

Brazilian politics

Brazil's Bolsonaro keeps it in the family

The president trusts few people and so with his sons is building a dynasty in Latin America's largest nation



Jair Bolsonaro's sons Eduardo, Carlos and Flávio have been outspoken since the inauguration of their father in January © Reuters/AFP

Bryan Harris, Andres Schipani and Carolina Unzelte in São Paulo MAY 6, 2019

One is known as the “pit bull”. Another is embroiled in a corruption scandal. The third is a rightwing gun enthusiast who is seeking to spread a populist movement throughout Brazil and Latin America.

More than four months into the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro, his [three sons](#) have emerged as a powerful force that is reshaping Brazilian politics.

This has fuelled fears that they exert undue political influence and are consolidating a new [political dynasty](#) in a continent with a long and contentious history of family politics.

“The sons have unprecedented influence,” said Aline Souza, an analyst with consultancy Prospectiva. “The Bolsonaro government has already broken with traditional modes of governance. One example of this is precisely this relationship with the children.”

“The perfect word is dynasty,” added Esther Solano, a professor of politics at the Federal University of São Paulo.

“The situation we have is that we voted for a president, but in fact his children have governmental powers. We have a family clan in the government.”

One reason the issue is controversial is because Flávio, Carlos and Eduardo — the three Bolsonaro sons in descending age order — have been so outspoken since the [inauguration](#) of their father in January.

In the US, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner, the president's daughter and son-in-law, maintain a low-profile in comparison to the Bolsonaro sons, who have stormed on to Brazil's political stage with a combination of social media invective and a visible presence in policymaking.

"They have the last word on everything. That is just a matter of fact. The president trusts no one else," said William Waack, a political commentator. "This is not gossip. Bolsonaro himself talks publicly about how important his sons are."

The men wield power in myriad ways, from publicly setting out policy priorities to speaking on behalf of their father, said Malu Gatto, a Brazilian assistant professor at UCL.

"They are seen as representatives of their father by many in government," she added.

Raised on a military base, the sons were using firearms from the age of five, according to their father, a former army captain who was elected president in a landslide victory in October. Since then, the men have moved into politics, taking with them a shoot first and ask questions later mentality.

We have had family clans . . . But it was a thing limited to state [level] policy and also some positions in the federal government. We never had a case such as this

Hamilton Mourão, Brazil's vice-president

Front and centre in recent weeks has been Carlos Bolsonaro, a 36-year-old whose fierce loyalty to his father earned him the "pit bull" moniker. Officially a city councillor in Rio de Janeiro, Carlos co-ordinated his father's [social media campaign](#) during the election and is widely credited with helping the once outsider candidate dramatically expand his voter base.

He has since emerged as a de facto spokesman for the Brazilian president, utilising social media to hound potential adversaries, including most recently vice-president Hamilton Mourão.

In a tweet last week, Carlos, slammed Bill de Blasio, the mayor of New York, after the Brazilian president decided not to visit the city. The decision followed a public outcry from environmentalists, gay activists and Mr de Blasio himself over the Brazilian-American Chamber of Commerce's move to honour Mr Bolsonaro at a gala.

"Jair Bolsonaro needs to stop anyone occupying the centre ground. He can only maintain power if there are no centrists to challenge him. That is what Carlos is doing. He shapes the debate," said Eduardo Mello, a professor at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation.

Carlos' domestic role is complemented on the international front by his younger brother Eduardo.

A federal deputy and chair of the house foreign affairs committee, Eduardo has adopted the role of de facto foreign minister, travelling to the US, Hungary and Italy in recent months to build relations with like-minded rightwing populists.

His office in Brasília is adorned with framed rifle rounds, bobblehead figurines of Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump and a sports cap that reads “Trump 2020”.

In February he pledged to “reclaim sovereignty from progressive globalist elitist forces” when he was named Latin America leader of The Movement, the populist group being spearheaded by US ideologue Steve Bannon.

He also won high praise from Donald Trump for orchestrating a meeting between the Brazilian and US presidents in March.

“Eduardo Bolsonaro has this very strong foreign policy agenda. The visit to the White House was very symbolic. He was the one alongside his father then, not the actual foreign minister,” said Ms Souza.

Flávio, the eldest son, has opted for a lower profile. Since the inauguration of his father, the Rio de Janeiro senator has been embroiled in a lingering corruption scandal involving suspect payments that has at times overshadowed the presidency of Jair.

“There is an ongoing fight within the administration [in Brasília]. There are the people who want to work within the system and then there are the people who want to overthrow the system. My understanding is the sons are the main leaders behind this second faction,” said Prof Mello.

“Bolsonaro doesn’t trust many people, so he has surrounded himself with family.”

According to a presidential adviser, who spoke on condition of anonymity, “the children are not going to wean from their father” and the father “is not going to go public to defend those people who are being attacked by his sons”.



Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro prays during an Evangelical Event in Camboriú, Santa Catarina state, Brazil on May 2 © AFP

“There are as many rational interests as irrational emotions present here,” the adviser said.

The sons did not respond to requests for comment.

Many believe the Bolsonaros have consolidated their position on Latin America’s list of political dynasties, which includes the leftwing Kirchners in Argentina and the rightwing Fujimoris in Peru.

Vice-president Mourão points out that while Brazilian politics has long featured influential family clans, none have been spread across the highest echelons of power like the Bolsonaros.

“We have had family clans . . . But it was a thing limited to state [level] policy and also some positions in the federal government. We never had a case such as this,” he told the Financial Times recently.

Given the sons cannot be fired, analysts predict that their influence will continue to grow until the intervention of another faction within the government, such as the military.

“In general, the results of these dynasties are never good for the countries,” said Maurício Santoro, professor of international relations at Rio de Janeiro’s Federal University.

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