



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Washington and Brasilia are possible anywhere - you just need populists in power



The violence of Jair Bolsonaro's supporters in Brasilia on January 8 triggered a connection with the intrusion of Donald Trump's supporters in the United States Congress two years ago. There are many similarities between the two events, but they are connected by their most significant common factor: they both constituted an attempted coup d'état. The big question is whether there would have been violence in Brazil in 2023 had the "original" not occurred in Washington in 2021? It is possible that the raid on Brazil's three most important state institutions would still have happened, but would it simply have been observed as just another in a series of attempts to avoid a peaceful transfer of power in under-consolidated democracies?

The action of Bolsonaro's supporters on January 8, like every other similar case in the future, will be viewed through the prism of Washington's January 6, 2021. What lies behind both previous violent attacks on government buildings in an attempt to prevent the transition of power, is the refusal of populist leaders to accept the fact that they are no longer authentic representatives of the people's will. For them, the day of their election defeat is the funeral of their dogma. There are quite enough populist leaders in power in the world to expect a repetition of the Washington and Brazil scenarios in a completely different and distant place. In this sense, geography plays no role, nor does even the strength of democratic institutions. An earthquake is possible anywhere, if populist politics is in power.

How many populists are in power in the world?

In its annual report on populism in the world, Tony Blair's Institute for Global Change reported that in 2022 there were 13 populists in power. Their number has been in decline since 2020, when there were 19. The trend of the decline of populist policies in power is a consequence of their fundamental mistake. If they are good at winning votes, they are bad at implementing practical policies. The goals and

promises with which they came to power are proving to be unachievable, and their leadership ineffective.

In its essence, populism is an oppositional concept. It is a set of policies (or just slogans) that lose ground in a collision with the levers of governance. The most famous European populist government, Greek left-wing populist Alexis Tsipras's ruling party, began its mandate in 2015 with one policy, and ended it four years later with a completely different, unrecognisable one. Greece is also an example of the fact that having a populist government or president does not mean that there will be a violent prevention of the transfer of power. But Trump and Bolsonaro confirm that a populist in power is a prerequisite for a coup.

It is possible to foresee a coup

Bolsonaro, like Trump before him, sent signals that chaos in their capitals was possible if they were defeated in the elections. Months before the elections, the Brazilian president began to complain about the electoral system, saying that the vote processing system was open to the possibility of fraud. Maxine L. Margolis, professor emerita of anthropology, University of Florida, "predicted" the future last September: "Uncanny similarities between Bolsonaro and Trump supporters suggest the possibility of post-election violence in Brazil akin to the Jan. 6 insurrection in the United States," she wrote in Newsweek last September with the headline, "How Likely is a Brazilian Coup?"

It is interesting to observe the behaviour of populist leaders after the experience in the US and Brazil according to this criterion: will they complain about flaws in the voting system before the election race? Why would this pattern not be repeated somewhere else in the world, when it has already happened twice, once in a country with one of the longest democratic traditions in the world?

Washington, Brasilia... Who

next?

This year, the most important test of the power of populist leaders will take place in Turkey and Poland. It will also be a test of the resistance of their democracies to the risk of refusing to hand over power peacefully. Under such temptation, even the strength of democratic institutions does not have to play a decisive role. The example of America opened the door to anxiety in countries with the most developed democratic institutions. Why would it be impossible for post-election violence to happen somewhere in the European Union, where the strength of laws and democratic institutions is seemingly unquestionable?

In Hungary, for example, when, in three years' time, populist leader Viktor Orbán goes to the polls? The Hungarian Prime Minister has already shown once that he has had a hard time coming to terms with an election defeat, when, after losing power in the capital Budapest and dozens of other cities in 2019, he cut original local revenues and seized money from EU funds as a sign of revenge. Why would he not take action similar to that of his friends Trump and Bolsonaro, three years later? The strength of the democratic institutions in the US fought the putschists, as every developed democracy will fight if it goes through a similar experience. But that does not mean that populists will not try to use violence to prevent the peaceful handover of power.

It is deep-rooted in their political agenda that they are "chosen" to represent the authentic will of the people, as opposed to the alienated establishment they are fighting against. In this regard, the Financial Times editorial about the events in Brasilia is misleading when it writes "Sunday's spectacle in Brazil demonstrates the enduring threat to democracy from far-right extremism." The threat to democracy comes equally from right-wing and left-wing populism, because their political essence is the same. If they win an opportunity to be in power, they will face downfall just as hard, regardless of whether they are on the right or left of the political spectrum, because defeat in elections is also the death of their entire political credo.