



Congressional win for Bolsonaro

by Andrew Thompson

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What happened?

On 1 February, in what has been described as right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro’s biggest political success since winning the 2018 elections, two of his supporters were elected as speakers of the upper and lower houses of Congress.

The details

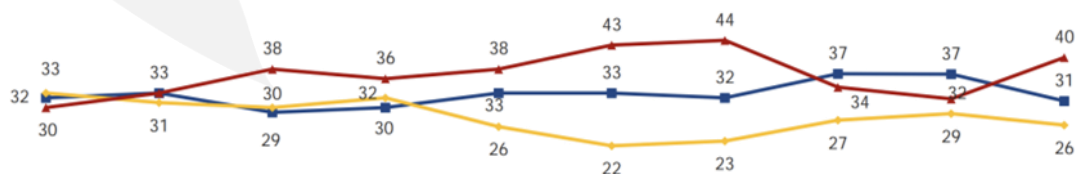
The victors are Arthur Lira, elected speaker of the Chamber of Deputies with 302 to 145 votes, and Rodrigo Pacheco, chosen to lead the Senate with a 57–21 majority. Members of the *centrão* (“Big Centre”), a coalition of small conservative parties, they have pledged to work with the president. Lira is particularly important since he acts as a ‘gatekeeper’ controlling whether any of over 50 requests to impeach Bolsonaro, based on a range of complaints including for alleged corruption and for mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, get a hearing in the lower house. On current form they are not going anywhere.

There are various reasons for thinking things are looking up for Bolsonaro. The vote was a defeat for his arch-enemy, former lower house speaker Rodrigo Maia, who sought to limit presidential power. It puts two allies in place for the last two years of his four-year term. It boosts his re-election ambitions. The government, and economy minister Paulo Guedes, should find it easier to get market-friendly tax and fiscal reforms, including much-promised privatisations, passed into law, which are thought to enable investment and economic recovery.

Avaliação do presidente Jair Bolsonaro

Resposta estimulada e única, em %

O presidente Jair Bolsonaro completou um ano e onze meses de governo. Na sua opinião o presidente Jair Bolsonaro está fazendo um governo ótimo, bom, regular, ruim ou péssimo?



President Jair Bolsonaro has completed one year and 11 months in office. In your opinion is his government doing an excellent, good, fair, bad, or terrible job? Blue= Excellent/good, Yellow = fair, Red = Bad/terrible. Source: [Datafolha](#)

But there are a few potentially significant elephant traps along the way. The *centrão* has been euphemistically described as “rent-seeking”, meaning it indulges in the pork-barrel style politics that for decades has been a key ingredient of the country’s multi-party system. It has been reported that to win over the *centrão* the president agreed to authorise US\$659mn worth of budgetary allocations to fund pet projects in the constituencies of its deputies and senators. Also promised were a range of first and second-level cabinet positions, to the extent that a government reshuffle is now expected.

This has two implications. Many people who voted for Bolsonaro because of his promises to “drain the swamp” will feel betrayed. Constantly shifting alliances within the Big Centre means its support may ebb and flow. Bolsonaro, a populist ideologue, has little patience for complex deal-making and could find his congressional base eroding again. There are other reasons the president’s triumph may be short-lived. His approval ratings peaked last year but following the cessation of generous coronavirus emergency payments in December he is now rapidly once more losing popularity. The president is in a bind, trying to balance the reintroduction of some kind of social support for the poor with the imperative of fiscal austerity to cut the deficit and reassure business and foreign investors.

What does it mean?

There is an argument that with new backing in Congress the government has won a six-month window of opportunity to counter the pandemic, introduce fiscal reforms and trigger economic recovery. But if it fails, Congress might again start thinking about those impeachment files.

About the Author

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As well as being a Canning House Associate Fellow, Andrew is a former foreign correspondent (Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro) and a broadcaster for the BBC’s Latin American Service. Working through La Rambla Research Ltd., he writes about economics, political risk, and business in Latin America.



These stories are also available on Andrew’s blog site, [La Rambla Research](#).