

# *The instrumentalization of the Tunisian crisis by the bolsonaristas as a narrative of power*

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When reading the news of one of the last right-wing manifestations supporting Brazil's president, Jair Bolsonaro, a careful observer would notice something curious. Some of the protesters were holding up a poster that read "*Vamos tunisiar o Brasil*" — "let's turn Brazil into Tunisia", in a literal translation. But after all, what does a small Mediterranean country located in the northern coast of Africa have to do with 2021's Brazil? To answer this question, it may be convenient to take a recapitulation of events.

Back in late 2010, Tunisia was one of the epicenters of the Arab Spring protests. Now, after a little more than ten years, it is safer to make some conclusions about its successes, how they affected the current Tunisian government and what they have to contribute to the understanding of contemporary Brazil. In the first part of this article, there will be an exposition of the two protests that largely contributed to the current day of Tunisian and Brazilian Governments. Then, in the second part, the focus will be on demonstrating how, despite the different political backgrounds between both countries, the Brazilian regime tries to mimic some strategies utilized by the current Tunisian government. Nevertheless, it will be highlighted how social networks and the access of the population to the internet might be an integral part of this strategy and how these tools might be twisted against democracy.

**Vox Populi, Vox Dei?**

On December 17th, 2010, a man called Mohamed Bouazizi (26), who lived in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, had his fruits and vegetables' wagon confiscated for not having the licence needed to work on the streets. Later on, that day, he went to the local city hall to try to get back his work tools, but nobody was there to meet him. In desperation, he proceeded to get a gallon of gasoline and set fire to his own body in front of the building.

With the help of social networks like Facebook and YouTube, this act of despair spread comotion all over the country, and later, the whole Arab world, resulting in a series of riots; first in Tunisia, and later in other Arab countries such as Egypt, Libya, and Syria. The protesters on these riots, when participating in a movement that later came to be known by the name of “Arab Spring”, fought against the corruption of the national regimes in these countries and for democracy. The movement resulted in the displacement of a considerable number of leaders from their offices — most of them had been in charge of the countries for decades. The exception being Syria, that despite not having dethroned Bashaar Al Assad delved into a civil war that lasts to this very day (SIMÕES, 2021).

About two years after the first protests took place in Tunisia, Brazil had its version of protests for a better government. What started with people complaining about an increase in the prices of bus tickets in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (ODILLA, 2018), rapidly turned into a larger movement that encapsulated demands from different groups — especially right-wing ones, like the Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL, in English, Movement for a Free Brazil) — and that ultimately contributed to the instability of Dilma Roussef's government and her impeachment in 2016 (GALVÃO; TATAGIBA, 2019).

Since then, both countries have followed roads that led to similar destinations. Tunisia has become the only democracy in the Arab world, according to The Economist's index on the issue (O QUE..., 2021). On the other hand, Brazil has seen its democracy backslide since 2016 (REY, 2021). Despite those apparent differences, both countries are more alike than they may seem to be.

In Tunisia, the last weeks have been tense, with the current president, Kais Saied, usurping a vast amount of the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary powers (O QUE..., 2021). Saied argues that his deeds are legal, and that he is based on the article 80 of the Tunisian constitution, which states that the president may intervene in case of “imminent danger to the country’s institutions”. However, the Tunisian professor of Constitutional Law Ilyadh, Ben Achour, and the leader of the opposition party Ennahda Rachid Guannuchi, both affirm that the Law was not respected and that the president’s actions are unconstitutional. In Brazil, it is not a novelty that Bolsonaro seeks to test and antagonize the country’s institutions, like the Supreme Federal Court (STF) and the Congress. Bolsonaro himself stated that he might be forced to “act outside the boundaries of the Constitution” in response to investigations conducted by the Supreme Federal Court and the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE) (VASCONCELLOS, 2021).

One trace of character that assembles these two political figures is that, despite clearly threatening their countries’ institutions, they try to build a narrative that invests them with popular support. In Tunisia, Saied has got a lot of popular support, with approximately 72% of the population backing his government (O QUE..., 2021). In Brazil, Bolsonaro does not hold the same amount of approval, with about 62% of the population judging his administration as bad/terrible. However, the Brazilian president counts with very active supporters that can be seen in many occasions, such as in his motorcycle parades or the frequent acts held in Brasília as a demonstration of support to him and his governance. He is a classical populist.

Brazil and Tunisia part from different starting points: the former is a much more solid democracy, while the latter was an authoritarian regime dating to no longer than ten years ago. However, as highlighted by Baeza (2018), both countries share similar features in aspects such as the victory over long term dictatorships, and the resemblance between the constitutional processes adopted by both countries during their democratization.

## **Who tells the story holds the power**

This section of the text will cover the very subject of this essay: the use of information as a tool of manipulation. From the very first moment, one must acknowledge that both the Arab Spring and its Brazilian softer counterpart, the protests of June 2013, despite the aforementioned different political backgrounds have one thing in common: they were both potentialized by social networks, like *Facebook* and *You Tube*. Nevertheless, the outcomes of these movements benefited from these unique features to thrive.

