**[Far-right frolics](https://www.dawn.com/news/1731036/far-right-frolics)**

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THE Jan 1 inauguration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was an orderly affair, even though his predecessor wasn’t there to perform the customary task of handing over the presidential sash. Instead, Lula received it from a 33-year-old sanitary worker, representing the people of Brazil.

Jair Bolsonaro had fled to Florida a couple of days earlier, escaping anticipated le­­gal charges over aspects of his four-year mis­­rule. His diehard supporters, meanwhile, were encamped outside various military facilities, vainly hoping to provoke a coup that would transport their nation back a few decades to its infamous era of army rule.

The impetus behind the storming a week later of key institutions in the capital, Bra­silia — the houses of congress, the supreme court and the presidential palace — was much the same. The insurrectionists, organised on the same social media that serves as a reliable source of constant disinformation, had little idea what to do once they had breached the buildings, meeting little resistance from the local police. So they went on a destructive spree, slashing historic works of art, destroying furniture, and the like, until they were driven out by federal forces, including the military.

Hundreds of people have been arrested, and they are being described as terrorists — which might be something of an exaggeration. The mob’s violent behaviour was un­­w­­a­rranted, obnoxious and anti-democratic, but it isn’t particularly useful to categorise obno­xious idiocy as terrorism. That obviously does not apply to the Bolsonarista who tried to place a bomb on an airport bus in an effort to instigate coup-inspiring chaos, or to those who posted a video on Telegram advocating the murder of Lula supporters’ children.

Brazil and the US offer evidence of a troubling trend.

Bolsonaro — before being hospitalised in Florida after complaining of abdominal pains, amid calls for him to be deported from the US — and some of his more prominent allies criticised the insurrection after it had failed. It would be hard, though, to deny the fact that Bolsonaro’s insistence over the years that he could only be defeated in a rigged election has fed into the wrath of his delusional supporters.

He is reportedly seeking asylum for himself and his family in Italy, from whence his ancestors emigrated. But even the far-right regime in Rome has joined fellow European states, the US and most Latin American governments in unequivocally condemning the anti-democratic endeavours in Brasilia.

The absurdity of the fruitless uprising was inevitably compared to the Capitol Hill riot in Washington two years earlier, the fallout from which is still gripping US politics. It was reflected in the 15 rounds of voting it took the House of Representatives to elect a speaker last week, a phenomenon not witnessed in 100 years. It was considered an anomaly even in 1923, given that the previous kerfuffles had occurred in the mid-19th century, when slavery was still a live issue. The American Civil War followed soon afterwards.

Back then, the newly created Republican Party was a relatively progressive force and, despite all his flaws, Abraham Lincoln stands out as a formidable president. It was only in the 20th century that the GOP took a sharp turn to the right and the Democrats built up a reputation as the less reactionary half of the political duopoly, particularly through Franklin Roosevelt’s three-and-a-bit terms as president. And it’s only in the past few decades that the Republicans have shifted from the right of what was considered the mainstream to the abominable extreme.

Kevin McCarthy’s recent Republican predecessors channelled that trend, notably Newt Gingrich, John Boehner and Paul Ryan. But McCar­thy is nonetheless something of an an­­omaly in the sense that despite his Trum­p­ist predilections, he was considered in­­sufficie­n­tly extre­mist by almost 10 per cent of the Re­­publican caucus. And his concess­ions to the ultras in order to win their votes or their neutrality point to at least a short-term future in which the lunatics will effectively be in charge of the asylum.

There’s a rough patch ahead for Joe Biden, including the likelihood of government shutdowns. His old-fashioned negotiating skills won’t count for much in the current milieu, and it would probably be wise to declare right away that he won’t seek a second term. Which shouldn’t lead automatically to the candidacy of his vice-president, the predictably unimpressive Kamala Harris. There are formidable women of colour waiting in the wings who would be far more effective campaigners against Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis, or anyone else the Republicans might throw up.

There is no guarantee of success for Lula either, although he might be able to kick more goals than Biden. Ultimately, though, challenges to democratic institutions anywhere should prompt an assessment of their (sometimes enduring, not least in the case of the US) inadequacies. Else the challenges might trump the institutions. And we know what that led to in Europe (and, by proxy, globally) less than 100 years ago.

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