

BRAZILIAN STREET PROTESTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC (*)

Olivia Cristina Perez (**)

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Brazil during a time of intense political polarization. The 2010s marked Brazil's history due to an intense cycle of protests, which started in 2013 with the "June Journeys," when thousands of people took to the streets of large metropolitan areas, initially demanding reduction in public transportation fares and then condemning how politics are conducted in the country (Perez, 2021).

Since June 2013, street protests have revealed a dispute over projects on different ends of the political and ideological spectrum: protesters on the left have defended democracy and the rights of oppressed groups (women, Black people, and blue-collar workers) against Bolsonaro and his policies; on the other hand, the streets have also been occupied by supporters of Jair Bolsonaro (Liberal Party, PL), who attacks the agendas of the left on behalf of an authoritarian project.

According to Tarrow (2009, p.25), when the cycle of protests is initiated, there is a reduction in the costs of collective action for other agents. Hence, the impacts of the cycle go well beyond the visible objectives of the movement(s) that initiated it: they amplify participation, which helps one understand the continuity of street protests and demonstrations, including by other groups.

It was in the context of these ongoing, intense disputes on the streets that the pandemic hit Brazil in the beginning of 2020. The country became the stage of a real tragedy: in October 2021, the country reached the 600,000 deaths mark, second only to the United States in the overall number of deaths. Despite the numbers, the Bolsonaro government continued denying the seriousness of the disease and opposing preventive measures such as social isolation, the use of masks, and even vaccination.

Did the pandemic lead to changes in the agendas of the cycle of street protests that were taking place in Brazil? Data presented below indicate that, even though the pandemic has brought some new agenda items, protests can be best understood as the continuity of an earlier cycle of political mobilization.

In May 2020, the murder of George Floyd caused by police brutality in the United States rekindled the #blacklivesmatter movement. #Blacklivesmatter made a big impact in Brazil, leading protesters to the streets in small demonstrations under the motto "Vidas Negras Importam" (Black Lives Matter). These protests also condemned the killing of young Black people by police officers in Brazil. Social rights for oppressed groups such as the Black population in Brazil are issues that had been part of the Brazilian cycle of protests before Floyd and the pandemic.

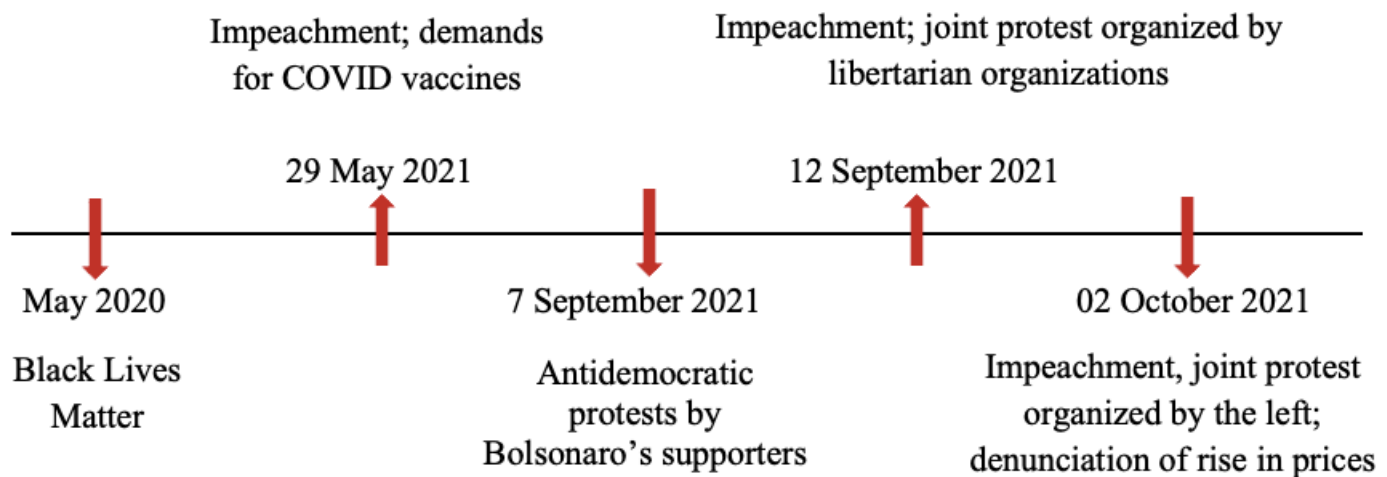


Figure 1. Timeline of the main street protests in Brazil since the start of the pandemic.



