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Beyond ordinary policy change: Authoritarian policy dismantling in Brazil

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Beyond ordinary policy change: Authoritarian policy dismantling in Brazil¹

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Abstract

From a normative perspective, policy change is seen as crucial to improving social conditions, reducing inequality, and promoting sustainability. However, what about change that implies the dismantling of previously successful policies? How can one differentiate between democratic policy change and policy dismantling? In order to shed light on these questions, this article analyzes changes occurred in Brazil since Jair Bolsonaro took office in January 2019. The paper addresses those changes from the perspective of the federal bureaucracy spread across different agencies and professional careers. The research design involved quantitative and qualitative data collected using the following methods: i) a survey with former and current federal employees; ii) semi-structured interviews with civil servants who have worked or are still working in the federal government. Research findings indicate that, in Brazil, policy dismantling is no ordinary policy change, as it has been marked by authoritarian dynamics that have disarranged the federal bureaucracy and eroded state capacity.

Key words

Policy dismantling; Brazil; Policy change; Comparative policy; Bureaucracy

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Introduction

During his first 100 days in office, Jair Bolsonaro issued an executive order that became famously known in Brazil as “*revogação*”, the massive cancellation of 250 executive orders that had been issued by his predecessors dating all the way back to 1901.² During the first 24 hours of his administration, Joe Biden similarly signed 15 new executive orders, many of those repealing past decisions and policies that had been enacted by Donald Trump. The two acts may seem comparable and, in fact, some may argue that they are the expected result of the democratic process. However, when one looks deep into the current Brazilian state apparatus, the level and nature of policy dismantling occurring at the Brazilian federal government set the country apart from ordinary, post-election policy change following the replacement of the political party in office.

From a normative perspective, policy change is seen as crucial to improving social conditions, reducing inequality, and promoting sustainability. The public policy literature on policy change is extensive and has provided policy scholars with multiple conceptual frameworks to understand the mechanics of the policy change process. Alongside that literature, Michael Bauer and colleagues have addressed a specific kind of policy change, which they have termed “policy dismantling”. It is defined as “the cutting, reduction, diminution, or even complete reduction of existing policies” (Bauer et al., 2012, p. v).

The distinction between ordinary policy change and policy dismantling may not be clear to some. Is policy dismantling simply policy change that usually comes after a new administration takes office and sets the course to undo the works of a predecessor? Is policy dismantling just some kind of undesirable policy change, therefore breaking with the supposed neutrality of the “theories of the policy process” (Sabatier & Weible, 2014)?

Based on the case of Brazil under Bolsonaro, this paper will unveil specific features that may set policy dismantling apart from ordinary policy change. In Brazil, policy dismantling has been marked by authoritarian dynamics that have disarranged the federal bureaucracy. The bureaucracy is not only an important part of the state administrative structure but also an autonomous body of actors in the policy process (Bauer, Peters and Pierre, 2021). With the bureaucracy in disarray, the consequences are to be found both in the dismantling of federal policies and in the erosion of policy capacity at the individual and institutional levels (Wu et al., 2018). Hence, this paper responds to the call made by Bauer, Peters and Pierre (2021) on the need for greater analysis of the relationship between populist backsliders and the public bureaucracy of their states.

The paper will ask the question: in Brazil, what has set policy dismantling apart from ordinary democratic policy change? Even though the answer to this question may be multifold, the research herein presented will take the reader into the inner workings and perspectives of the Brazilian federal bureaucracy, indicating that policy dismantling in Brazil has involved authoritarian elements, including contempt for career civil servants, fear, harassment, and an ensuing process of ‘bureaucratic reshuffling’, whereby bureaucrats were either removed from their original positions or resorted to exit in fear of persecution.

² http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2019-2022/2019/decreto/D9757.htm

This research helps expand the policy dismantling framework by identifying aspects that are particular to what will be termed authoritarian policy dismantling. Different from the subtle nature of dismantling by default that had been identified in the literature, illiberal populists rather adopt an upfront and deliberate attack on the resources and institutions that sustain public policies and, ultimately, the state.

This is a mixed-methods research project initiated in the Summer of 2019, six months after the inauguration of Jair Bolsonaro in the Brazilian presidency. Data collection covered the span of two years and involved a snow-ball survey with **337 former and current federal employees**, of whom **129 were part of semi-structured interviews** of 1 to 1.5 hours. Participants were asked about their personal trajectories and career decisions. They were not asked directly about policy dismantling. Reported data represents information that respondents volunteered to the interviewing research team. Interviews were coded and analyzed with the aid of the NVivo software.

