



Declaration of the WATERLAT-GOBACIT Network

Inequality, injustice and defencelessness in Latin America and the Caribbean: on the need to develop alternatives in the face of a return of extreme authoritarianism in Brazil and the region

Since its origins, our International Network has a strong commitment with research, teaching and interventions related to those social processes that, broadly speaking, produce and reproduce inequalities, injustices, and defencelessness in human societies (<http://waterlat.org>). Our main research object, water politics and management in their multiple aspects, is both a “window” through which we have access to, and a result of, such processes. Therefore, our approach seeks to transcend the reductionisms that characterize the prevailing forms of research, teaching and intervention in relation to water, which assume that studies over water should be reduced to their techno-scientific or economic-mercantile aspects. These prevalent approaches pretend to be value-neutral, a position that is often used to justify the absence of a clear position over issues that are fundamental for the survival of civilized human societies. Our Network maintains a position of permanent alert about those social processes that produce and reproduce inequalities, injustices, and defencelessness in their various forms and, therefore, has publicly expressed its positions in relation to the socio-economic, political and cultural processes that threaten not just the region’s fragile democratic systems but also the very survival of many human groups and social sectors.

This is not an exaggeration. Historically, Latin America and the Caribbean has been the most unequal region on the planet, according to most indicators applied to measuring this social relationship, which we term inequality. Although since the early 21st Century some countries, particularly in South America, managed to substantially reduce their levels of extreme poverty, the levels of inequality persisted and, according to recent reports, since 2015 those advances have stalled, and, in some countries, there is a process of rapid reversal and loss of the gains achieved. This happens in a context whereby repressive and assassin violence on behalf of governments from the region associated with power groups, national and multinational private companies, and other actors, have reached levels that are intolerable in societies that pretend to be democratic and civilized. Some countries, like Honduras, are now sadly identified as the most dangerous places on the planet to defend life and nature, while others like Brazil, Colombia and Mexico are top of the rank in the global statistics of assassination of social leaders, many of whom are peasants, indigenous, Afrodescendants, or from other groups historically marginalized, who defend their territories and their waters against the advance of extractivist activities. These assassinations, overall, remain unpunished, and many are never even investigated. Other forms of violence against communities, legal-institutional, though often illegitimate violences, symbolic emotional, psychological violences, silent and silenced violences, have also historically operated as mechanisms for the production, reproduction and maintenance of structural inequalities in our societies. These are problems that our International Network has addressed regular and consistently over time (<http://waterlat.org/public-statements-2/>).

However, except for the civil-military dictatorships that razed our societies during the second half of the 20th Century, generally these violences and structural inequalities have been ignored, silenced, hidden, or negated, but rarely openly justified and much less included in electoral campaigns

supported by millions and by broad social sectors, particularly business sectors, broad sections of the judicial and police-repressive establishments, educated middle classes, including academics and university students, millions of people who self-define themselves as “Christian”, and also fractions of the working classes and marginalized sectors. Undoubtedly, this description corresponds to the experience of the electoral process currently experiencing Brazil, where almost 50 million voters, 46 percent of the valid vote, supported the extremist candidate Jair Bolsonaro in the first round that took place on 7 October 2018. Jair Bolsonaro openly justifies the crimes of the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985), regrets that the scale of the repression and assassination of political opponents was not higher during the dictatorship, justifies torture, the indiscriminate and generalized use of weapons, rape, promotes the deepening of class, gender, ethnic, sexual, and other forms of social discrimination, proposes to take Brazil out of the United Nations and of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and plans to close the Ministry of the Environment and to eliminate environmental regulations, among many other issues. The great electoral victory of the candidate, with the armour-clad provided by the threat of a military coup if the electoral result was in favour of the Workers Party candidate, Fernando Haddad, a victory explicitly or tacitly supported by the judicial-repressive and media apparatuses, by influential sectors of the intellectual and political establishments that so far had pretended to keep a liberal façade, by the “markets” that effusively celebrated the electoral result of the first round, and by millions of believers self-defined as “Christians”, who seem to ignore the basic tenets of their religious leader, who among other matters preached tolerance, care for the excluded and marginalized sectors of society, and who threw the “markets” of his time out of the temple, continues to arise surprise and all manners of feelings and reactions.

