto—but in the eyes of the public, the stench of scandal was only emanating from the leftist leaders of the Worker's Party.

When Bolsonaro was tried, at the beginning of September, households in Brazil once again had eyes on the Supreme Court. This fact was not lost on the justices, who all (except the small quorum of Bolsonaro appointees) made sure to be at the trial—even the ones who weren't directly involved in the proceedings—and to sit in frame for the whole country to see. After they were sanctioned by the US under the Magnitsky act—an attempt from Donald Trump to pressure the court and free his demagogue-buddy from jail—the judges wanted to show they were on the right side of history.

Throughout the trial, the feeling of history was palpable in the country. On the outside of the Supreme Court, the Court's press office set up a projector for a giant live feed of the trial. This kind of apparatus isn't uncommon to Brazilians. But it's usually reserved for World Cups, Carnival, or for when a Brazilian film has a real shot at the Academy Awards.⁵ One of the most shared memes on Brazilian social media at that time was about the series of promises (like hosting a cookout) that a sensible Brazilian person would carry out after Bolsonaro was convicted. Personally, I cried. As did many people who went through the pandemic with Bolsonaro doing everything in his power not to help his people.⁶ Brazil had the second highest rate of deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic in the world. And it was a

⁴ "Não existe precedente o que essa gente fez e por isso essa gente terão que ser punida. E nós inclusive vamos descobrir quem são os financiadores desses vândalos que foram a Brasília. Nós vamos descobrir os financiadores e todos eles pagarão com a força da lei esse gesto de responsabilidade, esse gesto anti-democrático e esse gesto de vândalos e de fascistas." <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/radioagencia-nacional/justica/audio/2025-11/confira-linha-do-tempo-que-levou-prisao-de-bolsonaro>

⁵ Though the feed was broadcast publicly, the Supreme Court wasn't open to the general public. About 3000 people were allowed to pre-register to attend the trial in Brasília, including press. After the January 8 attacks, and the two car-bombs in 2024, security increased tenfold in the capital, and wide-access was restricted.

⁶ From refusing to buy vaccines, and peddling drugs for horses, to sending expired gas tanks to hospitals, and mocking people who couldn't breathe, Bolsonaro showed, through and through, that he didn't care about how many people might die because of the "little flu," as he called it. <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-55107536>

decisive time for the Bolsonaro clan—father, sons, and wife—who tried and failed to throw out the Brazilian Constitution to raid and mine the country, birth more cattle, and put guns in the hands of its citizens.

3. BY THE SEA

The other city in this story is Montevideo. It's where the story really begins, because before Bolsonaro's trial, Montevideo was the stage for a meeting between some of the leftist leaders of South America: President Lula from Brazil, President Gabriel Boric from Chile, President Gustavo Petro from Colombia, and the newly elected Yamandú Orsi from Uruguay.

In March of 2025, at an event in the national congress, after Orsi swore over the constitution and took power, he was greeted by the traveling presidents, and a very symbolic photo was taken. In the center, dressed in red and white shirts open at the collar, are Lula and Petro, their hands held in the middle of the frame by two younger men, in tight blue suits on either side of them, Boric and Orsi. The “smiling left” photo⁷ was a symbolic gesture of a nascent force in South America. Conspicuously missing from the photograph is Javier Milei, who, in characteristic fashion, threw a tantrum and made a big deal out of not attending. At the beginning of the year, Argentina was losing long-standing industries to China,⁸ while Milei went to Donald Trump's second inauguration and gifted Elon Musk a chainsaw to continue disfiguring the American government.

The biggest delegation to attend Orsi's inauguration came from Brazil. It included three national ministers, two old-guard politicians (former combatants of the dictatorship), and one Supreme Court justice. As well as the president. They went to Montevideo to celebrate the victory of a left-wing government, and the decline of a right-wing moderate. One of the ministers, Gleisi Hoffmann, a few months away from her 60th birthday, had just been bumped to Institutional Affairs Secretary, and went to Uruguay to celebrate her promotion. José Dirceu, on the other hand, a representative of the old guard (who turned 80 the year after), was celebrating his recent judicial victories. After spending 5 years in jail for his involvement in the *Mensalão* corruption scheme (one of the two corruptions scandals that doomed Dilma Rousseff's second term and eventually put Lula in jail), his conviction, like

⁷ https://www.estadao.com.br/internacional/lula-reune-frente-de-esquerda-no-chile-contra-extremismo-em-meio-a-ofensiva-de-trump/?srsltid=AfmBOoqiTOLEJk5sdPxwzdEqAFHfkGJp9uKSB_rlhHhdwMrGQP7_FJ

⁸ <https://www.diarionorte.com/289511-mercedes-benz-se-va-de-la-argentina-tras-mas-de-70-anos-de-produccion>

Lula's, was annulled because of collusion, illegal collection of evidence, and fabrication of evidence from the judge and prosecutors handling the case.

