

Brazil in the V-Dem Democracy Report 2026: Reversal, Resilience, and the Limits of Democratic Recovery

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The **V-Dem Democracy Report 2026** both concerns us and, tautochronously, presents us with its severe diagnosis of the global state of democracy. In aggregate terms, the report demonstrates that the gains of the so-called “third wave of democratization” have been virtually reversed, with democracy returning, for the average global citizen, to levels equivalent to those of 1978. In this scenario, marked by the expansion of pockets of autocratization and the erosion of liberal institutions, Brazil surprisingly appears as one of the few countries classified as undergoing democratization in the contemporary context.

This labeling, however, requires a more qualified reading. The report identifies Brazil as a case of *U-turn democratization*, that is, a country which, after a recent period of autocratization, begins to show signs of reversing this trajectory. This is a specific analytical category, which does not correspond to the classical idea of democratic transition or institutional deepening. What is at stake is the recovery, at least partial, of previously existing institutional standards.

The terminological distinction implies an understanding that the current Brazilian trajectory should not be interpreted as democratic expansion, but as institutional recomposition following a cycle of intense deterioration. The core claim advanced here is that this recovery is partial and fragile: it restores institutional functioning without fully addressing the underlying drivers of autocratization. As such, the Brazilian trajectory should be read as a moment of suspension rather than consolidation.

The logic of reversal and its limits

The concept of a “U-turn”, mobilized by V-Dem, is based on the premise that contemporary autocratization often occurs in a gradual, incremental, and institutionally internalized manner. In such contexts, reversal takes shape as a gradual inflection in the course of institutional deterioration. The process unfolds through the recomposition of mechanisms of control and guarantees that had been progressively weakened, reactivating practices and balances characteristic of the functioning of liberal democracy.

In the Brazilian case, this translates into the recomposition of now-eroded foundational elements: the functioning of checks and balances, the containment of direct pressures on the press and civil society, and the preservation of the integrity of the electoral process. Although the report does not detail, in qualitative terms, each dimension of this recovery, the classification as a country undergoing democratization indicates a relative improvement in these indicators.

However, this recovery does not imply a return to the *status quo ante*. Processes of autocratization naturally leave institutional scars and practices that do not automatically dissipate with the reversal of the trend. Changes in the behavior of political actors, accumulated tensions among branches of government, and mobilization strategies based on contesting the rules of the game – all these elements tend to persist, albeit with varying intensity.

In this sense, the notion of democratic reversal could be enriched by a distinction between institutional recovery and institutional transformation. The former refers to the reactivation of previously existing arrangements, whereas the latter would imply deeper changes in the structures that enabled the prior deterioration. In the case under analysis, the emphasis appears to fall predominantly on recovery, which raises a relevant question: to what extent is the reversal observed by V-Dem sufficient to reduce the likelihood of new cycles of autocratization, or whether it merely restores conditions that remain structurally vulnerable.

Brazil in an adverse global environment

Brazil's position in the report must be analyzed in light of a global situation: autocratization has once again ceased to be a peripheral phenomenon and has come to characterize the predominant dynamic of the international system.

V-Dem identifies a “third wave of autocratization,” marked not only by an increase in the number of countries experiencing democratic regression, but also by the inclusion of traditionally stable democracies in this movement. The deterioration observed in core countries – most notably the United States – significantly alters the normative and political environment in which democracies operate.

The fact that Brazil appears among the few countries undergoing democratization acquires additional significance, as the Brazilian reversal occurs in opposition to a predominantly autocratizing trend.

This centrifugal condition entails two developments. First, the absence of a favorable international environment reduces external incentives for democratic consolidation. Unlike earlier periods, in which there was greater diffusion of pro-democratic norms and expectations, the current scenario is marked by greater tolerance for illiberal practices and by a pluralization of models of political organization. Second, this condition renders domestic processes more vulnerable. Without the support of an international order oriented toward the promotion of

democracy, regime stability depends more intensely on internal factors, which are, by nature, more unstable.

This dynamic also suggests that the analysis of the Brazilian trajectory cannot dispense with a relational dimension. Democratic reversal, in contexts of global regression, tends to be more costly and less stable precisely because it lacks mechanisms of normative diffusion and external reinforcement. This implies that the sustainability of democratization in Brazil will depend less on international alignments and more on the domestic capacity to rebuild minimal consensus around the rules of the democratic game.

Latin America and the fragmentation of democratic trajectories

The regional analysis reinforces the need for caution in interpreting the Brazilian case. The report indicates that Latin America is going through a period of fragmentation, in which national trajectories diverge significantly.

On the one hand, countries such as Brazil, Bolivia, and Guatemala are classified as undergoing democratization, often in the form of a reversal of autocratizing processes. On the other, there is a significant set of countries experiencing democratic deterioration, including Argentina, Mexico, Peru, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

This dispersion makes it difficult to identify regional patterns of democratic stability. Instead of an environment of mutual reinforcement among regimes, one observes the coexistence of distinct dynamics, some of which move toward the concentration of power and the erosion of institutional guarantees.

