

“Fake news” hysteria set to take center stage in Brazil’s October elections

By Miguel Andrade
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Under the pretext of guarding Brazil’s October presidential election against the impact of “fake news,” security agencies are seeking to amass vast repressive powers that will have a lasting impact upon decaying Brazilian democracy, regardless of the immediate electoral outcome. With such measures, the Brazilian bourgeoisie is preparing itself for the inevitable eruption of class struggle in reaction to the sharp turn to the right taken by Brazilian politics since the last election in 2014 and subsequent ouster of President Dilma Rousseff from the Workers Party (PT) on trumped-up charges of budget manipulation in 2016, in favor of her vice president, Michel Temer.

As in 2014, Brazil will elect, between October and November, the president, the governors of all 26 states and the autonomous capital, Brasília, as well as all of the state parliaments, the whole 513-strong Lower House of the Federal Congress and two-thirds of the 81-strong Senate.

The front-runner in the presidential polls is former PT President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, followed by the fascistic congressman and former army captain Jair Bolsonaro. A ruling by a Porto Alegre appeals court scheduled today on Lula’s conviction on corruption and money laundering charges, the first in a series, may ultimately decide the fate of his candidacy.

In anticipation of the election, top officials, including Defense Minister Raul Jungmann, several Supreme Court members, and the chiefs of the Federal Police (PF) and the intelligence agency, the ABIN, have made declarations affirming that the alleged threat of “fake news” justifies the use of a 1983 National Security Law that forbids “the spread of information that may cause panic or disorder.” This law, passed under the outgoing military dictatorship, was written to justify censorship and repression and, crucially, says nothing about supposedly threatening information being “fake.”

Brazil’s High Electoral Court (Superior Tribunal Eleitoral, TSE) is spearheading the current censorship plans. Its outgoing president, Supreme Court Justice Gilmar Mendes, in late December appointed a Consultant Commission made up by TSE members and representatives of the Defense and Science ministries, the Federal Police, the ABIN, the Safernet consulting firm and the Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV) think tank, Brazil’s main government and business school.

From the start, Mendes has firmly placed the “fake news” hysteria under a “national security” framework, telling the public broadcaster EBC on December 15 that “our laws are only valid in

Brazil, but we will have to act against websites hosted overseas.” With such concerns in mind, Mendes in October summoned Google and Facebook to Brazil to guarantee they would disclose the funding of political advertisements and comply with Brazilian justices’ orders to bring down content.

National security concerns were cited as the motivation for Defense Minister Jungmann declaring in October that the Army’s Electronic Warfare Command (CCOMGEX) could be involved in the operations. Additionally, it is highly significant that in his interview with EBC, Justice Mendes declared that one of the main worries during the elections would be the attempt by organized crime to elect officials, which would place the elections as one more arena in the “war on drugs,” a critical ideological pretext for the integration of Latin American armies into US imperialism’s regional aims.

The Consultant Commission’s stated goal is to research the actions of other governments against “fake news,” especially those of the United States, France and Germany. All of these countries are engaged in expanding imperialist interventions the world over and class war at home, in which “fake news” and “Russian interference” are treated as matters of national security and a justification for Orwellian spying and censorship.

According to the *Poder360* website, the Commission’s second meeting on January 15 heard from Safernet that no model would be available outside Brazil, since no specific law had yet been approved in any other country targeting “fake news.” The chief of the Federal Police Organized Crime Division (DICOR), Eugênio Ricas, declared a week earlier that if no new law were approved by Congress before the elections, the 1983 National Security Law would be applied.

While no new laws or specific measures have yet been unveiled to censor the Internet, the attitude of Brazil’s repressive apparatus makes clear that this will be hardly necessary, with the dictatorship-era National Security Law being embraced as a legitimate resource once again. Moreover, the Brazilian state has already called upon the vast censorship apparatus set up since April 2017 by Google, Facebook and Twitter to guarantee that “dangerous” information will be kept from the public. The Consultant Commission’s January 15 meeting also decided that Google and Facebook representatives would be invited to all of its following bimonthly meetings.