Arriving in Montevideo, you see only farmland below. Small, well-tended crops, not many cattle, right up to the city limits, which feels unlike most capital cities in the world, but it matches the stereotype of South America, where Uruguay has, in the past 10 years, become a shining example of wealth distribution, education, health and safety. It's only after leaving the airport, and on the way to the city proper that you encounter the ocean on the left side of the longest coastal avenue in the world, *la Rambla de Montevideo*, which sometimes doubles as Havana for Hollywood productions.

Montevideo is a port town. Like New York, it sits on the estuary of an important river and was created by the British. Though that's not the whole truth because New York was lifted by the Dutch and Montevideo wasn't even a city once. It used to be the port for a region in South America that was passed like a hot potato from country to country since its founding in the 17th century. It was built across the river from Buenos Aires, its more established sister in South America. The cities grew in concurrence with the expansion of the silver business in Argentina and Brazil, which travelled in boats down the *Rio de la Plata* (River of Silver) to the two ports and into the Atlantic Ocean.

In 1825, newly independent Brazil invaded the region beyond its Southern border, the independent province known as the Oriental Province, which we now call Uruguay. The region had expanded vastly since its founding in 1680 by a Portuguese land-captain who presided over the economic region of Rio de Janeiro—one of the 15 captaincies that formed the Portuguese colony of Brazil. In the 19th century, the Oriental Province had become an important port for trade with Britain and a minor cattle producer. Many conflicts were waged over administration of the region. Over a 54-year period, Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay all laid claim over the province, and it was only recognized as an independent country after the British stepped in to push out the Brazilians and secure their trade interests.

That's how Montevideo was born, as the independent port across the river from Buenos Aires. Walking through the city you sometimes spot international cruise ships at the end of long rows of houses.

Uruguay is one of the smallest countries in South America. A third of its population (of 3 million) live in the capital city. But many of Montevideo's citizens had left town during the week of the inauguration, which coincided with carnival and a couple of public holidays. Its population was unsuccessfully replaced by out-of-towners who made the

pilgrimage to see their new leader, and delegations from all over the world that came to pay respect to the new president on his inauguration.

Uruguayan politics is a seesaw between the left and the right, which is not surprising for a country that got out of a military dictatorship only 40 years ago. Though it may sound like a long time, consider that most of South America suffered through dictatorships in the 20th century. This kind of political unrest doesn't disappear overnight.

Yamandú Orsi was celebrated as the political heir to José 'Pepe' Mujica, Uruguay's most famous president. He is an heir to the left that had faced the dictators and survived. Much like Lula, Mujica was a remnant of more than twice erased past. But he was a good memory of this past: A president who abdicated the presidential palace, drove himself in a VW beetle, and spent 12 years in solitary confinement during the dictatorship. He also passed away two months after the inauguration.

Leaders like him are once-in-a-lifetime. And it's possible that they can be as good as they are only because they're from small countries. It's much harder to have the legacy of a Mujica in a 'third world' country. In my lifetime, the Global South has been a well of self-deprecation and embarrassment. The idea that the 'southern' part of the world could unite in any way that wasn't a complete shambles, was laughable. Immigration to the United States or to Europe was the dream. You hear about such leaders coming from small places, like Switzerland, or Canada, or even Uruguay, sometimes. To the rest of South America, Uruguay is a golden dream.

But at the inauguration, I didn't see much exaltation. Not really. I'm accustomed to hordes of people rushing down the street, carrying each other into the crowd like a wave. Watching the celebrations, among raised flags of the coalition of leftist parties and freshly made mate gourds, I couldn't feel much excitement myself. Though excitement is what was expected of me. When I spoke to some of the members of the Brazilian delegation, these established political actors, I wondered what they thought about me. As the newest generation to be entering the political space, Gen Z is constantly comparing itself to generations past and often failing to understand that we aren't anything like them. Not because the world has changed, but because it has remained exactly the same.

