# [Text written on 30 September, 2018, last revision 10 October, 2018]

# Brazil: Politics, human rights, authoritarianism and business: dangerous relations?

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2018 is a memorable year. We commemorate thirty years since the 1988 Constitution known as the Citizen Constitution, which has guaranteed human rights essential to democracy, addressing years of dissolute relations between the State and private interests, and high rates of violence, racism, sexism, exploitation, oppression and asymmetries of power that, unfortunately, persist in Brazil. 2018 is also an election year, and the year in which the fragile Brazilian democracy has been at its greatest risk since the first democratic elections of 1989.

[Political analysts](https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-45054300), including [foreigners](https://www.dw.com/pt-br/analistas-alem%C3%A3es-veem-democracia-no-brasil-em-risco/a-45681951), are in agreement that, in addition to being polarised, these elections are marked by political violence and [fake news](https://blogdosakamoto.blogosfera.uol.com.br/2018/09/30/fotos-de-multidoes-sao-falsas-para-quem-nao-entendeu-os-protestos/). In March Rio de Janeiro city councillor Marielle Franco and her driver Anderson Gomes were brutally murdered. Because she was a human rights defender, a black woman of poor origin, the killing has been deemed political and remains unsolved, which also seems to be the rule in other cases of killings and threats against human rights defenders.

Unfortunately, Brazil is the champion in killing of defenders, according to the [Global Witness report of 2018](https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/deadliest-year-on-record-for-land-environmental-defenders-new-global-witness-report-says-207-activists-killed-in-2017). In September, two groups opposing the proposals and the candidacy of right wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro, leader in the presidential race, suffered serious cyber attacks.

Administrators, for example, of Women United Against Bolsonaro (*Mulheres Contra Bolsonaro*), which brings together almost 4 million women on a Facebook platform, were threatened, their data hacked and one of them was physically attacked. An expert on human rights and the Internet says that [Facebook did not take sufficient measures regarding the attack](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/09/18/politica/1537306482_201081.html). The group that called for democracy ["Democracia Sim" also suffered attacks](https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/eleicoes,democracia-sim-sofre-ataque-cibernetico,70002519309).

But this is also the year in which [Brazilian women returned](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/09/30/politica/1538270819_523141.html) to the streets, leading [the biggest protests](http://catarinas.info/o-grito-elenao-ecoa-na-maior-manifestacao-de-mulheres-da-historia-do-pais/) organized by women in the country's history, in which they reaffirmed their voice nationally and internationally to say [#nothim](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/09/29/politica/1538231797_499925.html) , #himnever, [#democraciasim](https://democraciasim.com.br/), in allusion to the authoritarian character of Bolsonaro, who is a retired military man, an evangelical, staunch defender of the military dictatorship, and whose recurrent discourse is that it is necessary to arm the population and use violence to solve problems of public security.

This violent rhetoric turned all too real against him when he was stabbed at a rally and left him out of the campaign until a week before the first round of the elections in 7 October. Condemning the violence of which the candidate was a victim, numerous analysts are unanimous in affirming that the fact the candidate had to be away from the campaign to recover has actually propelled his candidacy that was losing breath. Some of the reasons might be that he had a fascist discourse in public appearances and shallow knowledge on subjects inherent to the exercise of the executive power, clearly visible in the few debates in which he participated. The movement exposes the contradictions of this candidate, who raises the flag of the fight against corruption and nevertheless hugely increased his assets without having the actual means to have received such incomes nor proof of them. He presents himself as a defender of morality and evangelical but revealed that [he used in the past an apartment given by the state for sexual relations](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/01/12/politica/1515787762_592872.html).

The candidate leads the polls, has won the first round, and his victory would intensify secular oppression every day, putting human rights and the country's already fragile democracy at risk. The thousands of voters of different parties who went to the streets to demonstrate against this candidate oppose authoritarianism and reassert the value of true democracy. It is hoped that the uprising of Brazilian women supported throughout the world may be a flashlight to illuminate the past so that a more egalitarian, just and democratic future emerges. Vigilance and constant care for the rule of law are urgent so that human rights are respected and are, at the same time, both premise and purpose.

