IS ‘THE MYTH’ STILL ALIVE? MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL SCANDALS DURING THE FIRST MONTHS OF JAIR BOLSONARO’S ADMINISTRATION

Diego Santos Vieira de Jesus
Ph.D. in International Relations from Pontifícia Universidade Católica (PUC-Rio),
Adjunct Professor at the ESPM-Rio,
Professor at the Veiga de Almeida University (UVA)
dvieira@espm.br

ABSTRACT
The aim of the article is to analyse the role of the media in the construction of political scandals during the first months of president Jair Bolsonaro’s administration. It focuses on three cases: the PSL’s registering of fake candidates to receive public campaign funds, the suspicious transactions of the president’s son Flavio Bolsonaro and the supposed unethical conduct by Justice Minister Sérgio Moro when he was Lava Jato Operation’s judge. The main argument indicates that the media sectors that were critical of the government highlighted the misconduct of members of Bolsonaro’s administration or his family by associating these participants as perpetrators of moral, legal or ethical transgressions of public interest. These actions became visible and affected negatively the perception of a great part of the Brazilian population about the (supposed) perpetrators. However, the president took fierce decisions against some of the perpetrators and used social media and some TV channels and newspapers that supported him during and after the elections to show that he had no direct or indirect involvement in the scandals. He tried to preserve his personal image from the criticism against members of his government and family.

Keywords: Jair Bolsonaro. Media. Political scandals. Right-wing governments. Brazil.

O ‘MITO’ AINDA VIVE? A MÍDIA E A CONSTRUÇÃO DE ESCÂNDALOS POLÍTICOS DURANTE OS PRIMEIROS MESES DE GOVERNO DE JAIR BOLSONARO

RESUMO
O objetivo do artigo é analisar o papel da mídia na construção de escândalos políticos durante os primeiros meses do governo do presidente Jair Bolsonaro. Ele foca em três casos: o registro, pelo PSL, de candidatos fantasmas para o recebimento de verbas do fundo partidário; as transações suspeitas do filho do presidente Flavio Bolsonaro e a suposta conduta antiética do ministro da Justiça Sérgio Moro quando foi juiz durante a Operação Lava Jato. O argumento principal indica que setores da mídia que eram críticos ao governo apontaram a conduta desviante de membros do governo Bolsonaro e da família do presidente ao associar esses participantes a perpetradores de transgressões morais, jurídicas ou éticas de interesse público. Tais ações tornaram-se visíveis e afetaram negativamente a percepção de grande parte da população brasileira sobre os (supostos) perpetradores. Entretanto, o presidente tomou decisões duras contra alguns desses perpetradores e usou as redes sociais e alguns jornais e canais de TV que o apoiaram durante as eleições e depois delas a fim de mostrar que ele tinha qualquer envolvimento direto ou indireto com os
Is ‘the myth’ still alive? media and the construction of political scandals during the first months of Jair Bolsonaro’s administration

JESUS, D. S. V.

escândalos. Ele tentou preservar sua imagem pessoal das críticas contra membros de seu governo e de sua família.

1 INTRODUCTION

The candidate Jair Bolsonaro – from the coalition “Brazil Above Everything, God Above All”, formed by the political parties PSL and PRTB – won the first round of Brazil’s 2018 presidential election, counting on more than 46% of valid votes. In the second round of the presidential election, Bolsonaro defeated the candidate Fernando Haddad, from the coalition “People Happy Again” – formed by the political parties PT, PC do B and PROS –, with more than 55% of the valid votes (TSE, 2018). The themes that dominated the political debates during the 2018 presidential election focused mainly on the fight against corruption – especially in the light of the accusations made by Lava Jato Operation – and urban violence, which had reached alarming levels in several Brazilian cities. Bolsonaro focused on the fight against crime and corruption and the revitalization of the “traditional values of the Brazilian family”. As for culture, many Bolsonaro’s speeches and tweets during the electoral campaign were directed against cultural and artistic expressions of black, indigenous and LGBT people, which motivated the reaction of countless members of the artistic and creative classes. In addition, the proposals of the candidate for areas such as education did not stimulate the critical thinking and creativity of students and, in terms of innovation, the focus was predominantly on more traditional sectors of the economy (JESUS, 2019).

