

The RCLF Minute, Issue 8

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Brazilian Politics and the Dangers of Mirror-Imaging

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Mirror-imaging refers to cultural nuances that one might inadvertently assume are similar to their own culture. The reality is that people do things differently; they do not think or act according to the same parameters. People have different realities; they have diverse civil liberties and legal rights; there are varying degrees of observance of the rule of law in their countries; some of the population might not have even basic education. These are all things that you can take for granted in your own culture and may not be true for the culture you are observing or reading about. According to the *Culture General Guidebook For Military Professionals*, by the Center For Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL), “mirror-imaging is interpreting what you see through the lens of your own background or experiences.”¹

Mirror-imaging is a common pitfall when observing a new culture. However, mirror-imaging can also lead analysts or journalists to inaccurate or dangerous assumptions. This concept is also relevant for intelligence analysis, as remarked by Richards J. Heuer, in his *Historical Document*, published by the Central Intelligence Agency, “Failure to understand that others perceive their national interests differently from the way we perceive those interests is a constant source of problems in intelligence analysis.”² This brief paper will highlight the importance of this concept in the international news reporting of the 2018 presidential election in Brazil.

On October 7, 2018, Brazilians voted on the first round of elections to choose governors, members of congress, and their new president, with a runoff election on October 28. About 147 million voters in the country had to choose between a total break from the recent past—represented by the extreme left-leaning party—and a right-turn, represented by a conservative party. These were not ordinary elections, as they decided the future of the country based in two completely opposed ideologies. Many countries are divided during elections. The United States is not different. But this Brazilian election differed significantly from the U.S., as the results of this election may affect the future of democracy and the Brazilian way of life for many generations.

The first risk of mirror-imaging for an American reader unfamiliar with Brazilian politics could make is that this election is mostly about party politics. This would be a mirror-imaging error. This is not a left vs right election, as it is here in the United States. The United States is the largest democracy in the world, with strong institutions that provide checks and balances and guarantee the rule of law. The left in Brazil is directly associated with Cuba and Venezuela and aims to copy their communist-inspired autocracies in Brazil. The Brazilian democratic system and institutions have been undermined for two decades by pervasive corruption and by an extreme-left ideological program based on communism that has grown roots and now permeates every layer of Brazilian democratic institutions. In addition to a totalitarian ideology, the left in Brazil is responsible for widespread corruption schemes, in tandem with corrupt politicians and corrupt big business. This partnership of corruption and ideology has caused the deepest economic crisis in the history of Brazil and has profoundly affected governance and the observance of the rule of law. While in the U.S. the result of an election would unlikely automatically lead to a breakdown of democracy, lawlessness, or economic destruction, the opposite can certainly be true in Brazil. It is this fundamental difference that can elude those trying to understand Brazilian politics, and this includes many Brazilians, analysts, journalists, and the international press. Therefore, by simply looking at the two

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contenders' differences in personalities, policies, government plans, or these individuals' apparent qualities or flaws would misrepresent the seriousness of the stakes and the possible lasting consequences.

The second risk of mirror-imaging is to view Brazilian politics through the lenses of one's own political system, which would lead to assumptions and generalizations based on the political system of the greatest democracy in the world. It would be a mirror-imaging error to make assumptions about the Brazilian presidential contenders or their parties without an in-depth look at the core differences between the political system in the U.S. and the 2018 realities of the political system in Brazil. One essential element of this analysis is to determine who controls the local media, what exactly is filtered by biases of the local media based on their ideological leaning (or who pays for their services) and what is published by the international press. This is not a simple task, in an era of multiple social media platforms, fake news and of media manipulation by hidden lobbying forces, which normally involve large sums of money from interest groups. These are challenging points to consider, even for many voters in Brazil.

The third risk of mirror-imaging in the case of the Brazilian elections would be to assume that stakes are equally high in any presidential elections, in any country. When Americans voted in the 2017 presidential election, the political choice in the ballots was not between the last chance for the survival of democracy vs an authoritarian communist-based political plan to institute a totalitarian regime (like that found in Venezuela). As surreal as this comparison might sound, this is exactly what happened in this Brazilian presidential election. The Brazilian voters had to choose between two diametrically opposed political systems. One of them, once installed, would permanently change the Brazilian way of life, and turn the political system into an authoritarian socialist government like the Venezuelan model—a failed state on the brink of collapse. With so much at stake, Brazilians were more mobilized than ever in these elections, and voted on the candidate that had the best chances to beat the other side.

The fourth risk of mirror-imaging when analyzing the Brazilian election is to assume that every voter views the nation as "indivisible," wave the same flag, and will defend the constitution. In the U.S., both major parties generally respect the American flag. In Brazil, the militants the Worker's Party (PT)—the party that has ruled Brazil since 2002— wave the red communist flag, not the green and yellow flag of Brazil; PT's presidential candidate has a PhD in Marxist theory; he has openly declared a plan to write a new constitution, and his running mate is an official from the Communist Party of Brazil. PT leaders and officials openly support autocratic governments, such as the socialist dictatorship Venezuela and the Cuban regime; many PT leaders and politicians are in jail for corruption, including a former president; and the last PT affiliated president of Brazil was impeached for corruption in 2016. For the fifth time, PT is using an election—the pillar of a democratic system— to undermine democratic institutions in Brazil and to perpetuate themselves in power, with the goal of installing a totalitarian regime in Brazil, as described in detail in their government plan. Such an undemocratic ideological maneuver would not have a place in American politics, and no American voter would consider voting against press and internet freedom.