And what is the role of companies in this context? Unfortunately much of the private sector in Brazil is too close to the State. The Economist affirms that Bolsonaro puts the Brazilian [democracy at risk](https://www.dw.com/pt-br/bolsonaro-p%C3%B5e-democracia-em-risco-diz-economist/a-45581621). But business owners like the construction company Tecnisa, the restaurant Coco Bambu, [Havan department store](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/08/21/politica/1534888407_697144.html), the Centauro network of sportswear retailers, Victor Vicenzza shoes, the Rural Democratic Union (UDR), which brings together large landowners, and Artefacto Móveis e Tecidos have declared [support to Bolsonaro](https://exame.abril.com.br/negocios/os-empresarios-que-apoiam-bolsonaro/). Some have given significant donations to his campaign.

Among the various academics, economists, advocates, activists, and artists [who signed a manifesto for democracy](https://democraciasim.com.br/) there were also executives of company Natura and a shareholder of Banco Itaú. The statement says "... fascist leaders, Nazis and several other autocratic regimes in history and in the present were originally elected, with the promise of rescuing self-esteem and the credibility of their nations, before subordinating them to the most varied authoritarian embezzlements. In a time of crisis, we must have the maximum clarity of the historical responsibility of the choices we make. This clarity moves us to this joint declaration, at this moment in time. Besides all the differences, we have been together in the democratic construction in Brazil. And one must know how to defend it in that way now...Jair Bolsonaro's candidacy represents a frank threat to our primordial civilization heritage. We must refuse its normalization, and join forces in the defence of freedom, tolerance and collective destiny among us ... " (*our translation*).

There are few companies that publicly and clearly advocate for democracy and human rights. There are many examples of relationships that endanger human rights. There are many complaints that landowners are lobbying for policies that favour them to be adopted: [Amazon Watch's report](https://www.business-humanrights.org/pt/brasil-relat%C3%B3rio-da-amazon-watch-denuncia-rela%C3%A7%C3%A3o-de-favorecimento-entre-deputados-da-bancada-ruralista-e-grandes-empresas) addresses, for example, the relationship of favouritism between Congress members of the ruralist (landowner) group and 112 American and European companies. There are many articles that mention [agrarian groups encouraging deforestation](https://www.business-humanrights.org/pt/brasil-especialistas-creditam-aumento-do-desmatamento-na-amaz%C3%B4nia-metade-delas-em-terras-ind%C3%ADgenas-%C3%A0-bancada-ruralista-e-grileiros) on indigenous lands [or the “Bible, beef and bullets” caucus (Bancada da Bíblia, do Boi e da Bala"), whose authoritarian candidate](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/12/01/politica/1512148795_433241.html) mentioned above is one of its exponents, trying to stop demarcation of indigenous lands to favour agribusiness.