Before taking office, Bolsonaro said that he would select key members for his cabinet, such as Lava Jato Operation’s judge Sergio Moro for the Justice Ministry, University of Chicago-trained Paulo Guedes for the newly-created Economy Ministry and the evangelical pastor Damares Alves to head the newly-created Women, Family and Human Rights Ministry. Bolsonaro also indicated the largest number of active and former members of the military since Brazil’s return to democracy. Bolsonaro’s government members made many promises and implemented important changes in the first months of the administration. Guedes promised to cut taxes, reduce public spending and reform the pension system. Moro presented a package of proposals named the Anti-Crime Law to fight corruption, criminal organizations and violent crimes, explaining that organized crime feeds

---

2 The Lava Jato Operation is a set of investigations underway by Brazilian Federal Police, which began in March 2014. The operation investigates crimes of active and passive corruption, fraudulent management, criminal organization and obstruction of justice, among others (JESUS, 2019).
Is ‘the myth’ still alive? media and the construction of political scandals during the first months of Jair Bolsonaro’s administration

more corruption. LGBT concerns were removed from the purview of the Women, Family and Human Rights Ministry, headed by Alves, which brought fears to LGBT people that they would have less protections from the government, considering Bolsonaro’s homophobic comments throughout the campaign and Alves’ view that diversity politics threatens “the Brazilian family”. Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo has praised the strengthening of the cooperation with the United States – he even voiced plans to follow in Donald Trump’s footsteps by moving Brazil’s Tel Aviv embassy to Jerusalem – and anti-globalist views, as well as the criticism toward leftist governments. The second Education Minister during Bolsonaro’s administration, Abraham Weintraub, threatened to limit the resources for public universities, necessary to invest in innovation and development. Some of the measures proposed by Bolsonaro’s government also included a home-schooling regulations bill, a new structure for fines imposed by Brazil’s environmental protection agency Ibama and a bill that increased Brazil’s Central Bank Autonomy. (GONZALEZ; LEME, 2019).

However, many changes proposed by the new government faced resistance by many sectors of Brazilian population, as well as difficulty in their implementation, mainly because some changes – including the pension reform – depended on the Congress’ approval. Intervention from the president’s sons, the cabinet’s splintering into military, evangelicals, moderates, and anti-globalists, and Bolsonaro’s controversial tweets about the negotiation with the Legislative chambers have brought turbulent times for the markets and the Brazilian currency, the real. The easing of restrictions on gun possession in Brazil – one of Bolsonaro’s campaign promises – was implemented, but faced the resistance of many groups such as human rights NGOs. The fight against corruption seems more difficult, given ongoing investigations linking one of the president’s sons, Rio de Janeiro Congressman Flavio Bolsonaro, to suspicious cash transactions, as well as investigations over his party – PSL – registering fake candidates to receive public campaign funds (GONZALEZ; LEME, 2019).

The cases involving Flavio Bolsonaro and the registering of false candidates by PSL were some of the first scandals during Jair Bolsonaro’s administration, even though the president said he had nothing to do with these cases. In June 2019, The Intercept website published a series of improprieties, which have cast serious doubt on the validity of
numerous guilty verdicts issued by Moro when he was Lava Jato’s judge and the anti-corruption task force, especially the conviction and imprisonment of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, at the time when he was the frontrunner to win the 2018 presidential election. Moro faces widespread calls to resign from the same large Brazilian media groups that turned him into an icon of integrity. The supposed unethical conduct by Moro created another political scandal during the first months of Bolsonaro’s administration. (GREENWALD, 2019).