4. COLONIAL CAPTAINCIES

When Uruguay became an independent country, it was ‘helped’ along by the British. At the beginning of the 19th century, Uruguay didn’t have a preeminent military force. Mostly because it wasn’t yet a country. It was sometimes part of Argentina, sometimes of Brazil. And when the British came calling and promised its elites freedom from their oppressors, Uruguayan heroes like José Artigas, or Venancio Flores jumped at the opportunity. The kind of settler expansionism and Indigenous genocide that happened in Uruguay is similar to the one that happened in the United States, for example.

Today, when the United States kills unwitting fishermen and broadcast the strike all over the internet, or when they split up a nation so that they can take ownership of the canal they built, or when they send their navy to the doorstep of a country to make sure that the ‘communist’ president doesn’t take power, it sends the same kind of message that Britain could send back then. In this way, the colonizer-metropolis relationship that took place in South America carries on to this day.

It happened in Colombia. First in 1903, when the United States was finishing construction of the Panama Canal, and Colombia refused to give control of the canal to the Americans, Theodore Roosevelt took possession and separated the north of Colombia into a new country called Panama. Then it happened again in the 1980s, when the War on Drugs took center stage on American TVs and the United States found a way to internationally criminalize drug cartels to justify its military to enter Colombia. The same script was written and re-interpreted all over South America in the 60s and 70s. Brazil had its democratically elected, left-wing president overthrown by the military in 1964. My father was three years old then. Argentina had their dictatorship from 1976-83. In Uruguay, people say that “the night of the coup lasted 12 years.” It also happened in Ecuador, it happened in Venezuela, it happened in Central America, in Africa, in Asia and in the Middle East.

Apart from Argentina, as the countries of South America came out of their dictatorships, the military officers responsible for overthrowing the democracies weren’t tried, much less convicted of any crimes against the state. Broad amnesty laws were folded into the post-dictatorship governments all over the continent. It happened in Chile in 1990, in Paraguay in 1989, in Uruguay and Brazil in 1985. 40 years later, Brazil convicted generals of a coup d’état for the first time.

Bolsonaro, however, was never a general. In the military he rose as high as captain,⁹ and saw his career rendered a failure in the official records, when he authored a fraught plan to bomb several military barracks to force a pay raise for officers. He then went into politics, became a state deputy in Brasília, where he was seen, for the next 30 years, as a court jester. The rejected heirloom of an embarrassing past. He hung around the fringes of Congress making low-level deals and telling women he wouldn't consider assaulting them because they were so ugly. But he was allowed to stay. The amnesty laws extended to people like him and served as a convenient way to sweep the past under the rug. The dictators were all forgiven for their crimes against the country. They were forgiven for all the people they disappeared, for all the trees they cut down, or the villages they relocated; in fact, in our history books they were thanked for the “economic miracle”¹⁰ they'd performed and were allowed the ‘dignity’ to give up on their lost cause. It was the coup after the coup.

But they found reasons to care about the cause again not much later than that. 30 years later, in 2015, President Rousseff installed the first tribunal to judge the military officers accused of committing crimes during the dictatorship. She poked a hornet's nest and ended up impeached. Bolsonaro, then a congressman, cast a vote for the impeachment, and dedicated it to a known torturer from the military dictatorship, the man who had tortured a young Dilma Rousseff after she was arrested for fighting against the regime.

This same hornet's nest blew up the house in 2018, as judge Sérgio Moro, who was later made Secretary of Justice during Bolsonaro's presidency, and prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol, who later went into politics as a right-wing congressman, colluded to fabricate evidence to throw Lula in jail, in an electoral year, when he was leading the polls against Bolsonaro. And a majority of the country was happy with Lula's conviction then.¹¹ Today, 40% believe that Bolsonaro's own conviction was a miscarriage of justice.¹²

Brazil, like South America, is facing another crisis. Convicting Bolsonaro and the military officers responsible for the attempted coup of 2023 was an important step in the right direction. But crises aren't solved overnight. Chile has been trying to get rid of its dictatorship-era constitution since 1980. And at the end of 2025, Chileans voted president Boric out of office, replacing him with an archetype of Bolsonaro and Milei: José Antonio Kast is a conservative politician whose father was a member of the Nazi party. In Argentina,

