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Brazil, What Country Is This? An Analysis of the Intersection Between Politics, Culture, and Democracy

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Abstract

This article analyzes the intersection between politics, culture, and democracy in contemporary Brazil over the period from 2013 to 2025. Using a qualitative, documentary, and interpretive approach, we examine high-profile political events, such as the attacks of January 8, 2023, and the trial of their organizers, in dialogue with cultural manifestations that emerged in the same period, including carnival, popular music, cinema, and audiovisual productions. The study starts from the understanding that such expressions do not merely reflect the political situation but operate as active spaces of symbolic dispute and construction of collective memory. In this sense, samba-enredo songs, artistic mobilizations against amnesty bills, and the film *Ainda Estou Aqui* (I'm Still Here) are brought together and understood as cultural practices that rework authoritarian experiences and challenge narratives about democracy. By articulating institutional events and cultural responses, the text seeks to show how culture acts as a constitutive dimension of public debate, mobilizing affects, identities, and historical repertoires. We argue that, in a cycle of democratic crisis and contestation, cultural manifestations take part in producing meanings about the recent past and contribute to processes of symbolic reconstruction in the present. The article thus proposes that Brazil's cultural *soft power* is not restricted to international projection but also operates domestically as a form of resistance, memory, and democratic affirmation.

Keywords: Politics; Culture; Democracy; Resistance; Contemporary Brazil.

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1. Introductory remarks

This narrative takes on a documentary function: to record, along a historical thread, political and cultural events in Brazil between 2013 and 2025, weaving together national events (elections, trials, demonstrations) and artistic expressions (samba-enredo, cinema, popular music, literature). Our aim is to give material form to the present time, as a gesture of "archiving" discourses and practices from a tense period of recent political history. Approaching, then, an interpretive historical chronicle, a hybrid of synthesis journalism and narrative of and about memories, this is the writing of someone who wishes to preserve a reading of the present for the future.

With a qualitative, documentary, and interpretive approach that combines the analysis of political discourses, cultural manifestations, and media records, the text does not propose an exhaustive historiographical reconstruction, but rather an initial analysis based on public sources (official speeches, press coverage, artistic productions, and cultural manifestations), understood as devices of social and political memory.

The political events and cultural manifestations gathered here were selected through a reading intended to ensure interpretive coherence and symbolic relevance. First, we prioritized events that had a direct institutional impact or significant repercussion in the public debate on Brazilian democracy, whether through judicial decisions, social mobilizations, or legislative disputes. Second, we considered cultural expressions that achieved broad social and media circulation, acting as mediators of meaning about the recent past and the political tensions of the present. In this text, we especially included manifestations capable of mobilizing repertoires of memory, identity, and belonging, contributing to the construction, or contestation, of democratic narratives.

This reading does not seek to exhaust the universe of events and cultural productions of the period. On the contrary, working with selected cases to build a narrative, albeit an initial one, on the intersection between politics, culture, and democracy was not an easy task, given the many other meaningful possibilities. We therefore sought to identify some emblematic cases in which politics and culture intertwine in a particularly visible way, revealing the symbolic dimension of the disputes over democracy in contemporary Brazil. In short, the events and cultural expressions analyzed were selected according to three lines of analysis: a) public and institutional impact on Brazilian democracy; b) broad symbolic circulation in the national and international debate; and c) capacity for cultural mobilization around recent political memory.

The 2013–2025 time frame does not merely respond to a chronological delimitation but to the understanding of a cycle of intensifying disputes over Brazilian democracy. In our view, the 2013 protests marked a moment of reconfiguration of the public sphere, characterized by expanded political participation in the streets and by the emergence of new actors and discourses that began to strain democratic institutions and consensus. From that point on, we can observe the progressive radicalization of political debate, running through the 2016 *impeachment*, the rise of new right-wing movements, the 2018 election, and the growing erosion of institutional trust, culminating in the attacks of January 8, 2023.