A political scandal might be understood as a result of moral degeneration or a sign of a post-truth society, but this perspective does not allow the understanding of the underlying logics of a scandal construction (VOLBERG; ZEITLER, 2019). The aim of this article is to analyse the role of the media in the construction of political scandals during the first months of Jair Bolsonaro’s administration. It will focus on three cases: the PSL’s registering of fake candidates to receive public campaign funds, the suspicious transactions of Flavio Bolsonaro and the supposed unethical conduct by Moro as Lava Jato’s judge. The main argument indicates that the media sectors that were critical of the government highlighted the misconduct of members of Bolsonaro’s administration or his family by associating these participants as perpetrators of moral, legal or ethical transgressions of public interest. These actions became visible and affected negatively the perception of a great part of the Brazilian population about the (supposed) perpetrators. However, the president took fierce decisions against some of the perpetrators and used social media and some TV channels and newspapers that supported him during and after the elections to show that he had no direct or indirect involvement in the scandals. He tried to preserve his personal image from the criticism against members of his government and family.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Bound to active media involvement, political scandals generate explosiveness, affect multiple public spheres and bring different forms of visibility. The making and staging of scandals in and by media are developed through some analytical categories. The “emergence” category shows that scandals must be included into some interpretational
Is ‘the myth’ still alive? media and the construction of political scandals during the first months of Jair Bolsonaro’s administration

frameworks and discursive negotiations which make them not isolated incidents. They require narratives that build on preceding actions which are characterized as intentional and personalized as moral, legal, or ethical transgression of public interest (DEWBERRY, 2015). Scandals also involve different “participants” who are observed, evaluated, and judged based on their respective involvement and actions. The “participants” category includes the victim(s) and the perpetrators(s), who are usually figures of public interest and are responsible for acting in a narrative that can attract interest and stimulate the interest of the audience. The dynamics of the “battle between good and evil” is connected to the affective involvement of the audience, which makes scandals be framed in forms that bring collective emotional reactions. Curiously, the communication of a scandal may become self-referential, because a further scandal may be caused by the way a scandal came to the audience. Besides the victim/perpetrator binary, the people who discover the truth – usually journalists and internet actors who are watchdogs of democracy – are fundamental participants, because they make the scandal visible to the public (LUHMANN, 1996).

The “substance” category relates to the topics that constitute a scandal, which typically arise from issues linked to a sexual misconduct, the misappropriation of money and the misuse of power, because they represent transgressions of legal, ethical, moral or public standards (DEWBERRY, 2015). In the light of the growing public distrust on politicians and the personalized attacks by political opponents, small transgressions might evolve into immense scandals if they are framed as disruptions of the public order, in a collective and culturally defined process of social negotiation. Finally, the “perception” category recognizes that scandals are bound to attention and visibility provided by and through mass media and involve public knowledge of actions and events. Visibility does not mean only to show actions and events, but also hide some of them, which reveals that the perception provided by mass media is highly selective. If a scandal happens, it can affect the mediated representation of public opinion over a longer period and influence audiences’ emotions and opinions regarding the perpetrator(s). His / her opponent might appear as better choice, especially during elections (VOLBERG; ZEITLER, 2019).

Regarding the methodological considerations of this article, the bibliographic research consisted of reading, selecting and organizing topics on the scandals during Jair Bolsonaro’s administration published by the media from January to June 2019. In the
Is ‘the myth’ still alive? media and the construction of political scandals during the first months of Jair Bolsonaro’s administration

JESUS, D. S. V.

proposed content analysis, the collected data were organized into three categories: 1) the PSL’s registering of fake candidates to receive public campaign funds; 2) the suspicious transactions of Flavio Bolsonaro and 3) the supposed unethical conduct by Moro as the Lava Jato’s judge. The next step was the interpretation of the collected data using the main concepts presented at the theoretical framework.

