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Attacks on Academic Freedom in Brazil - a Factsheet

- On the eve of his inauguration in January 2019, far-right President-elect **Jair Bolsonaro** declared war on academic freedom and critical thinking in Brazilian education, tweeting his government's commitment "to combat the Marxist trash that has occupied teaching institutions". One of his flagship policies is *Escola Sem Partido*, dubbed by its opponents the "Lei da Mordaça" ("Gagging Law" – see below).
- Bolsonaro's first **Minister of Education, Ricardo Vélez Rodriguez**, was nominated by Bolsonaro's special adviser, far-right guru and astrologer-philosopher Olavo de Carvalho. A critic of the Truth Commission's investigations into state torture and murder under the 1964-85 dictatorship, like Bolsonaro Vélez Rodriguez favours the celebration of the 1964 military coup in Brazilian schools, and the teaching of the dictatorship as a positive phase in the country's history. A defender of *Escola Sem Partido*, he advocates creating "morals and good customs" committees in schools. Vélez was replaced in April after sacking 14 advisers and executive-secretaries, leaving a trail of internal rows and failed projects.
- His successor **Abraham Weintraub**, an economist with a questionable academic reputation, is another self-declared crusader against "cultural Marxism". In late April 2019, he announced a 30% plus budget freeze aimed at three federal institutions, the Universities of Brasilia (UnB), Bahia (UFBA) and Fluminense (UFF), in retaliation for alleged political activities on their campuses, and for supposedly low levels of academic performance, although these universities are in fact ranked among the top nationally. After a wave of public outrage pointing out the cuts were ideologically motivated, targeting centres of criticism of the Bolsonaro administration, especially sociology and philosophy departments, the government extended the budget freeze to the whole sector. Half the country's 68 federal institutions underwent 50% cuts. Research funding was also hit, with the freezing of 3,000 Masters and PhD scholarships.
- **Freedom of expression in Brazilian universities came under attack** during the electoral campaign in October 2018, when campuses across the country were invaded by police and electoral officers, in a move to suppress anti-fascist activities. In December 2018 the National Union of Lecturers in Higher Education Institutions (ANDES-SN) reported the filming and intimidation of a lecturer in the Education Faculty of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, and a Federal Prosecutor's investigation of anti-fascist activities in the State University of Ceará (Uece).
- **Escola Sem Partido** ('Non-partisan School')—launched in 2014, the *Escola Sem Partido* campaign aims implicitly to suppress critical thought and progressive teaching in the name of "ideological neutrality". Focusing particularly on issues such as sexual and gender diversity, Congressional Bill no. 7180/14 would prohibit the so-called "practice of political and ideological indoctrination" by teachers, as well as outlawing activities and content that are at odds with the moral and religious convictions of students' parents. Progressive educators are likely to be bullied and subject to dismissal as a form of political persecution and censorship. The work of the *Escola Sem Partido* Congressional Committee was suspended in December 2018 but is expected to resume in 2019.
- *Escola Sem Partido* has been publicly repudiated by the Vice-Chancellors of public universities such as the Pontifícia Universidade Católica of São Paulo, Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul & University of São Paulo. In October 2018 the Santa Catarina State Public Prosecutor's office announced it would

investigate the conduct of state deputy Ana Caroline Campagnolo, who called on social media for students to film and report teachers expressing views opposed to President Bolsonaro. In November 2018 the Global Campaign for Education VI Assembly passed a motion condemning Escola Sem Partido.

- A further congressional bill (PLS 272/2016) currently in progress would change Brazil's **Antiterrorism Law** (13.260/2016) so as to openly criminalize political manifestations by social movements and the left as terrorist. Senator Magno Malta, a conservative evangelical pastor and Bolsonaro loyalist, introduced amendments to the previous bill to include acts with a "political, ideological or social motivation" as terrorist crimes. The bill defines as terrorists those who support, praise or defend acts/movements considered terrorist (including via social media). This can be used to target scholars and academic research, and it represents a serious threat to freedom of speech.
- **University autonomy under attack.** Presidential decree 9.794/2019 of 15 May 2019 transfers to government the power to decide senior appointments to federal universities, below the rank of Reitor (Principal or Vice-Chancellor). Currently, reitores are themselves selected from a shortlist of names democratically elected by university staff and students, but their ability to act autonomously will be eliminated if they are not free to appoint their own administrative teams. In March 2019, another presidential decree annulled leadership and committee posts, affecting over 13,000 university staff.
- Brazil's **1988 Constitution** guarantees that universities have "didactic-scientific, administrative and financial management autonomy." It also guarantees to all citizens the right "to present their thought" and the "free expression of intellectual activity." Examining recent episodes of Electoral Courts' abusive actions against dozens of universities, the Federal Supreme Court emphatically reaffirmed the constitutional principles of university autonomy and academic freedom.
- **The privatization agenda.** Paulo Guedes, Bolsonaro's Economy Minister, supported the transfer of responsibility for universities from the Ministry of Education to that of Science and Technology. While the move didn't take place, this is indicative of the value placed on the university sector by the new administration. It will be committed to ending the principle of higher education as a basic right and as a duty of the State, and to opening it up instead to international commercial interests. Guedes is an advocate of the privatization of all state-owned companies, and the brother of Elizabeth Guedes, Vice-President of the National Association of Private Universities (Anup). Following announcements of the government cuts to public education, there was a rise in the stock market shares of Kroton-Anhaguera, the world's largest private company in the education sector.
- **University staff and students resist.** More than a million people protested across over 100 cities on 15 May 2019 in nationwide strikes opposing the government attacks on education, with further protests planned for 30 May. The Frente Nacional Escola Sem Mordaça (Ungagged School National Front) <https://www.escolasemmordaca.org.br> is a broad coalition of trade unions, students organisation and education associations set up in 2016 to fight the Escola Sem Partido agenda. Its signatories include the main lecturers' union, Sindicato Nacional dos Docentes das Instituições de Ensino Superior (ANDES), the Brazilian counterpart of the UK's University and College Union (UCU).
- **Links:** "Students protest across Brazil over Jair Bolsonaro's sweeping cuts to education" <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/31/students-protest-across-brazil-over-jair-bolsonaros-sweeping-cuts-to-education>
"Call for students to film 'biased' teachers brings Brazil's culture wars to classroom" <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/03/brazil-schools-teachers-indoctrination-jair-bolsonaro>
"Fears for academic freedom as Brazil's political climate deteriorates" <https://www.chemistryworld.com/news/fears-for-academic-freedom-as-brazils-political-climate-deteriorates/3010315.article>
"In Defense of Academic Freedom and Autonomy in Brazil" <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/world-view/defense-academic-freedom-and-autonomy-brazil>
"Bolsonaro poses a serious threat to higher education" <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20181102101957300>