The unfolding of these events, especially the trial of those involved and its cultural and symbolic repercussions up to 2025, allows us to observe not only the crisis but also the movements of institutional and artistic response that are the focus of this study. The selected period thus allows us to observe the transition between a moment of democratic inflection, in which the institutional order comes under strain from intensified political disputes and narratives of contestation, and a later stage marked by the dispute over the meaning of these events. In this second moment, the issue is not only the formal defense of institutions, but the construction of interpretations about what happened, who the subjects of the crisis are, and which values should guide the future. It is in this field that memory comes to be mobilized and reworked through cultural, artistic, and media practices, shaping processes of symbolic reconstruction that seek to reaffirm, reinterpret, or contest the meaning of democracy in contemporary Brazil.

In sum, strictly for our purposes, this work engages with perspectives that understand culture as a constitutive dimension of politics. In this direction, we draw on the notion of *soft power*, a concept attributed mainly to Joseph Nye's reflections in international relations theory, which refers to the capacity to attract and persuade through political and cultural values, as opposed to war. We also mobilize the idea of cultural memory as it manifests itself in different forms of expression, recording knowledge, places, and celebrations, as presented, for example, in the Samba Dossier organized by the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage (Iphan), and the notion of symbolic resistance as a practice of contesting meaning in the public sphere, in the way Michel de Certeau perceives the paths of everyday culture.

2. Brazil in times of democratic reconstruction

We start from September 2025, when, at the 80th United Nations General Assembly in New York, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva opened the session with a speech that resonated in Brazil and around the world. Traditionally, Brazil delivers the opening speech, and Lula used this space to reaffirm the defense of national sovereignty, multilateralism, democracy, and social and environmental justice. The president also expressed solidarity with Palestine and Latin America, criticized the pressure on Cuba and Venezuela, and defended the regulation of large digital platforms.

His words, “Our democracy and our sovereignty are non-negotiable”, echoed beyond the floor of the United Nations. The statement referred to the recent trial that had convicted a former Brazilian head of state for attacking the democratic rule of law, an unprecedented fact in 525 years of national history. The speech summed up a moment of transition: Brazil was trying to consolidate its democracy after years of political polarization, attacks on institutions, and growing social tension.

Lula also stated forcefully: “Before the eyes of the world, Brazil sent a message to all would-be autocrats and those who support them. [...] Our democracy and our sovereignty are non-negotiable”. In defending democracy and sovereignty in this way, he was sending a message to the President of the United States, Donald Trump, at one of the moments of greatest tension in the relationship between the two countries, in view of the 50% tariffs imposed on Brazilian products, the attempt to pressure the trial of former president Jair Bolsonaro, and the application of the Magnitsky Act against Alexandre de Moraes.[1] As the speech reverberated at home and abroad, the Brazilian actress Fernanda Montenegro, for example, shared a message of gratitude and admiration on social media: “President Lula, you dignified, you honored our Brazil by delivering your extraordinary speech at the opening of the UN Assembly”.

When Lula took office for his third term as President of the Republic, the defense of democracy was highlighted in his inaugural speech: “democracy always”. The fight against the growth of the far right became one of his goals after one of the most “polarized” elections,[2] which went to a runoff against Jair Bolsonaro (PL), who was seeking reelection, in a campaign that involved Brazilians of different ages, classes, creeds, and so on. The debate was so intense that killings made headlines in different Brazilian cities, such as Salvador and Foz do Iguaçu.[3]

In January, after the international repercussion of his election, the president moved part of Brazil by walking up the presidential ramp at his inauguration alongside several representatives of the Brazilian people, such as Chief Raoni, one of the country's Indigenous leaders and an activist in defense of Indigenous peoples, as well as a waste picker, a metalworker, a person with a disability, a student, and a Black child.

Below, we present the image of President Lula's inauguration:

[1] _____ Weeks after the president's speech, on October 6, President Trump spoke with President Lula by telephone and appointed his Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, to negotiate the tariffs imposed on Brazil.

