**Brazil nuts**

BY M A H I R A L I | 1/29/2020

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| JUST days before he arrived in New Delhi on a state visit, Brazil`s president Jair Bolsonaro declared on his weekly Facebook podc ast: `Indians are undoubtedly changing ... They are increasingly becoming human beings just like us.The insult was directed not at his forthcoming hosts but at indigenous Brazilians, which has been par for the course ever since the former army captain surfaced as a serious political contender. His bigotry is by no means restricted to the descendants of Brazil`s original inhabitants. Bolsonaro`s repertoire rangesacrossracism,misogyny,homophobia, climate change denial and an irresistible attraction to militaristic authoritarianism.This presumably made him a suitable choice for chief guest at India`s Republic Day extravaganza, although it isn`t hard to conjure up a rogues` gallery of alternative contenders, given the unusually generous sprinkling of fairly obnoxious individuals with autocratic ambitions in the international leadership ranks.Bolsonaro`s penchant for crudity is reminiscent of Rodrigo Duterte, but he wears with pride the tag `Trump of the Tropics`.Among his most troubling tendencies is shameless nostalgia for the brutal military regime that presided over Brazil`s misfortunes for 21 years from 1964. And perhaps what`s particularly tragic is that his worst characteristics were very much on public display when he was voted into of fice with a 55 per cent majority in October 2018.Like Donald Trump, he has thereaf ter consistently defied predictions that he would become more `presidential`. Back in 2016, he dedicated his vote for then president Dilma Rousseff`s impeachment to `the memory of colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra`, the head of an infamous military torture unit whose victims had included Rousseff. And last September, following criticism of police violence in Brazil by the UN high commissioner for human rights, former Chilean president Michelle Bachelet, Bolsonaro responded that `if Pinochet`s people had not defeated the left in `73 among them your f ather Chile would be a Cuba today`.Bachelet`s father was an air force general who opposed the military coup led by Augusto Pinochet against Salvador Allende`s government; he was imprisoned (like his wife and daughter), tortured, and died in jail of a heart attack.It`s not particularly surprising that Pinochet is idolised in Bolsonaro`s political milieu, and the admiration extends beyond the sheer viciousness of the regime to its pioneering experiments in neoliberal economics. A government-funded Brazilian research institute last week announced plans to hold a Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reaganweek, featuring lectures and exhibitions about the disastrous Anglo-American duo.Of course the Bolsonaro regime extends beyond the individual. The president`s sons are frequently in the news, with allegations of corruption and links to death squads swirling around the f amily. A few months ago, one of them, Eduardo touted as a possible ambassador to Washington, and who represents Steve Bannon`s organisation The Movement in the region held out the possibility of `a new AI-5`, a particularly egregious 1968 law whereby the army shut down freedom of expression and assembly.Among other luminaries in Bolsonaro`s ruling circle, his foreign minister describes climate change as a Marxist plot, his education minister tweets about his dog defecating on national newspapers, and his culture minister was obliged to resign this month af ter posting a video about a new award that borrowed its talking points about `heroic` and `national` art from a speech by Joseph Goebbels. `As someone said,` journalist Mauro Ventura recently said of the president`s appointees, `they seemto have been picked for their IQ: that`s to say their quotient of imbecility, inability, idiocy, incompetence, ineptitude or impiety.Academic Monica de Bolle says the choices point to the `totally nuts` nature of a `fundamentalist`regime.Among those choices is Justice Minister Sergio Moro,who was rewarded for, in his capacity as a prosecutor and judge, hounding former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva into prison on a highly dubious corruption charge. After ending his two terms as president with an 87pc approval rating, Lula was again the leading contender for the post in 2018.Disqualifying him made way for Bolsonaro.The long-running `car wash` anti-corruption inquiry nailed culprits across the political spectrum, but in mid-2019 evidence emerged that the investigation itself was corrupt, with Moro colluding in illegal behaviour. Last week, Glenn Greenwald, the Brazil-based journalist who broke the news, was accused of cybercrimes. The absurd charge prompted an immediate backlash both within Brazil and internationally. Even before that, Greenwald required round-theclock armed protection. Meanwhile, in responding to a far-right regime`s excesses, Brazilians would do well to borrow a few pages from the unfolding Indian playbook. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com  |