1. Policy change, dismantling, and the bureaucracy

The assumption that policy change is always needed in developing countries has fallen apart in places where far-right governments have praised the dismantling of previously existing progressive policies. This phenomenon has not been exclusive to developing countries. It has ranged from immigration policy in the United States under Trump; to criminal and drug policy in the Philippines under Duterte; to environmental, social, human rights, and education policies in Brazil under Bolsonaro.

The policy dismantling literature took root much before illiberal populists became a notable trend in world politics. The collective work published Michael Bauer, Andrew Jordan, Christoffer Green-Pendersen, and Adrienne Héritier in 2012 originates in social policy dismantling processes that began prior to the 2008 financial crisis and were further magnified by it. Their collective work drew from Paul Pierson's idea of dismantling, published in the 1990s (Bauer et al., 2012). In that point in time, policy dismantling mostly referred to the extinction or reduction of policy instruments in a context of fiscal constraints. Pierson's own original work was dedicated to addressing the dismantling of the welfare state.

Bauer and colleagues understood that policy dismantling could provide a useful framework for dismantling processes outside of the social policy field. In their 2012 book, they included environmental policy besides social policy to test their proposed framework. They define policy dismantling as:

“a change of direct, indirect, hidden or symbolic nature that either diminishes the number of policies in a particular area, reduces the number of policy instruments used and/or lowers their intensity. It can involve changes to these core elements of policy and/or it can be achieved by manipulating the capacities to implement and supervise them³” (Bauer et al., 2012, p. 35).

³ Author's emphasis.

The definition encompasses an interesting and useful distinction between different types of policy dismantling strategies: active dismantling, dismantling by default, symbolic dismantling, and dismantling by arena shifting. Additionally, it includes the possibility that dismantling may be pursued by a manipulation of the capacities for policy implementation. All of these elements of the policy dismantling framework are not only useful but also applicable to policy dismantling processes underway in Bolsonaro's Brazil, as indicated below.

The framework, as it was originally developed, sought to resolve an apparent contradiction that seemed particularly puzzling: "why might rational, utility maximizing politicians whose ultimate goal is usually to ensure their own re-election, deliberately and consciously engage in something as potentially unpopular as policy dismantling?" (Bauer et al., 2012, p. 31). Such apparent contradiction, although reasonable in discussions of dismantling in contexts of fiscal constraints, might actually not be present in processes of policy dismantling occurring in recent examples of illiberal populism. Working around a narrative of the "deep state" (Abramson, 2017) or by accusing civil servants of being partisan, illiberal populists openly dismantle previously existing policies as a deliberate strategy to please their electoral bases.

The policy dismantling literature has recently expanded to incorporate analysis of policy change that, rather than deriving from fiscal and neoliberal cuts, instead emerges from the dictations of illiberal leaders. In a recent paper, Bauer, Peters and Pierre (2021) argue that populist backsliders "engage in molding the administration into new illiberal forms" (p. 2) by employing five strategies: transforming structure, redistributing resources, taming personnel, sowing illiberal norms, and dismantling accountability. The third strategy, which is particularly relevant for this research, is defined as the "ideological cleansing of staff" (p. 3). In an upcoming book, Bauer et al. (2021) make the argument that democratic backsliding should be understood not only from the perspective of the political or the judicial system, but also by considering how it affects public administration, which is ultimately responsible for implementing public policy.

Bauer & Becker (2020) look at various examples of how populist backsliders have dealt with public administration. They look at the examples of Hungary, Peru, the United States and Switzerland, where they identify the following takes on the public bureaucracy: capture, dismantling, sabotage, and reform. Their work includes a matrix that crosstabs the populist's view of the state (positive or negative) with the administrative order in the country (fragile or robust). When the populist holds a negative view of a state that carries a fragile administrative order, dismantling ensues. The authors find this to be the case of Peru under Fujimori. This article will present data indicating that this is also the case of Brazil under Bolsonaro, along the lines of what Sabourin et al. (2020) found in their study of family farming policies.

The conservative discourse built around public service portrays the bureaucracy as producing too little, earning too much, and being averse to change. It is no coincidence that, in the education literature, teachers and their unions are often identified as obstacles to education reform (Moe, 2016). However, public administration literature has identified that bureaucrats do have decision-making capacity (Lipsky, 2010) and can challenge the orders received from higher authorities if those are against their own personal principles, in an attitude that O'Leary (2014) called 'guerrilla government'. In that vein, Guedes-Neto & Peters (2021) take on the charge of empirically finding, by means of experimental methods, whether civil servants in Brazil would work, shirk or use sabotage (Brehm & Gates, 1999) when told to carry out undemocratic projects. Their research involved municipal civil servants in two state

capitals of Brazil and indicated that, when presented with hypothetical undemocratic projects, bureaucrats at the municipal level would mostly opt for shirking.