[2] Lula 50.90% and Jair Bolsonaro 49.10%.

[3] See: https://periodicos.claec.org/index.php/relacult/article/view/2690/1774. Accessed October 7, 2025.

Figure 1. President Lula's inauguration



Source: https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2023/01/01/lula-toma-posse-diante-de-centenas-de-milhares-em-brasilia-reafirma-compromissos-de-combate-a-pobreza-e-defende-a-democracia.ghtml.

A moving image, on the one hand; on the other, images of sad events also appeared. The country watched live, broadcast on television and social media, as thousands of people, supporters of former president Bolsonaro, invaded the seat of the Three Powers in Brasília, aggressively destroying public property in a frightening wave of violence.

Figure 2. The invasion



Source: https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/1030327-memoria-8-de-janeiro-fotos-ineditas-mostram-danos-provocados-na-camara-e-no-senado-pelos-invasores/.

Figure 3. The attacks



Source: https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/1030327-memoria-8-de-janeiro-fotos-ineditas-mostram-danos-provocados-na-camara-e-no-senado-pelos-invasores/.

Figure 4. The destruction



Source: https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/1030327-memoria-8-de-janeiro-fotos-ineditas-mostram-danos-provocados-na-camara-e-no-senado-pelos-invasores/.

January 8, 2023, in Brazil, organized by supporters of Jair Bolsonaro, was compared to January 6, 2021, in the United States, carried out by supporters of Donald Trump. Both movements contested the election results, questioning the electronic voting machines in the Brazilian case and mail-in voting in the United States, without any evidence of fraud, with the central aim of discrediting the democratic process and the electoral system. It is important to note that, beyond the similarities in the invasion and destruction of buildings representing seats of power, the Praça dos Três Poderes in Brasília and the Capitol in Washington, these events reveal a loss of trust in politics and democracy, driven by crises and by the rise and use of social media, which were so important for the victories of far-right leaders, Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 and Donald Trump in 2016; both failed to be reelected and provoked the January events. In both cases, therefore, we observe the mobilization of narratives of electoral fraud and the use of national symbols as instruments of political legitimation, revealing transnational dynamics of radicalization.

Years later, on September 2, 2025, an unprecedented trial began of those involved in the coup plot and in the attempt to abolish the democratic rule of law, which culminated on January 8, 2023, in the attacks in Brasília just described. Broadcast live, the trial placed seven high-ranking military officers and former president Bolsonaro in the dock for the first time, in what was perhaps one of the most important trials in the history of the Republic.

On September 9 of that year, Justice Alexandre de Moraes, the rapporteur of the case, presented his arguments on the attempted coup and the abolition of the rule of law, setting out a timeline and explaining that the coup plot had been planned since 2021.[4] According to him, these were not isolated actions, and Bolsonaro was the leader, the "leader of the criminal organization". Justice Flávio Dino, using humor, recalled that the camps were located in front of the barracks and not in front of churches, and Justice Cármen Lúcia reflected on history and memory, stating that Brazil was meeting its past, present, and future.

The trial gained national and international media coverage. *The Economist* ran a cover with the image of Jair Bolsonaro, stressing that the trial was a "lesson in democracy" for the world: "Brazil offers a lesson in democracy to an America that is becoming more corrupt, protectionist and authoritarian". *The New York Times* published a piece drawing attention to the fact that Brazil had succeeded where the United States had failed: "*Brazil Just Succeeded Where America Failed*".