Hagstrom and Gustavsson (2019) work with the concept of narratives of power. They argue that the political actors worldwide have been working with narratives for a long time but have recently turned more attention to this powerful tool to achieve their goals. They make the case that there is a growing concern, especially in Europe and in the United States that Russia might be working on what they call “troll factories” to influence the results of the elections. The authors argue that what makes narratives like these being perceived as propaganda, soft power or information warfare depends on if they are able to resonate in the hearts and minds of the audience around the world (HAGSTROM; GUSTAVSSON, 2019).

When applying such concepts to the Tunisian and Brazilian cases, specially to the latter, the attempt of both regimes to sound like their actions are legitimate and have the population’s approval becomes crystal clear. In this context, it makes sense when figures like Bolsonaro give speeches saying that “Brazil is on the brink of suffering a communist coup d’état” or when the Tunisian president comes on the TV and says that there is imminent danger to the country’s institutions. The focal point here is not about facts, but about telling a story that can convince a large number of people. This aspect brings us to the second point of this section.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a belief, specially among the young people of that time, that the information revolution would bring an era of welfare to the world. Nowadays, despite the special status played by information during, this belief is dead. With the advance of internet connection to almost every place on the planet, we do not experience an era of prosperity and knowledge, despite important advancements to what concerns to the access to information via the likes of Google, the *Wi-Fi* and mobile phones with access to fast internet connection. In fact, what we experience today is a world each time more closed into small bubbles of topics, that were generated artificially by algorithms.

Much more than that, these advancements in technology represented the possibility of foreign groups of people that advocate for an anti-democratic agenda to meet each other. Bolsonaro, for example, owns a large part of his digital activism strategy to Steve Bannon, the same man responsible for planning the electoral campaign of Trump in 2016 (PIRES, 2020).

By the late 2010s, some people started noticing a trend, especially in politics, of a phenomenon that came to be known as “post truth”. The term was coined as describing a world where there is no more truth or lies (GRIJELMO, 2017). With the rapid evolution of technology, information moves much faster, so fast that, in many cases, we cannot determine if an event is true or if it never happened at all; actually, this seems not to matter anymore.

As mentioned above, it is just part of the narrative. To have that better illustrated take a look at the current Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. During his presidential run he spread a rumor that public schools were distributing baby bottles in the shape of penises to small children (RODRIGUES, 2019). This was obviously not true but it did not matter to the people to whom the narrative was formulated. They are not really concerned with the truth. That brings us back to the first topic of this essay: the Arab Spring and the Brazilian protests of June 2013.

Despite the fact that both events were only able to happen the way they did because of the aforementioned advancements of technology, they soon fell hostage to these same tools. In Tunisia, the cell phones and the local media played a pivotal role, with protests being organized on *Facebook* groups and posts, and with the media encouraging people and social movements to take part in the protests (ALSAYYAD; GUVENÇ, 2013). In Brazil, something similar took place, with influential news conglomerates like *Folha de S. Paulo* being one of the most prominent entities to push for the protests (GALVÃO; TATAGIBA, 2019). The same is reported by Torres (2016), that argues that, differently from the modern concept of protests until this day, the Brazilian protests of 2013 saw the presence of a multitude and a plurality of messages and views from different sectors of the Brazilian society.

Despite these efforts, the fruits that emerged from both events were sour. In Tunisia, despite democratic advances, the country is on the brink of facing another authoritarian regime in less than ten years after the first protests back in 2011. The same might be said about Brazil, where the people who went to the streets claiming “it was not just about 20 cents”, but about democracy and a more righteous government saw, in 2018, a president that was more famous for his bigoted declarations than for his political career being elected president after having mastered social media communication.

Now, with Bolsonaro’s government and popularity approval facing a crisis, there is an attempt, among his most staunch supporters, to fabricate a narrative where there is a “dictatorship” about to be implemented in the country by the Supreme Federal Court of Justice (DITADURA..., 2021). In this scenario, the Tunisian example, where the north African country’s president makes similar claims, presents itself as a good model to be followed, that is, a model where the president is capable of usurping the power and, at the same time, retain population’s approval.

It must be remembered that the appeal to foreign movements is not something new among Bolsonaro’s supporters, with some of them speaking about “ucranizar” (make

Brazil like Ukraine) the country, with that being a synonym for the galvanization of ultra-right wing political movements in the country (ALESSI; HOFMEISTER, 2020).

It must be noticed that, both the Tunisian and the Ukrainian cases are narratives of victory, which is why they are so vindicated by the president's supporters. When one take this into consideration along with the theory of narratives of power, brought by Hagstrom and Gustavsson (2019), it is much easier to grasp why a distant country like Tunisia is being so vindicated by the bolsonaristas. Afterall, nobody resonates with the losers.

## **Conclusion**

Tunisia and Brazil are countries that, in spite of not having so much in common at the first glimpse, resemble more than one could guess on the political side. Having experienced protests that share similar narratives, but not so similar contexts, Tunisia shows itself as an interesting model of the Bolsonaro's plans for Brazilian democracy or, at least, what his supporters dream about it. Notwithstanding, the instrumentalization of the Tunisian democratic crisis by the supporters of the current Brazilian president reminds us that in an era of lies, or rather, the absence of truth, the narrative is a two-edged sword. It might be used to cut wood today, but tomorrow it might chop your head off.

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