3 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1 PSL’s registering of fake candidates

The Folha de S. Paulo newspaper revealed how PSL allocated $182,000 in public funding to the congressional campaigns of five unknown candidates, who ended up receiving almost no votes. Much of the money, according to official receipts, was spent at companies linked to top party officials. The federal police opened an investigation (FISHMAN; SANTI, 2019). The emergence of the scandal includes narratives that build on preceding actions seen as intentional and labelled as moral, legal or ethical transgression of public interest (DEWBERRY, 2015). In this case, Jair Bolsonaro and his party campaigned first and foremost on combating corruption in politics – which they framed as a problem created by the center-left Workers’ Party and its allies –, thereby making this a serious challenge to their credibility.

The crisis in the government provoked by the revelations made by Folha de S. Paulo brought a clear shock between two main participants: Gustavo Bebianno, the PSL’s president during the election and then the secretary general of the presidency, and Carlos Bolsonaro, one of the president’s sons, who was officially a Rio de Janeiro city council member and unofficially worked behind the scenes as the president’s social media guru, earning his father’s trust and support. However, Bebianno used his influence to block Carlos Bolsonaro from having an official role in the administration. As the PSL’s president during the elections, Bebianno was accused of indicating the fake candidates to have access to the public funding to the congressional campaigns, but he denied any responsibility regarding the accusations. Carlos Bolsonaro used the scandal over disbursements to irrelevant candidates to strike back. He used a “leak” recording of a conversation between his father and the minister to publicly call Bebianno a “liar”, a
remark that was endorsed later by his father (FISHMAN; SANTI, 2019). The substance of the scandal – the use of fake candidates to deviate electoral funds – represent a transgression of legal, ethical, moral or public standards (DEWBERRY, 2015), and the perception was clear, when the crisis in the government gained visibility provided by and through mass media and involved public knowledge of actions and events (VOLBERG; ZEITLER, 2019).

When the president Jair Bolsonaro realized that the aggravation of the situation could damage his own image, he finally fired Bebianno. However, top party officials, allies from other parties and military figures showed concern that president could “throw them to the wolves” if some next scandal touched them. The military feared the unchecked influence of Jair Bolsonaro’s impulsive sons (FISHMAN; SANTI, 2019).

3.2 The suspicious transactions of Flavio Bolsonaro

A federal investigation into corruption in Rio de Janeiro’s State Assembly in 2019 found multiple representatives and staffers with large bank transfers that did not match with their stated incomes. Flavio Bolsonaro, who is now a federal senator, was among the involved people, as well as his former driver, a retired police officer named Fabricio Queiroz. Queiroz was regularly receiving deposits from staffers in Flávio’s and Jair Bolsonaro’s offices, typically on or just after payday. Queiroz used his wife to transfer money to Flávio and Jair Bolsonaro. In three years, the transactions totalled more than $1.8 million. As Dewberry (2015) argues, scandals have to be inserted into interpretational frameworks and discursive negotiations which make them not isolated incidents. Besides the large bank transfers, Flávio Bolsonaro was also being investigated for a series of “lightning” real estate transactions in which he would buy properties and flip them for enormous profits. The declared values in mandatory filings rarely matched the purchase or sale prices.

As perpetrators, Flávio Bolsonaro and Queiroz were criticized by other participants of the scandal, such as authorities who wanted them to be deposed. However, both decided not to leave their positions and gave interviews to friendly media outlets defending their points of view. The Veja magazine and the O Globo newspaper reported that Queiroz was allegedly involved in multiple killings in the line of duty. According to Flávio Bolsonaro,
Queiroz was responsible for hiring and supervising the mother and wife of Adriano Magalhães da Nóbrega, a former police captain said to be the chief of a militia group known as the “Office of Crime”. The group was accused of murder, extortion and fraud. Currently, Nóbrega is a fugitive and the primary suspect in the murder of Rio de Janeiro’s city council member Marielle Franco, a human rights activist, and her driver Anderson Gomes. Flávio and Jair Bolsonaro have both publicly commended Nóbrega in the past, despite his arrest on murder allegations. Since their ties to prominent militia members came to light late, the Bolsonaros have been quiet on the subject (FISHMAN; SANTI, 2019).