The fifth mirror imaging error that could occur when reading about the Brazilian elections is the assumption that Brazil has the same level of observance of the rule of law as the United States. The U.S. is a strong democracy founded in the strong respect for the rule of law. There is a stark difference between a democracy with a strong rule of law and a democracy with a weak rule of law. In Brazil, disrespect for the law can reach surreal levels. Americans will never have to worry about electing a president who is serving time in jail. This scenario occurred in Brazil during the 2018 president elections. Despite being sentenced to twelve years in prison for corruption, former President Lula da Silva wanted to run for

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president again. After presenting multiple court appeals—a drama that captured Brazil in the weeks leading to the first round of the election – Lula was ultimately denied the opportunity to be a presidential candidate from prison. Lula finally appointed his “representative,” for this election, Fernando Haddad, a former minister of education (2005-2012) and mayor of the city of São Paulo (2013-2017). Haddad left the government of São Paulo—the most populous city in Latin America and wealthiest city in Brazil— with a bleak record and dozens of corruption charges; he also lost a re-election bid with only 9 percent of the total votes. He is currently facing several law suits; state prosecutors accuse him to be involved in dozens of schemes that include corruption, bribery, graft, election fraud, and other crimes.³ During the weeks and days before the first round of the presidential election, Haddad would fly in to the city of Curitiba to visit Lula in prison and get guidance from the charismatic disgraced PT leader. Haddad also announced he would pardon Lula of his crimes and set him free as one of his first actions if elected president.

On October 28, 2018, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, the conservative candidate was elected president of Brazil with 55 percent of all valid votes. The far-right former army captain from “*Partido Social Liberal*” (PSL) [Liberal Social Party]— a minuscule party from Rio de Janeiro—won the election against all odds, despite intense negative publicity from the domestic and international press, virtually no money for the campaign, and after surviving a life-threatening stabbing by a political opposer three weeks prior to the first round of elections. Bolsonaro spent most of the campaign at the hospital, underwent three surgeries, and later went home to recover. His campaign headquarters was his living room from where he and his followers improvised live videos on the internet to communicate with the electorate. He was also warned no to leave the house and participate in television debates due to continuous death threats. All these limitations were not sufficient to prevent his win, in an unprecedented political campaign, by a candidate that was universally opposed by the media, by the establishment, had no money or big party support, and was physically incapacitated to campaign. The people of Brazil spontaneously conducted the campaign taking it to the street in large and noisy caravans, and in social media, mostly by WhatsApp.

Bolsonaro’s political record and government program will be discussed in a third RCLF Minute. The second RCLF will discuss in details the Worker’s Party corruption legacy, which determines the immense task ahead for the new president elect. Another reason for the legacy of the far-left candidate and program to be detailed in the next RCLF Minutes is because the international press has already written extensively about the far-right candidate. Besides, it was precisely because of the legacy of corruption that Brazilian voters rejected Haddad and elected Bolsonaro. Therefore, knowing details about this legacy will allow the readers to understand the election results and the final choice of the Brazilians.

Prior to the second round of the elections, the international press published various headlines such as *The Economist’s* (November 9, 2017) “A radical from Rio Jair Bolsonaro hopes to be Brazil’s Donald Trump - Can a right-wing demagogue win next year’s election?” or *The Economist’s* (September 20, 2018), “Jair Bolsonaro, Latin America’s latest menace,” or from the same magazine on the same date, “Jair Bolsonaro would be a particularly nasty addition to the club of populists that includes Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte,” and *the Washington Post’s* “Bolsonaro’s rise is a new blow for liberal democracy,” (October 9, 2018). These headlines show the international press’ reporting on one candidate but did not inform about the extremism and shadowy past actions of the other candidate. By leaving out relevant details from a two-sided complex story, readers of these stories were led to believe Brazilians were out of their minds, displaying undemocratic tendencies, or were simply ignorant for electing such a controversial president.

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You are now in a better position to avoid mirror-imaging. You learned about the differences between the U.S. and the Brazilian political systems and know about the systemic corruption that Brazilians were trying to fight off in this election. This brief paper aimed to assist readers to reflect on mirror-imaging to enhance critical thinking when reading the headlines about politics, especially in another country. Ideally, the press would always report bias-free analysis on all matters. However, as the case of this highly polarized Brazilian presidential elections have demonstrated, readers must exert caution when reading about complicated political matters in foreign countries. Taking into consideration the risk of mirror-imaging can help create awareness about political system differences and biases from powerful media outlets.

Endnotes

¹ Kerry Fosher, Lauren Mackenzie, Erika Tarzi, Kristen Post, and Erik Gauldin, *Culture General Guidebook for Military Professionals* (Quantico, VA: Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, 2017), 73.

² Richards J. Heuer, Jr., "Keeping an Open Mind" chapter 6, in *Historical Document*, Central Intelligence Agency (Last updated July 7, 2008). Accessed October 5, 2108, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/psychology-of-intelligence-analysis/art1.html>

³ "Escolhido pelo PT, Haddad é alvo de investigações; entenda," [Understand: Chosen by PT, Haddad is Target of Investigations] *Folha de São Paulo* (September 11, 2018). Accessed October 5, 2018, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2018/09/escolhido-pelo-pt-haddad-e-alvo-de-investigacoes-entenda.shtml>