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/articles/cn8438yvy53o>

¹⁰ https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/09/29/economia/1506721812_344807.html

¹¹ <https://www.poder360.com.br/eleicoes/maioria-dos-brasileiros-acha-prisao-de-lula-justa-aponta-datafolha/>

¹² <https://datafolha.folha.uol.com.br/opiniao-e-sociedade/2025/12/para-54-a-prisao-de-jair-bolsonaro-foi-justa-e-para-40-injusta.shtml>

Milei seems enthralled by a race against bankruptcy where the only available rescue seems to come in the form of exorbitant loans from the US. In Ecuador, the country has seen signs of an improving economy at the same time as center-right president Daniel Noboa pushes for a broader, militarized crackdown to curb the rising rates of violence. And Venezuela struggles under the pressure of the American stick—always threatening sanctions, intervention or war.

At the time of Orsi's inauguration, Uruguay was celebrating the heir of 'Pepe' Mujica. Boric was still seen as the golden boy of leftist neoliberalism, and Petro was flirting with the BRICS, making a stand for the diversification of Colombia's economy to break away from the American bubble. By then, Bolsonaro had already been indicted, and six months later, Brazil ended his trial. But as the former president was routed to jail, a new conservative wave was sweeping across South America.

5. OLD AND NEW MAPS

After José Antonio Kast's victory, Milei shared a drawing of a map on his Instagram account. It was a representation of how he saw South America. To him, the continent appears split in half, with the left side, a corridor of right-wing and conservative-leaning politicians, represented as a shiny and beautifully futuristic metropolis, while the right side of leftist leaders is drawn to resemble *favelas*. It's not dissimilar from Donald Trump's assertion that America needed immigrants not from "shithole"¹³ countries.

In their own way, media outlets like CNN, the New York Times, or even Al Jazeera have made similar inferences following Chile's election. Paired with the conservative government of Noboa in Ecuador, and the centrist Rodrigo Paz presidency in Bolivia (which ended two terms of socialist rule in the landlocked country), Kast's victory signals a continuation of the shift towards "law-and-order politics."¹⁴

South American countries are no strangers to radical politics. Nor to the continuous seesaw between leftist and conservative governments. But conservative leaders play a paradoxical game: they praise the past, preaching to those most affected by the economy of a return to golden ages wholly mired in inequality. Over the second semester of 2025, Brazilian congress launched almost weekly assaults on the country's constitution. Following the trial and continuous investigations from Brazil's federal police into money

¹³<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-referred-haiti-african-countries-shithole-nations-n836946>

¹⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2025/12/14/americas/chile-election-kast-latam-intl>

laundering schemes involving right-wing politicians in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro,¹⁵ the conservative majority of congress is looking for a new kind of amnesty to continue such illicit enterprises as encroaching on Indigenous reservation lands, passing laws to give congress the authority to decide whether its own members can be criminally investigated, and lowering Bolsonaro's sentence. Each new bastardized attempt to further this anti-democratic project has been curbed so far only after thousands of Brazilians went out to the streets to protest (sometimes asked to take to the streets by leftist politicians). One of the highest trending hashtags on Brazilian social media last year was "Congress enemy of the people."^{16 17 18}

The last time I remember seeing leftist politicians calling on their base to protest the government was back in 2013. After a proposed raise in bus fares, a small movement led by dissatisfied young voters exploded into country-wide demonstrations against the rising costs to host the 2014 World Cup and the corruption scandals of the time, the *Mensalão* and 'Car Wash,' which evolved in the proceeding years into the arrests of several high-ranking politicians, including José Dirceu.

Speaking with Dirceu in Montevideo, he echoed a sense of regret from the left for letting the 2013 protests be hijacked by conservative politicians. But perhaps hijacking isn't the correct term. What politicians like Bolsonaro were able to do at that time was surf on the deep-seated unrest of the population in order to get their platforms for the future sponsored. Back then, the driving force behind conservative-voting trends wasn't a desire for right-wing politics, but a rejection of the left, and the Worker's Party in particular.