There are also complaints about the influence of the private sector in approving [the labour reform](https://www.business-humanrights.org/pt/brasil-senado-aprova-reforma-trabalhista-que-viola-direitos-trabalhistas-protegidos-pela-constitui%C3%A7%C3%A3o-tratados-internacionais-afirmam-autoridades#c160195) and [flexibility of environmental laws](https://www.business-humanrights.org/pt/brasil-john-knox-relator-da-onu-sobre-meio-ambiente-e-direitos-humanos-afirma-%C3%A0-conectas-que-flexibiliza%C3%A7%C3%B5es-de-normas-ambientais-no-pa%C3%ADs-podem-gerar-retrocesso), as can be seen in the case of [congressman owner of eucalyptus exporter companies who proposed relaxation of the law on the licensing](https://www.business-humanrights.org/pt/brasil-deputado-dono-de-exportadoras-de-eucalipto-prop%C3%B5e-relaxamento-da-lei-de-licenciamento-do-produto-e-%C3%A9-tamb%C3%A9m-investigado-por-evas%C3%A3o-fiscal) of the product; and this congressman is also being investigated for tax evasion. There are allegations that [companies and the market will benefit](https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-38270520) from costly measures such as freezing public expenditures in ​​education and health. There are many other articles demonstrating the pressures and influences of the private sector in the texts of [mining codes](https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/noticias/2015/12/151202_escritorio_mineradoras_codigo_mineracao_rs) and [forests](https://theintercept.com/2018/09/11/coca-cola-ruralistas-relatorio/), aiming to favour the private sector. Not to mention dubious relationships and conflicts of interest when, for example, a public servant responsible for the environmental licensing processes of a particular company is hired to [a management position in that same company](https://theintercept.com/2018/02/01/subsecretaria-de-orgao-ambiental-ajuda-mineradora-a-aprovar-barragem-maior-que-mariana/) after its licensing is approved.

Dangerous and intimate processes and relationships between companies and states are foundational and inherent to the Brazilian State. But there is an increased weakening of the State in the face of the strengthening of companies, especially transnational corporations, and, consequently, the growing [privatization of spaces](https://www.business-humanrights.org/pt/brasil-ex-presidente-da-funda%C3%A7%C3%A3o-nacional-do-%C3%ADndio-afirma-que-est-deve-parar-de-tratar-a-funda%C3%A7%C3%A3o-como-balc%C3%A3o-de-neg%C3%B3cios-min-da-agricultura-%C3%A9-100-voltado-ao-agroneg%C3%B3cio) and [power](https://www.business-humanrights.org/pt/brasil-investidores-e-mineradoras-canadenses-souberam-de-extin%C3%A7%C3%A3o-de-reserva-na-amaz%C3%B4nia-antes-do-an%C3%BAncio-oficial-afirmam-que-minera%C3%A7%C3%A3o-protege-a-natureza-sociedade-civil-n%C3%A3o-soube). The public sphere is not differentiated from private: politicians are businessmen and businessmen are politicians. This proximity also puts democracy at risk, especially because some companies and business sectors, such as ruralists, or the BBB Caucus, engage directly or indirectly in the defamation, harassment and killing of human rights defenders.

In this context of a close link between political and economic power and the immeasurable influence of the corporate sector on the politics course, Brazilian civil society has daily denounced the frequent violations of human rights arising from the operations of companies, mainly related to the extractive industry and agribusiness, worsening the asymmetrical relations between affected populations and companies and even between states and transnational corporations.

Examples of human rights violations perpetrated in Brazil by companies, either directly or indirectly include forced evictions, slave labour or inadequate working conditions, restrictions on access to water, information, disrespect to culture, various forms of discrimination, socio-environmental violations, among others. Violations have even a more intensified impact on indigenous peoples, *quilombolas*, riverine and non-white populations.

Violations and abuses often occur under the claim that these are operations conducted by private actors but done for public interests, almost a speech of "necessary evil." Classic examples of violations have occurred in the building of large constructions such as dams, railroads, ports, and roads, when impacted populations are not consulted and are not even considered in the planning and decision making processes. Or in the extraction of materials to supply these industries of civil construction or other necessities of the present times - like computers, smartphones etc. - whose materials come from the extractive industry. In this context, public and private funding is often mixed, which tends to take priority over private interests to the detriment of public interests.

As [affirmed](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16891&LangID=E) by the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights after its visit to Brazil in 2015: "Business as usual is what we have seen, despite all the progress on the international scene, with some few exceptions."

It is no longer possible to accept that companies say that governments corrupt them, or that governments say that it is the companies that do it. It is necessary to rescue the idea of *res publica*, of democracy for all. Women show the way. Let's go with them. Power must come from the bottom up. We cannot lose the ability to listen to each other, to participate, to speak, to decide, to respect, to protest.