The substance of a political scandal can be related to a misconduct, the misappropriation of money and the misuse of power (DEWBERRY, 2015). In this case, all elements were present, especially because the possible involvement of Jair Bolsonaro’s family with militia groups has been previously indicated by many political opposers of his government. It is important to highlight that, during his presidential campaign, Jair Bolsonaro promised to give policemen “carte blanche” to kill in line of duty and expand access to guns for average citizens. Many human rights NGOs such as Human Rights Watch indicated that measures like the first one can be used to let cops kill people in unjustifiable circumstances and evade punishment (FISHMAN; SANTI, 2019). The suspicious transactions of Flávio Bolsonaro and the possible involvement of members of his family with militias were bound to attention and visibility provided by and through mass media, once they involved public knowledge of actions and events, as Volberg & Zeitler (2019) indicate.

Flávio Bolsonaro attempted to quash the inquiry with a petition to the Supreme Court, but the move backfired, which served to provoke greater public indignation. However, the president declared in social media that he had nothing to do with the transactions in which his son was supposedly involved and that, if something was proved against Flávio Bolsonaro, he should be punished by law. Jair Bolsonaro was visibly trying to preserve his personal image from the public criticism against members of his family.

3.3 The supposed unethical conduct by Sérgio Moro as the Lava Jato’s judge

The emergence of the scandal that came to be known as “Morogate” occurred when the independent websites *The Intercept* – co-founded by Brazil-based journalist Glenn
Greenwald, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 2014 for his reporting on the U.S. National Security Agency’s vast spying program – and *The Intercept Brasil* reported on an “enormous trove” of leaked messages, received from an anonymous source, between former judge Moro and the prosecutors of the Lava Jato Operation on the encrypted messaging platform Telegram. The messages raised questions about Moro’s impartiality on the judgement of ex-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who was condemned to prison. In the exchanged messages, Moro made suggestions to prosecutors about the focus, sequence and pace of investigations. Lawyers who defended Lula, a leftist icon who remains one the most important opposition figures to the Bolsonaro’s government, have been petitioning the Supreme Court for his release and seized on the leaks to argue that his sentence should be overturned. (BROOKS, 2019).

While Lula could be classified, in this specific scandal, as “the victim” and Moro and the prosecutors of the Lava Jato Operation as “the perpetrators”, the “participants” in this case are figures of public interest and responsible for acting in a narrative that can attract interest and stimulate the interest of the audience, as Luhmann (1996) indicates. Moro and the team of federal prosecutors tried to fight back. At an event in Brasilia, Moro argued that the messages revealed by *The Intercept* showed no improper conduct on his part and these messages could have been altered or edited. The team of federal prosecutors cited in the messages said they had acted properly throughout the Lava Jato Operation and been targeted by a hacker. They also said that they were concerned about messages being taken out of context and possibly forged. The managing editor at *The Intercept Brasil*, Andrew Fishman, said that Moro and the prosecutors had said over the years that they were not collaborating, but the reporting shows that their private actions contradict their own public statements at the time.