Once in power, the right did very little but try and advance the individual interests of its leaders and donors. Before his 2025 conviction, Bolsonaro had already had his political rights stripped for eight years for stealing jewelry gifted to the country by the royal family of UAE.¹⁹ Milei was elected on the promise of making Argentina great again. After two years, he's only managed to stabilize the Argentinian economy by pushing more than half of the country below the poverty line.²⁰

¹⁵ In August, one federal operation led to the apprehension of \$8 billion in São Paulo's Wall Street district. The money came from a money laundering scheme connected to notorious gangs, and right-wing politicians. <https://www.metropoles.com/sao-paulo/pcc-e-faria-lima-esquema-com-banco-paralelo-movimentou-r-46-bi>

¹⁶ <https://www.poder360.com.br/poder-congresso/criticas-a-motta-e-congresso-superam-15-mi-de-mencoes-nas-redes/>

¹⁷ <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/blogs/hashtag/2025/07/hashtags-anti-congresso-e-hugo-motta-ultrapassam-38-milhoes-de-mencoes-no-x.shtml>

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/9WQE4tGigX0>

¹⁹ The jewels were gifted to Brazil following the controversial sale of a Brazilian oil refinery to an investment fund in the UAE. <https://www.cut.org.br/noticias/cgu-confirma-que-refinaria-rlam-na-bahia-foi-vendida-por-bolsonaro-abaixo-do-pre-c7aa>

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ceqn751x19no>

Leftist leaders across South America have a golden opportunity today to ride the wave of mounting rejection against the worn-out political projects of the right. Milei, Kast and Noboa have the support of the Trump administration, but they've lost a strategic ally in Bolsonaro. Brazil is the largest economy in South America, it's one of the most influential countries in the recently expanded BRICS, and it's the entryway for the Global South into the Americas. Wherever the political tides are shifting, Brazil isn't necessarily the pioneer, but it can function as a microcosm for the continuous developments of the continent. Today, its leader is pushing for unity, not war. The same can't be said of his right-wing counterparts.

6. EPILOGUE

In the early hours of January 3rd, 2026, the United States military conducted a covert operation in Venezuela. Under the guise of its commander-in-chief, who took a break from his winter vacation at Mar-a-Lago to bring the pot of colonialism to a boil, the US bombed Caracas, shut off electricity to part of the capital, broke into the presidential palace and kidnapped president Nicolás Maduro. By the time I woke up in São Paulo, Brazilian media outlets had just put two and two together, and I turned on the TV in horror to find that many people in the country thought two and two added up to five.

The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano once said that every time the United States "saves" a people, it leaves them transformed, in "a madhouse or a cemetery."²¹ The Peruvian writer, and Nobel prize winner, Mario Vargas Llosa came to a similar conclusion in his book *Harsh Times*, about Guatemala and the United Fruit Company's successful campaign in the 1950s to unseat the country's president in favor of one more aligned with the corporation's interests. This idea is also echoed in yet another Nobel prize winner's work. About halfway through Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a train arrives for the first time into the fictional town of Macondo (a stand-in for Colombia and Latin America), bringing inside it the very same American corporation, and a continuation of the American neocolonial enterprise in the continent.

When you jump into the rivers of South and Latin America, you find slightly altered repetitions of this sentiment just waiting, right below the surface. For 35 years in Paraguay, the US-backed Stroessner regime ruled the country, and arrested over 120,000

²¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/DTDy1HvDoKV/>

people, almost 20,000 of which were tortured.²² In the 1980s, in Panama, the United States aided the rise of Manuel Noriega, who was a CIA asset and ruled the country for six years until he was captured by the American military, and taken to the US to stand trial for drug trafficking and money laundering. In 2014, in Brazil, on the 50th anniversary of the military coup, we listened to newly released tapes from the Kennedy White House, in which the president had conversations about deposing our democratically elected government in favor of a regime more favorable to American interests.²³ ²⁴ A few years later, after the dust had settled on the unraveling of the ‘Car Wash’ operation and the victors had been raised, The Intercept in Brazil²⁵ ²⁶ published a series of articles showing the involvement of the United States in the less-than-judicially-sound proceedings that culminated with Lula’s arrest before the 2018 presidential elections.