[4] Use of public agencies to monitor opponents and spread falsehoods about the Supreme Court; actions to attack the Electoral Court over the result of the 2022 election; live broadcasts by the former president delegitimizing the voting machines; attacks on the Judiciary during the rallies on Avenida Paulista, São Paulo, on Independence Day, 7/09/2022; the summoning of ambassadors to delegitimize the elections on 18/07/2022; the use of the Federal Police to prevent or hinder voters in the Northeast; the use of the technical branch of the Armed Forces to question the electronic voting machines; highway blockades and camps in front of barracks by supporters; surveillance of elected authorities; the Liberal Party's (PL) complaint against the voting machines; a meeting of the "kids pretos" (special forces officers) to plan attacks against authorities (President Lula, Vice President Alckmin, and Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes); the attempted invasion of the Federal Police headquarters and the burning of vehicles on the day Lula's victory was certified, 12/12/2022; the attempt to blow up Brasília airport with a bomb in a fuel truck on 24/12/2022; the execution of the "Green and Yellow Dagger" plan to kill authorities, and its ramifications; the drafting of the coup decree and meetings with commanders to discuss the coup; and the coup attacks of January 8, 2023, in Brasília, which ransacked the seats of the Three Powers.

Figure 5. The magazine



Source: https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/articles/cgln787rjndo.

While the trial was under way at the Federal Supreme Court, the Chamber of Deputies was organizing to push the "amnesty" agenda for those involved in the coup plot. It is worth recalling that many trials of those who invaded the seat of the Three Powers in Brasília had already taken place.[5] The Brazilian press, in its editorials, also condemned this amnesty bill. *Estadão*, for example, ran the headline "An amnesty deal for coup plotters is pornographic", with part of the text stating: "Hatched in the underground of Congress, a possible impunity for those accused of plotting a coup d'état now on trial at the STF is legally teratological and morally unacceptable".[6]

From this perspective, January 8 and the trial of the coup plotters are, in our view, a lesson in democracy. By describing the attacks in Brasília (January 8, 2023), the trial at the STF (September 2025) with its main justices, arguments, and national and international repercussions, the reaction of the press and civil society, the opposing movements (the amnesty bill and the so-called Shielding Amendment, PEC da Blindagem), and the popular demonstrations in defense of democracy, we seek to record the events and the institutional reactions.

3. Culture in resistance: art, music, and democratic memory

On September 21, 2025, several cities organized popular demonstrations, and artists gathered to protest against the Amnesty Bill under consideration in the Federal Chamber of Deputies and the approval of the Shielding Amendment (PEC da Blindagem), which expands special jurisdiction and protects members of Congress in relation to criminal investigations. Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Chico Buarque, Paulinho da Viola, and Djavan, together on a sound truck on the Copacabana waterfront in Rio de Janeiro, led a large protest. The crowd sang with Chico and Gil the song *Cálice*, a composition released in 1978 during the military dictatorship in Brazil, which began in 1964 and lasted 21 years. The song is considered a symbol of struggle and resistance.[7]

[5] A total of 1,630 people were charged in the plot: 554 expressed remorse and accepted non-prosecution agreements with the authorities, 683 were convicted, 11 were acquitted, and 382 criminal cases are still under way.

[6] See: https://www.estadao.com.br/opiniao/acordo-por-anistia-a-golpistas-e-pornografico/. Accessed October 10, 2025.

[7] We must acknowledge that culture does not operate exclusively as a vector of democratic resistance. In the same period, cultural mobilizations with a conservative orientation emerged, especially associated with gospel production and religious networks, which also contend for meaning in the public sphere. Culture is a field of symbolic conflict, not only of resistance.

Figure 6. The artists



Source: https://tvtnews.com.br/rio-de-janeiro-reune-artistas-contra-anistia/.

Earlier, in November 2024, artists had already performed in defense of democracy, as at the *Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty Festival* in Rio de Janeiro, whose message included the defense of democracy and the fight against social inequality. First Lady Janja Lula da Silva compared this gesture to other historic *concerts* that brought together art and politics.

In the audiovisual field, documentary productions have also played a relevant role in the dispute over narratives about recent Brazilian democracy. The documentary *Apocalypse in the Tropics* (2024), by Petra Costa, helps to understand the intertwining of religion, politics, and social mobilization in the country by showing how certain religious discourses were incorporated into the public arena and institutional disputes. By bringing to light the actions of leaders and movements that articulate moral and identity values and projects of power, the film broadens the reading of contemporary conflicts, showing that culture, including in its audiovisual dimension, does not merely react to political events but actively participates in the construction of meaning about the democratic crisis and its consequences.

