

Opinion [Outlook](#)

Brazil's 1964 coup casts a long shadow over Lula

The leader has come under fierce criticism for his failure to commemorate the dark period

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Demonstrators mark the 60th anniversary of Brazil's military coup at an unofficial gathering, after the date passed without any government remembrance event © Amanda Perobelli/Reuters

Michael Pooler YESTERDAY

A long shadow fell over Brazil's democracy 60 years ago this week, leaving a chill that is still felt today. On March 31 1964, a military coup d'état began which would overthrow leftist president João Goulart. It spawned a repressive dictatorship lasting 21 years, considered by many Brazilians to be the darkest chapter of the country's modern history.

Yet the date has passed without official remembrance events, reportedly on the orders of the current leftwing leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The reason, it seems, is to avoid tensions with the nation's armed forces, which have come under an uncomfortable spotlight lately.

Police investigators believe that senior military figures were involved in hatching a plot to overturn Lula's election victory in late 2022, with the goal of keeping in power his defeated far-right rival, Jair Bolsonaro. Although the plan was not executed, the revelations suggest a democratic rupture was close. Bolsonaro denies any wrongdoing.

Despite the present-day parallels, Lula has downplayed the anniversary of the 1964 putsch. "I'm not going to dwell on it, I'm going to move this country forward," he said in February. The leader's stance has dismayed some allies on the left, who wanted the

government to honour the victims of a regime that restricted freedoms and tortured, imprisoned and killed opponents. As a trade unionist, [Lula](#) was jailed for leading strikes during the period.

Since returning to office for a third term, the president has sought to improve relations with the armed forces, who were a pillar of support for Bolsonaro, a former army captain and admirer of the dictatorship. At a delicate moment for the military, the aim is not to cause them any further embarrassment, one government official tells me.

But some critics fear the state's lack of commemoration emboldens revisionist narratives. They draw a direct link between such apologism and January 8 2023 when, days after Lula's inauguration, radical [Bolsonaro supporters ransacked the Congress](#), Supreme Court and presidential palace. Claiming without evidence that the election was rigged, the rioters urged military intervention.

Defenders of the 1964 coup, which enjoyed backing from the media, middle class and business elites, call it a "revolution" that saved the country from communism. "The truth is that the military government brought Brazil to full development," read one circular on a Bolsonaroista WhatsApp group. "The great failure was allowing the agitators of the past to recover their [political](#) rights."

While the official toll of 434 killed and disappeared is much lower than under juntas in Argentina or Chile, human rights campaigners reject the idea that Brazil's was a "light" dictatorship. An estimated 20,000 people were tortured.

At a memorial gathering in São Paulo, one of many events held by activists, criticism of Lula is tempered by a recognition that his narrow election victory — with just 51 per cent of votes — means he must govern pragmatically.

Holding a sign that reads "Remember in order not to forget", 84-year-old Lucia Fabrini, who had friends that were tortured, imprisoned and killed during the dictatorship, says of the government's attitude: "There are things behind the scenes that we don't know about." She adds that it was "frustrating and disappointing nevertheless. The pain remains".

But historical comparisons only go so far. While the exact workings of the putative 2022 plot are still not fully clear, it seems to have stalled precisely because of a lack of support among top generals. In statements to investigators, the former army and air force commanders said they warned Bolsonaro against such a path. And the US, which approved of the 1964 coup, pushed through public and private channels for the

[electoral process to be respected.](#)

Ultimately, the handover of power to Lula last year demonstrated the Brazilian armed forces' commitment, as an institution at least, to the democratic order. But when fundamental disagreements over facts from almost a lifetime ago persist, it is hard to see how today's political polarisation in Brazilian society can be overcome.

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