The substance of *The Intercept* report – which came to be known as “Vaza Jato” – brought to the surface the supposed lack of ethics and bias present in the most important anticorruption operation in Brazilian history, which characterizes the misconduct elements that are at the basis of the substance of a political scandal (DREWBERRY, 2015). The visibility provided by and through mass media involved the public knowledge of actions and events (VOLBERG; ZEITLER, 2019) and had important consequences. Lawmakers suggested the controversy would not slow their work on an overhaul of the country’s social
security system, which the government considers essential to start an economic recovery. Many members of Bolsonaro’s government suggested that Moro should temporarily step down as Justice Minister, which would give the Federal Police freedom to investigate the former judge if deemed necessary. However, Moro did not step down, even though many politicians and journalists indicated that Lula’s conviction by Moro, which was upheld on appeal, occurred when Lula was running for president in 2018, but was blocked from competing in the elections because of his conviction. The election was won by far-right Bolsonaro, and Moro was later chosen as Bolsonaro’s Justice Minister. Lula’s legal team said *The Intercept* leak proved that Moro and federal prosecutors teamed up to ensure that Lula would be found guilty and blocked from the 2018 election. Moro and the prosecutors have denied any illegal collaboration (BROOKS, 2019).

Although president Bolsonaro said in the first moment that he could only trust in his own mother and father, his office told the *Globo* TV that the president had “complete trust” in Moro and still saw his Justice minister as an example to combat corruption in Brazil after years of “leftist governments” that destroyed Brazil’s reputation. Some days after *The Intercept* leaks, no new facts were revealed, and Bolsonaro even brought Moro to watch a soccer match in Brasília. Despite the initial controversy, the speculations on the “Morogate” – which could damage seriously the Bolsonaro’s government – were gradually silenced to re-establish public trust on the president himself and one of the most important member of his government, especially reinforcing popular attitudes towards these politicians, which reconnect them with the common citizens, such as watching a soccer match. (KOTSCHO, 2019).

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is possible to see that, in the three cases analysed above, the media sectors that were critical of the government revealed the misconduct of members of Bolsonaro’s administration or his family by labelling these participants as perpetrators of moral, legal or ethical transgressions of public interest. These actions became visible through different media coverage and affected negatively the perception of a great part of the Brazilian population about the (supposed) perpetrators. However, the president took fierce decisions...
Is ‘the myth’ still alive? media and the construction of political scandals during the first months of Jair Bolsonaro’s administration

against some of the perpetrators and used social networks and some TV channels and newspapers that supported him during and after the elections to show that he had no direct or indirect involvement in the scandals. He tried to preserve his personal image from the criticism against members of his government and family and supported some of them because they were fundamental for the implementation of his political agenda, such as Moro.

The right-wing agenda defended by Bolsonaro – who was called a “myth” during the elections by many of his voters – proposed more flexible environmental and labor regulations; the cutting of social spending; the making of taxation even more regressive; the privatization of almost every government-controlled asset; the expansion of the privatization of education and health care; the increase in access to firearms; the ban on abortions in all circumstances; the promotion of environmentally destructive extractive industries; the authorization for more aggressive policing of poor neighborhoods; the increase in the military’s power and prestige; the rollback of freedom of information programs; and the dismantling of laws and programs supported by progressive groups (FISHMAN; SANTI, 2019).

Some of the scandals revealed during the first months of Bolsonaro’s administration could have damaged the agenda, the members of his government and family and the president himself. Even though many important parts of the agenda are still under attack by many media and other social groups and the image of many members of his government and family are still damaged or recovering from the scandals, the president himself tried to show that he was not directly or indirectly involved in any of these scandals, trying to preserve the “myth image” constructed during the election period. Although many Brazilians question this image today – including many of his voters – and his popularity has fallen abruptly in his first 100 days of government, Bolsonaro tried to preserve his personal image from the criticism to keep “the myth” alive. However, it is still not possible to say until when he will be able to do this in the light of new revelations of misconduct during his administration.
Is ‘the myth’ still alive? media and the construction of political scandals during the first months of Jair Bolsonaro’s administration

REFERENCES


FISHMAN, Andrew; SANTI, Alexandre de. Jair Bolsonaro’s first 53 days as president of Brazil have been a resounding, scandalous failure. The Intercept, February 22nd, 2019. Available at https://theintercept.com/2019/02/22/jair-bolsonaro-presidency-brazil/. Access at June 26th 2019.