A late start in the vaccination program, which added to the high number of deaths, and increased impoverishment due to the pandemic led to a new series of protests in 2021. The National Campaign “Fora Bolsonaro,” (*Bolsonaro Out*) which brought together various social movements on the left, organized six protests up to October 2, 2021. The demonstrations took place in several cities across the country on May 29, June 19, July 3, July 24, August 7, and October 2, and became known by the acronyms that refer to their dates, such as 29M and 19J. The protests called for the impeachment of the president due to his poor management of the pandemic.

Criticism of Bolsonaro and the authoritarian project he represents were common before the pandemic, for example with the emblematic protest known as #EleNãO (#NotHim), in which thousands of women took to the streets in 2018 against his candidacy in the runoff of the presidential election. What made the street protests against the president different during the pandemic were the requests for a speedier vaccination program and for policies that could mitigate the adverse economic effects of the pandemic, such as pandemic aid. Therefore, the core of the agenda of protests before the pandemic (against Bolsonaro and in favor of democracy) remained in the most recent period and was compounded by new topics, such as an outcry for access to COVID-19 vaccines.

The delay in vaccination and the high number of deaths due to COVID-19 denial by the government led to the establishment of a Parliamentary Inquiry Commission in April 2021. As a consequence, support for the president started to weaken. In reaction, his supporters organized a series of protests on September 7, Brazil’s Independence Day. What shocked the world was the anti-democratic content of those protests, with threats to the Supreme Court and Congress (G1, 2021). It is also worth noting that smaller protests organized by supporters of the president had already been taking place in Brazil, generally against social isolation measures. In the protests in favor of the president, calls for a return to a military dictatorship had been common, even before the pandemic.

To supposedly overcome the political polarization between the left and the right expressed on the streets, Brazilian libertarian organizations Movimento Brasil Livre (*Free Brazil Movement*, broadly known as MBL for its Portuguese acronym) and Vem Pra Rua (*Come to the Street*), which had previously supported Bolsonaro, decided to call protesters to take to the streets on September 12, in favor of the impeachment of the president (El País, 2021). Protests turned out smaller than expected, given the absence of the Workers’ Party (PT) and more left-wing supporters, as they decided not to side with organizations that had a history of supporting the political right.

The last big protest in this series took place on October 2, 2021, with intention to unite different parties and organizations in favor of Bolsonaro’s impeachment. The main difference between the 10/2 protests and those called by the MBL and Vem Pra Rua was that the former were organized by leftist social movements and unions, in addition to having the presence of about 20 political

parties, student associations, and even organized soccer fans. The most frequent themes on protester signs and speeches were the defense of democracy, the impeachment of the president, as well as criticism and complaints regarding the increase in prices of food, gas and fuel (BBC, 2021). Again, criticism of the president and the authoritarian project he represented were also present during this period.

Therefore, the pandemic was not sufficient to halt the cycle of protests that had been taking place in Brazil. In general, protests organized during the pandemic expressed the ideologies and clashes that had been present in the previous waves of protests. But despite continuities, important new issues emerged: the defense of the Covid vaccine, demands for greater access to it, and requests for government policies to support the population in coping with the economic impacts of the pandemic.

The expansion of the protest agendas can help in the election of candidates who propose more social spending by the State. If that happens, the crisis caused by the pandemic and the dissatisfaction expressed on the streets will contribute to the demise of the ultra-liberal project adopted in recent Brazil and to the return of proposals more in line with social democracy and the welfare state.

Notes

(**) PhD in Political Science, University of São Paulo. Assistant Professor at the Federal University of Piauí (UFPI), where she teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in Political Science and graduate courses on Public Policy. E-mail: oliviaperez@ufpi.edu.br

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