Also in the field of art, carnival, considered the largest popular festival in our country and a cultural phenomenon, features samba school parades marked by political, social, and cultural influences. Politics as a theme in carnival plots is nothing new: the beautiful samba that brought the title to *Imperatriz Leopoldinense* in 1989, “Liberdade, liberdade, abra as asas sobre nós” (Freedom, freedom, spread your wings over us), celebrated the centenary of the Proclamation of the Republic.

In 2020, the Brazilian comedian Marcelo Adnet, dressed as President Jair Bolsonaro, paraded with the *São Clemente* samba school in Rio de Janeiro. The plot “O Conto do Vigário: uma crítica social em forma de samba” (The confidence trick: a social critique in the form of samba) used the classic figure of the confidence trick to criticize scams and frauds in contemporary Brazilian society. The samba lyrics addressed disguised political corruption (the “vicar in a necktie”), disinformation through fake news, technological manipulation (such as VAR), and the superficiality of social media. The performance became one of the most discussed topics in the media.[8]

[8] See: https://brasil.elpais.com/verne/2020-02-25/o-carnaval-da-critica-politica-vai-dos-blocos-as-escolas-de-samba.html. Accessed October 3, 2025.

Figure 7. Carnival



Source: https://www.terra.com.br/diversao/bolsonaro-e-alfinetado-em-desfile-de-escolas-de-samba-no-rio,5811fa5862c689401f91a32b8b5f3a72w8ivdrn2.html.

Like *São Clemente*, *Estação Primeira de Mangueira* paraded with the plot "A verdade vos fará livre" (The truth shall make you free), addressing the story of Jesus Christ and associating him with minorities and the disadvantaged, with Christian fundamentalism and intolerance, presenting a vision of Jesus as a Black, Indigenous person and as a woman who interacts with the margins of society. The school also directly criticized then-president Jair Bolsonaro by questioning the figure of the "messiah with a gun in hand".

In 2024, the *Grêmio Recreativo Escola de Samba Portela*, in Rio de Janeiro, presented a parade based on the beautiful novel *Um defeito de cor* (A color defect), by Ana Maria Gonçalves. A few days after the parade, the book became the best-selling title on *Amazon*, extending the theme of the struggle for freedom through the impetus generated by the samba-enredo at the Sapucaí. The theme of ancestry and the struggle for freedom is a tribute to Black women, their "struggle for survival and the construction of the nation".

Also in 2024, the *Grêmio Recreativo Escola de Samba Acadêmicos do Salgueiro*, in Rio de Janeiro, moved carnival-goers in defense of the Yanomami peoples with the samba-enredo "Hutukara" and presented a political narrative with a samba composed in honor of the leader Davi Kopenawa, emphasizing the "Yanomami as warriors, not victims", the struggle for survival threatened by illegal mining, and the resistance of the people themselves in facing a health and humanitarian crisis in the largest Indigenous territory in Brazil.

Figure 8. The Indigenous leader at Carnival



Source: https://sumauma.com/carnaval-2024-salgueiro-mostra-a-dor-e-a-beleza-de-ser-yanomami/.

After the beautiful carnival performances, in 2025, attention turned, beyond political issues, to the Oscar ceremony. The Brazilian film *Ainda Estou Aqui* (I'm Still Here), by Walter Salles, won Best International

Feature, and Fernanda Torres was also nominated for Best Actress. Brazil won its first statuette in history at the 97th Academy Awards, the most important award in world cinema.

Figure 9. The film



Source: https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/entretenimento/ainda-estou-aqui-ganha-novo-poster-apos-vitoria-no-oscar-veja/.

Subsequently, Fernanda Torres was honored in Brazil for the representativeness she expressed in her performance.