The emergence of Jair Bolsonaro as leader in one of the most important countries of the planet, because of its size, wealth and specific weight, reflects the normalization of a historical process grounded on the upscaled reproduction and deepening of structural inequality. It is unsurprising that, for example, the President of Chile, Sebastián Piñera, is praising in international forums the economic policies proposed by Jair Bolsonaro for Brazil, policies that are ultra-neoliberal and centred on massive privatizations. It is also unsurprising that what worries the government of Argentina are not the economic policies proposed by Jair Bolsonaro as such, but rather the potential economic impact that his threat to take Brazil out of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) could have on the country’s economy. Both the Chilean and the Argentinean governments have refused to take a public position about the radically antidemocratic character of Jair Bolsonaro’s political agenda. As a matter of fact, these governments, like many other governments in the region and internationally, tacitly, but many also explicitly, share the openly antidemocratic character of Jair Bolsonaro’s position, characterized by a profound disdain for human rights and for the principles of substantive democracy more generally. In Argentina, the government of President Mauricio Macri has showed a clear will to violate fundamental aspects of the Rule of Law, resorting to authoritarian practices such as the prosecution of political opponents and dissidents, the criminalization of social movements, including the disappearance and assassination of social leaders with participation of the security forces, the systematic attempt to discredit the country’s human rights organizations, and an elitist politics which is bringing economic devastation for the majority of the population. It is also unsurprising that leaders of the European extreme right, such as Italy’s Vice-president Matteo Salvini and the French Marine le Pen, President of Rassemblement National political party, previously known as the National Front, have warmly expressed their approval for the electoral victory of Jair Bolsonaro, whom they see as a promising crusader of extremism in Latin America. In fact, the possibility that Jair Bolsonaro’s extremist proposal could win in Brazil has probably the tacit or even implicit approval of many of the right-wing governments and allies in the region. But neither should be surprising the support given by the “markets”, whose headquarters are located, in most cases, in the territories of the world’s most

advanced democracies. The loud support of the “markets” to Jair Bolsonaro’s extremist project joins the complicit silence of governments, international institutions, and “liberal-democratic” intellectuals and politicians who, with few exceptions, have chosen to remain silent, or to speak softly, rather than clearly taking a position in defence of the struggle for substantive democracy, human rights, and the principles of inclusion, solidarity and equality. The relationship between these silences and the neo-colonial and neo-imperial projects currently under expansion in Latin America and the Caribbean must be examined. One of the clearest expressions of such processes is the re-subordination and disciplining (perhaps we should also say humiliation) of Brazil, after the failed attempt to make the country an autonomous economic and political power with global leadership. These processes of re-subordination, disciplining, and humiliation can also be identified in the attack against the processes and institutions of regional integration in Latin American and the Caribbean, an attack directed at reducing or even eliminating the increased levels of autonomy achieved by the region during the first two decades of this century. The analysis of the interconnections between these processes, as well as of their direction, dynamics, progress, and consequences for the region’s democratization processes and for the very survival of our societies, must be given top priority.

Therefore, and in connection with the approach, objectives and priorities that inform our International Network, once again we declare our strong fraternal support for Brazil’s democratic social forces, in all their expressions, in their struggle to defeat the threat presented by the authoritarian extremism of the presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro. We understand that this struggle necessarily includes the construction of alternatives, not only alternatives to right-wing extremism, but also to the privatist, mercantilist extremism that is often disguised as liberal-democratic. As already explained in previous statements, it is not a case for ignoring the mistakes made by progressive governments, including the experiences of public-private corruption that continue to be part and parcel of the region’s realities independently of who are the political actors occupying positions in the different governments. Overall, the struggle requires Political vision, in the highest sense of the term, to leave aside rivalries and egocentric attitudes, to concentrate on constructing an alliance that may defeat the powerful forces that promote the regression of Brazil and of the whole region.

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