In a similar fashion, Morais de Sa e Silva (forthcoming) finds that South-South cooperation projects under the Bolsonaro administration were being dismantled at a slower pace than expected due to bureaucratic momentum. Bureaucrats at various agencies continued operating South-South cooperation projects despite the government's reversal of the previous pro-South foreign policy.

In this present work, an expanded understanding of Hirschman's organizational triad of exit, voice, and loyalty (Hirschman, 1970) will be used. In Hirschman's words:

"Some customers stop buying the firm's products or some members leave the organization: this is the *exit option*. As a result, revenues drop, membership declines, and management is impelled to search for ways and means to correct whatever fault has led to exit" (Hirschman, 1970, p. 4).

The inclusion of exit as a possibility of action may seem inconceivable when considering public employees who count on tenured positions. Nonetheless, there are various and sometimes subtle exit strategies that a civil servant may pursue: seeking transfer to a different department/unit within an institution/agency; seeking transfer to a different government agency or to a different town; taking temporary leave to pursue graduate studies; taking an unpaid leave; and, ultimately, abandoning civil service altogether. Common sense tends to think of public employees as individuals who work in the same place, at the same desk, for their entire lives. However, at least in the case of the Brazilian federal administration, federal careers allow for some degree of mobility (although some are recognizably more mobile than others).

Again, when looking at the dismantling of family farming policies in Brazil and Argentina, Sabourin et al. (2020) find what they call "bureaucratic adaptation" (p. 62). According to them, both the bureaucracy and civil society eventually settle and bow to policy dismantling processes. Even though that might be the outcome in the long run, this research has found that such apparent adaptation has involved some degree of invisible unacceptance by civil servants, who have resorted to exit as their individual strategy to escape dismantling in an authoritarian context. As argued by Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018), present-day autocratic regimes are no longer the result of coups or revolutions. Instead, they are built through the permeation of the very institutions that were meant to support the democratic system.

Within this framework, this paper adopts the following specific questions: How does the bureaucracy react to an administration marked by illiberal populism? Do their reactions, in turn, affect policy dismantling processes? How does the bureaucracy help us differentiate between ordinary policy change and policy dismantling? On the one hand, the bureaucracy may openly resist or act to reduce the extent of policy dismantling, along the lines of what Guedes-Neto & Peters (2021) found in their experimental study. On the other hand, the bureaucracy, out of fear, may move away from the positions and institutions where dismantling is happening, therefore indirectly opening the way for further policy dismantling by default. In the latter scenario, the state is left both with dismantled policies and reduced state capacity.

2. The bureaucracy under Bolsonaro

Brazil's federal administration has a professionalized civil service. Some institutions, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, count on a structured and well-established bureaucracy that has been selected through open public exams since the 1940s.⁴ Since the 1988 Constitution, public entrance exams have been required for the selection of all tenure-track federal workers. From then on, a number of new and specialized careers were created, such as the positions of Specialist in Public Policy and Management (*EPPGG*); Planning and Budget Analyst (*APO*); Foreign Trade Specialist (*ACE*); Infrastructure Analyst; and Technical Social Policy Analyst (*ATPS*), to mention a few. Data from IPEA (2021) shows significant growth in the creation of federal positions in the executive branch: from roughly 5 million in 1986 to a little over 10 million in 2018. Although the number of civil service positions indicates a large state apparatus, its cost at all levels (federal, state, and municipal) and across all branches (executive, legislative, and judiciary) increased by only 1 percentage point from 2004 to 2017—from 9.6% to 10.5% of the country's GDP.

When Bolsonaro took office on January 1st, 2019, he inherited a large, professional, and well-established federal machinery. The Brazilian federal state had been capable of enacting *Bolsa Familia*, the world's largest conditional cash transfer program, reaching 14 million poor families (Morais de Sá e Silva, 2017). Brazil also counts on a universal health system, SUS, which makes health care available free of charge to every Brazilian citizen, anywhere in the country, including ample immunization. Brazil also has a network of 69 federal universities, which offer free and high-quality undergraduate and graduate education. The roll of institutions and policies is quite substantial and although no one in Brazil would claim that they are perfect, many of those were successful enough to attract international attention and serve as the basis for experience-sharing with other countries of the Global South (Porto de Oliveira, 2019).

Different from the Peru example of dismantling provided by Bauer and Becker (2020), in which a populist's negative view of the state meets a weak administrative order, Bolsonaro met an administrative order that was strong and well-established. On the one hand, like Fujimori, he set the country on a course for neoliberal administrative reforms under the guidance of his Minister of the Economy, Paulo Guedes. But beyond pleasing the market, Bolsonaro also adopted an ideological agenda that collided with much of what the Brazilian state had been doing when it came to public policies: environmental protection, social inclusion, racial and gender equality, and science-based public health. Such route of collision produced authoritarian acts and processes, meant to frighten, intimidate, and alienate the bureaucracy.