In this scenario of a devastated neighborhood, Brazil occupies an ambivalent position. On the one hand, it may function as a country of regional stabilization; on the other, it remains exposed to the same structural pressures that affect its

neighbors. These dynamics also reverberate domestically, shaping the conditions under which electoral processes unfold.

Elections, integrity, and delegitimization

Unlike in classical models of institutional rupture, contemporary **processes of autocratization** tend to preserve, at least formally, electoral institutions, while at the same time weakening the conditions that guarantee their effectiveness.

V-Dem observes that aspects such as freedom of expression, the autonomy of civil society, and the capacity to hold the Executive accountable are often the first to deteriorate, while elections remain relatively stable for a longer period. In the Brazilian case, the recent process of autocratization did not structurally compromise the integrity of elections. However, this does not mean the absence of risk.

Recent experience in Brazil shows that political disputes can easily shift to the level of contesting the legitimacy of the electoral process itself. The problem begins before – and continues after – the vote. It lies precisely in the willingness to accept the result when it is unfavorable. Therefore, the delegitimization of the electoral process does not depend on its material failure, but on the erosion of public trust in the rules that structure it. It is a cumulative phenomenon, fueled by discourses, practices, and strategies that strain the credibility of institutions.

The upcoming elections in Brazil, scheduled to take place in 2026, take place only a few years after the events of **January 8, 2023** – when supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro stormed and vandalized key federal institutions in Brasília, including the Congress, the Presidential Palace, and the Supreme Court –, which resulted in investigations and accountability for an attempted institutional rupture. Within this context, the possibility of an electoral return of actors directly associated with the previous political cycle gains prominence – among them Jair Bolsonaro and his familial and political circle – some of whom have openly

defended measures such as **amnesty** for those involved in the acts of rupture.

The presence of this type of agenda in the electoral debate reopens a sensitive question: not only who governs, but under what terms the limits that structure the regime itself are recognized – or relativized. What is at stake is no longer merely the outcome of the ballot, but the status of the institutional decisions that seek to frame recent episodes of crisis.

Exception, normalization, and institutional practice

Beyond formal indicators, there is a more diffuse dimension of democratic quality that deserves attention: the relationship between exception and normality in institutional functioning.

Processes of autocratization often involve the expansion of exceptional measures, justified by contexts of crisis, which come to be integrated into the ordinary repertoire of state action. The boundary between the exceptional and the regular thus becomes progressively less distinct.

Institutional responses to recent crises have involved recourse to instruments that operate at the margins of the ordinary constitutional framework. Among them, particular prominence is given to the so-called “**ex officio inquiries**” conducted within the scope of the Federal Supreme Court – investigations initiated by the Court itself, without a request from the Public Prosecutor, and aimed at addressing threats such as disinformation campaigns, attacks on judicial authorities, and coordinated efforts to undermine democratic institutions – especially the **Fake News Inquiry** and its respective developments, as well as a broader set of measures of a preventive and, at times, expansive nature in the control of conduct and speech.

These measures, activated in the name of protecting the democratic order in the

context of escalating anti-democratic mobilization – culminating in the January 8, 2023 attacks on federal institutions – have produced effects that go beyond the immediate containment of the crisis. They have expanded the repertoire of institutional action, displacing parameters regarding initiative, competence, and the scope of judicial decisions. What is thus observed is a silent, yet dangerous, reconfiguration of the system's operational limits.

The question that arises, prospectively, is whether this repertoire will be reabsorbed within the traditional limits of the rule of law or whether it will remain available as a political resource. This dimension is not easily captured by quantitative indices, but it is central to understanding democratic stability. Democracies are not defined solely by their formal rules, but by the practical internalization of their limits.

Final considerations

The classification of Brazil as a country undergoing democratization in the Democracy Report 2026 undoubtedly constitutes a relevant and hopeful finding. It indicates that the country was able to interrupt a recent process of institutional deterioration and to initiate a movement of recomposition of its democratic mechanisms.

However, this observation should not be interpreted as a trophy, or as a sign of consolidation.

The trajectory identified by V-Dem is, by definition, incomplete. Its outcomes remain contingent, dependent on the volatile interaction between institutions, political actors, and social dynamics. The Brazilian moment may be described as a state of transition – and uncertainty – in which democratic stabilization has not yet been fully secured.

From this perspective, the very classification of Brazil as a case of “U-turn

democratization” may be read not merely as a diagnosis, but as an analytical warning. It indicates that the country remains situated within an intermediate zone, in which mechanisms of democratic protection coexist with latent vulnerabilities. More than a point of arrival, it is a moment of suspension, in which future outcomes will depend on how institutions and political actors deal with the recent legacies of instability.

Ultimately, it may be said that Brazil finds itself at a challenging crossroads – between the reversal of a recent cycle of autocratization and the still-open possibility of consolidation or renewed regression.

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