But when Caracas was bombed by the American military at the opening of 2026, the leader of the opposition to the Maduro government, and most recent recipient of the Nobel prize for peace, María Corina Machado celebrated. “The time for freedom has come,” she wrote on X. “The United States government has fulfilled its promise to enforce the law.”²⁷ She called it the beginning of a new era. A new *old* era that always flows into the same old ocean of trade and subservience to colonial masters. During his press conference after the successful operation, President Trump was candid. He didn’t use the convenient lie of democracy, but he spoke about Venezuelan oil at least 15 times.²⁸

In 2019, I attended a lecture by Latin Americanist historian Alejandro Velasco about Venezuela’s historical amnesia.²⁹ The Venezuelan economy, he said, rises and falls with the price of oil, and its politics, in turn, mirror this relationship, operating under narrow time horizons, and abdicating the memory of past democratic failures. Back then, he was speaking after the then-leader to the opposition and president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, had challenged Maduro’s 2018 election victory. More broadly, Velasco referenced the insistence of pre-Chavez Venezuelan leaders to throw away the country’s constitution in

²²<https://www.gov.br/memoriasreveladas/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/paraguai-68-anos-da-trilogia-corrupta-de-alfredo-stroessner>

²³<https://oglobo.globo.com/politica/gravacao-revela-que-kennedy-pensava-em-invadir-brasil-11218793?versao=amp>

²⁴ <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB465/>

²⁵<https://theintercept.com/2020/03/12/united-states-justice-department-brazil-car-wash-lava-jato-international-treaty/>

²⁶ <https://www.intercept.com.br/especiais/mensagens-lava-jato/>

²⁷<https://www.cbsnews.com/amp/news/venezuela-maria-corina-machado-releases-letter-read-text-maduro-capture/>

²⁸<https://www.democrats.senate.gov/newsroom/trump-transcripts/transcript-president-trump-discusses-the-capture-of-nicolas-maduro-in-venezuela-10326>

²⁹ <https://yris.yira.org/campus/historical-amnesia-the-challenge-of-memory-and-the-crisis-in-venezuela/>

moments of crisis, and the apparent need, post-Chavez, of opposition and situation leaders alike to foment the semblance of a revolution with every new dispute for power.

Mexican historian Octavio Paz (yet another Nobel prize winner) discussed in his seminal work *The Labyrinth of Solitude* the process through which a nation comes into adulthood. This starts, he argues, when a people gaze upon their reflection in the “river of consciousness,” and ask themselves questions about who they are, about what to do with that discovery, and what obligations they must now fulfill to themselves. “To become aware of our history is to become aware of our singularity,” he writes. “It does not matter then if the answers we give to our questions must be corrected by time.”³⁰ The right to self-determination of a people is also the right to make mistakes. The important thing is that the mistakes have to be the people’s own. And not imposed upon them by imperial powers.

In one of the many analyses of what happened in Venezuela, I read a post on X I can no longer find about how the forced entry and deposition of the president was evidence that the alliance of Brazil, Colombia and Mexico—as the leftist-political leaders of Latin America—had failed. It’s funny because I interpreted it as the exact opposite. Its success is directly related to the meddlesome finger of Donald Trump and his foreign policy. The more sovereign these countries grow, the less dependent they become of America—and therefore the less subservient—and the more palpable the specter of a new world order becomes (of the BRICS, of the Global South, of South America as a self-asserting political bloc), and the more desperate in contrast does the United States and its corporations become to find new waters to assert their interests.

The struggle for democracy in South America is still a struggle for freedom. Today, it’s characterized by the discussion of sovereignty and the profound realization that there is no savior that will rid us of the shackles of imperialism. Trump, Milei, Maduro or Bolsonaro won’t save us. Lula, Petro, Boric or Orsi can’t save us by themselves. The election of presidents like Orsi, who are concerned with the rights and interests of South Americans, who reject the burdens placed upon us by American exceptionalism; or the conviction of wannabe-strongmen, like Bolsonaro, who try against democracy, who are more concerned about their own interests than the rights of a people; these are steps in the right direction, but they’re not the steps that cross the finish line. South Americans are running a marathon on twisted terrain, but we must continue running, and running by ourselves, with the same conviction we had at the beginning. We must undertake this struggle ourselves.

³⁰ Octavio Paz, “The Labyrinth of Solitude”

On the same day that Maduro was kidnapped, hundreds of Venezuelans took to the streets of New York to celebrate.³¹ But thousands more marched out of their communities in Caracas,³² ³³ rich and poor, futurists and *favelados* alike, and protested for the sovereignty of their nation.

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