

Brazil

Brazilian students and teachers join marches against Bolsonaro

Nationwide protests pits rightwing president against defiant student body



Jair Bolsonaro has dismissed protesters in Brazil as ignorant “militants” and “useful idiots” © AFP

Bryan Harris and Carolina Unzelte in São Paulo and Andres Schipani in New York MAY 15, 2019

Tens of thousands of students and teachers took to the streets across Brazil on Wednesday in the first nationwide protests against the administration of President [Jair Bolsonaro](#) and its plans for swingeing budget cuts.

Since the inauguration of Mr Bolsonaro in January, education has emerged as a key ideological [flashpoint](#), which has pitted the rightwing president and his supporters against the nation’s boisterous student body.

“Today is the beginning of a great confrontation with Bolsonaro,” said Marianna Dias, president of the National Union of Students.

“It is the first such strike during his rule, the first massive mobilisation in all of Brazil. Today is a day that he will not be able to sleep with the noise of students defending education,” said Ms Dias, adding that she was expecting a turnout of 100,000 in cities across Brazil.

For his part, Mr Bolsonaro dismissed the protesters as ignorant “militants” and “useful idiots” who were being manipulated by their peers in Brazil’s federal universities.

At the crux of the confrontation are Mr Bolsonaro’s plans to slash funding for federal universities as well as shift financial support away from the humanities and towards areas that Mr Bolsonaro says can “generate immediate return to the taxpayer, such as veterinary, engineering and medicine.”

Tensions have been further inflamed by efforts by the administration in Brasília to paint university students as lazy and debauched.

Announcing a 30 per cent cut to the funding of federal universities, Abraham Weintraub, Brazil's education minister, said the measure would target institutions that were “making a mess.”

“When [students] go to the federal university to party, run around, have no class or do absurd seminars that add nothing to society, it's money that is being wasted in a country with 60,000 homicides a year and a thousand other needs,” he said recently.

Tabata Amaral, a 25-year-old first term lawmaker from the impoverished outskirts of São Paulo who was educated at Harvard, said: “We cannot let this ideological war against Brazilian education further threaten Brazil's development and future.”

“The government's absurd and arbitrary decisions over the past two months have serious concerns about Brazilian education,” she said, adding that cuts had already amounted to \$500m.

Government efforts to portray the students in a negative light have been aided by an “orchestrated effort” to disparage the federal universities on WhatsApp, said Fabrício Benevenuto, a researcher on social media networks at the Federal University of Minas Gerais

“This is following the same style as the presidential campaign,” he said.

The popular messaging app featured prominently in Mr Bolsonaro's election last year, but has been [roundly criticised](#) for its failure to prevent the spread of false information, doctored photos and other hoaxes.

The protests are just the latest flashpoint over education. Mr Bolsonaro and his supporters have riled the sector by frequently accusing teachers and professors of “indoctrinating” students and spreading “[cultural marxism](#)” on campus.

Ricardo Vélez, who served as education minister for the first three months of the Bolsonaro administration, sparked [outrage](#) when he requested that students recite Mr Bolsonaro's electoral slogan — “Brazil above all. God above everyone” — in the classroom, a move that spurred fears about the politicisation of education.

The presence of teachers and professors at the demonstrations on Wednesday is likely to be a concern for Mr Bolsonaro.

In addition to the budget cuts, the educators are protesting plans by the administration in Brasília for a [comprehensive reform](#) of the country's pensions payment system, which would raise the age of retirement.

Widely seen as crucial to stabilise the Brazilian economy, the reform plan is considered the most pressing task facing the Brazilian president.

Cláudia Costin, an expert on education policies at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas, acknowledged that although the nation was experiencing a serious fiscal crisis, the government was not approaching budget cuts in the right manner.

“Talking with universities and presenting data were what should have been done. Bolsonaro had said that there would be technical management in education, but we are seeing everything but that.”

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