At the same time, efforts are already being unveiled to revoke Brazil’s law-enshrined net neutrality. Only a day after the US

Federal Communications Commission announcement of the end of the net neutrality in the US, Eduardo Levy, the head of Sinditelebrasil, the federation of national telecommunications companies, declared to *Globo.com* that Brazil's so-called "Internet Constitution" approved in 2014 guaranteeing net neutrality forced companies to "double efforts" to guarantee that different kinds of data traveled without priority, and that "the concept of net neutrality has to be rethought for 5G and the 'Internet of Things.'"

João Moreira, the president of the telecom lobby group comprised of some of Brazil's largest Internet providers, also declared to *Globo.com* on the same day that the 2014 law was "obsolete," with the Science Ministry's Telecommunications secretary adding to the same report that net neutrality guaranteed by the 2014 law doesn't take into account "technical needs" of the corporations, a declaration which reporter Helton Simões Gomes recognized as echoing the justification given by the FCC's president, Ajit Pai, for revoking net neutrality in the United States.

At the heart of these right-wing moves to censor the Internet are the unsubstantiated and repeatedly debunked claims that "fake news," and especially "Russian influence," have shaped the outcome of the 2016 US election, the 2017 French elections and the Brexit vote in the UK. These claims are being made by the security agencies and go unquestioned in the Brazilian media, from the right-wing to the nominal "left," all of which have since 2016 been acting as virtual extensions of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* on the "fake news" and "Russian interference" hoaxes, gaining them the confidence of the security apparatus.

This role has owed them the trust of security forces. A *Folha de S. Paulo* report from January 15 quotes the head of the Paraná State Police Cyber Crime Division as telling readers, "do not share fake news. It is very easy to identify what is fake news: Google it, and check if big papers have reported it," adding later, in an ominous call for the widest self-censorship: "don't share it, because politicians that feel offended have every right to make a formal request to come after these people." The same report makes clear the real target of the "fake news" hysteria by quoting an FGV professor claiming that he had found that "20 percent of social media traffic among those in favor of a general strike last April was produced by robots."

For its part, the Workers Party mouthpiece *CartaCapital* takes for granted the influence of "fake news" on the latest major political events. It introduced its own interview with DICOR chief Eugênio Ricas on January 17 stating: "with the ever-increasing spread of fake news on social media, electoral periods have become moments that favor the manipulation of public opinion. The American and French examples, in the 2016 and 2017 elections won by Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron, show the potential of the so-called fake news."

Last but not least, it must be said that the growing ranks of small, "fact-checking" oriented websites such as *Nexo*, *Agência Pública* and *Lupa*, a relatively new phenomenon in Brazilian politics that is chiefly inspired by American liberalism and the privileged petty-bourgeois milieu around the *New York Times*, as well as the so-called "news satire" television programs, have

increasingly fallen prey to the "fake news" and "Russian interference" hoax.

The political orientation of these initiatives made itself felt in the reports made by *Agência Pública* at the "3i Journalism Festival" held in Rio de Janeiro in early November, which gave a platform for Facebook and Google to voice their worries about assuring "authoritative content" and promote the collaboration of the fact-checking sites in flagging so-called low-quality content. By this they mean primarily oppositional views, especially regarding the war crimes of "democratic" American imperialism, which are excluded from public debate by the "authoritative" sources, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

In a revealing moment at the festival, a Guatemalan journalist asked Cláudia Gurfinkel, Facebook's "media partnership leader" for Latin America, why news feeds were being blocked for users in his country, dropping the access to some websites by 70 percent, to which she replied that "this wouldn't happen in other countries." On January 11, however, this was revealed to be a complete lie, as Facebook announced precisely the opposite, that it would extend the "Guatemalan experiment" worldwide.

It is irrelevant if Gurfinkel was consciously lying or misinformed: the whole framework of the festival was designed to promote Facebook and Google as champions of democracy, even as they collaborate intimately with every major government to impose censorship and the blacklisting of socialist and antiwar websites, chief among them the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Google is blocking the *World Socialist Web Site* from search results.

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