Figure 10. Fernanda as a carnival puppet



Source: https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/entretenimento/fernanda-torres-agradece-de-joelhos-por-homenagem-com-boneco-de-olinda/.

Figure 11. Fernanda on the streets



Source: https://gshow.globo.com/globoplay/noticia/fernanda-torres-e-homenageada-em-mural-gigante-em-porto-alegre.ghtml.

The film was inspired by Marcelo Rubens Paiva's autobiographical book about the Paiva family, published in 2015, whose narrative revolves around the struggle of the lawyer and activist Eunice Paiva, recognized for her work in favor of human rights, in defense of Indigenous peoples, and in the pursuit of democracy, truth, and justice. The film portrays precisely her relentless search to find out what had happened to the journalist and congressman Rubens Paiva, her husband, after his disappearance.

The film became an important vehicle for disseminating Brazilian culture internationally, a powerful vehicle for disseminating a country's culture: *soft power*. The struggle against the abuses and authoritarianism of dictatorial projects, together with Eunice's search for the disappeared congressman Paiva, is a message enabled by the Oscar, which put the film in the spotlight and on the everyday agenda, showing that this is a necessary dialogue, especially when we see demonstrations with material calling for the return of AI-5, a reference to the authoritarian and repressive measures contained in Institutional Act No. 5, the harshest decree issued by the military dictatorship in Brazil.

In *Cálice*, from 1978, the denunciation had already been made: the horrors of the dictatorship and the disappearance of thousands of Brazilians. For young people who did not live through that period, and for the democratic struggle that must be constant, not only during elections, this film, and not only this film but art as a whole, is in a constant movement of resistance for the strengthening and defense of democracy in Brazil. For us, art and culture are forms of symbolic resistance that keep democratic memory alive.

4. Conclusion: culture, politics, and the permanent struggle for democracy

As noted earlier, this text is structured as a narrative of recent political and cultural events in the country, weaving together discourses from different spheres: institutional politics (the presidency, the STF), the media (newspapers, magazines), art (carnival, cinema, music), and popular action (demonstrations). The thread that guides us is the discourse of the defense of democracy and of culture as resistance, offering a panoramic view of the intersection between politics, culture, and democracy in contemporary Brazil.

Like any interpretive selection, this study has limitations, especially regarding the selection of the events and cultural manifestations analyzed, as well as the impossibility of covering all the symbolic disputes under way. We stress that the selection of cultural manifestations presented here was not intended to be exhaustive, but illustrative of distinct forms of symbolic engagement with democracy: direct protest, historical reworking, and the memorialization of authoritarian experiences.

In view of the events that have marked Brazil since 2013, with the emergence of right-wing groups in the streets defending reactionary agendas and culminating in the attacks of January 8, 2023, we highlight the urgency of strengthening debates on democracy. The growing influence of Neo-Pentecostal evangelicals, who played a central role in the election of Jair Bolsonaro and gained prominence in the National Congress, shows how religious sectors can significantly affect the political sphere.

The attack on democratic institutions in 2023 placed Brazil on the map of democracies at risk, requiring a reorientation of both domestic and foreign policy. In this sense, Celso Lafer points to the Bolsonaro government's losses in the diplomatic field, marked by isolation and the deterioration of multilateral relations. In contrast, Lula's return to power rehabilitates Brazil on the international stage, with an agenda focused on the environment, the preservation of the Amazon, and the strengthening of multilateral institutions, aspects reinforced by his choice of Marina Silva as Minister of the Environment and by his speech at the UN.

Brazil, with its strong *soft power*, vibrant culture, and unique biodiversity, is rediscovering its leadership role on the global stage. More than a celebration, this reflects a nation seeking to reconnect with its democratic, social, and environmental values, reaffirming its identity before the world and itself. The events analyzed indicate that the struggle for democracy in Brazil is not limited to formal institutions but extends to the symbolic field, where narratives, images, and cultural performances operate as arenas of political legitimation.

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