The section below explains how federal employees who participated in this research explained their perceptions and career decisions. After the methods section, an analytical section introduces common patterns that have been identified, allowing for the depiction of the ongoing process of authoritarian policy dismantling in Brazil.

3. Data and methods

⁴ <http://www.institutorioabranco.itamaraty.gov.br/a-carreira-de-diplomata#:~:text=Em%20mar%C3%A7o%20de%201946%2C%20estabeleceu,para%20o%20acesso%20%C3%A0%20carreira.>

As part of a larger, multi-year research project, current and former federal employees participated in an online survey and in a 1-1.5 hour semi-structured interview conducted via Zoom.⁵ As indicated above, the survey counted on 337 respondents, of which 129 have been interviewed. Research participants were not part of a representative or purposive sample. The Brazilian government does not facilitate access to databases with contact information of the federal bureaucracy, therefore impeding the design of representative samples for research that is not developed by government research institutions. Consequently, this research project used a snow-ball sample based on the promotion of the survey via social media. The survey questionnaire was piloted during the Summer of 2019 with a small group of federal civil servants at Brazil's National School of Public Administration (ENAP). The initial questionnaire was also discussed with public policy professors and researchers based in Brazil. After adjustments were made, the survey was widely distributed.

Even though this was not a representative sample, there was significant diversity in terms of the federal careers and federal institutions represented in survey responses. The following tables give a sense of such representation. In both tables, there is a good number of respondents in the "other" category, which resulted in a long list of institutions and careers that respondents typed into the survey.

Among the 337 survey respondents, 240 are career civil servants. About half of those are concentrated in two federal careers: Specialist in Public Policy and Government Management (EPPG) and Technical Analyst of Social Policy (ATPS). The concentration of respondents in those two careers may help explain, as discussed later in the article, the recourse to exit, as both careers, especially the former, allow their members to move between federal institutions.

Table 1. Respondents' current and former work institutions⁶

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Center of Government (<i>Casa Civil</i>)	6.20%	37
2	Presidency's General Secretariat	3.69%	22
3	Ministry of Citizenship (formerly Ministry of Social Development)	10.22%	61
4	Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights	8.21%	49
5	Ministry of the Economy	12.06%	72
6	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	3.52%	21
7	Ministry of Education	11.89%	71
8	Ministry of Health	10.22%	61

⁵ Research approved on May 14th, 2019, under IRB number 10522.

⁶ One or more options could be selected.

10	Other	22.61%	135
11	Ministry of Justice	8.54%	51
12	Ministry of Science, Technology, Innovations, and Communication	2.85%	17
	Total	100%	597

Table 2. Respondents' federal careers⁷

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Specialist in Public Policy and Government Management	26.25%	63
2	Attorney General's Office	1.25%	3
3	Diplomat	6.67%	16
4	Consular official	0.00%	0
5	Technical Analyst of Social Policy	28.33%	68
6	Planning and Budget Analyst	2.08%	5
7	Foreign Commerce Analyst	0.42%	1
8	Finance and Accounting Analyst	3.75%	9
9	Other	28.75%	69
10	Public Defender's Office	0.00%	0
11	Career in the Judiciary	1.67%	4
12	Career in the Legislature	0.83%	2
	Total	100%	240

Survey respondents were asked to provide their email address if they agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interview. Interviews were conducted during the Spring of 2021, therefore over two years after Bolsonaro had taken office. The interviews were particularly telling for the purpose of the research questions raised in this paper. Various interviewees, particularly those still in the federal government, had to be provided with several reassurances that their identities would not be revealed. This led the research team to take several precautions to erase identifiable information in all data sources. Some interviewees would open up only at the end of the interview and after the structured questions had been asked, only then disclosing their perceptions and revealing current challenges.

⁷ Respondents who had worked in the federal government only as political appointees were not asked this question.

Unfortunately, it was not uncommon for interviewees to become emotional throughout the interview process, either in talking about the current situation or in reflecting upon their work experiences. This situation prompted the research team to add a new question at the end of the interview questionnaire, asking participants to think of the future and to choose a project they would like to pursue. This strategy was sought in order to end the interview on a positive and hopeful note, therefore minimizing the negative psychological effect the interview process was observably having on participants.

Interviews were analyzed using the NVivo software, which allows for coding and text queries. It is important to highlight that the terms used in the text queries and coding process were not the direct subject of specific interview questions. Instead, coded themes were spontaneously volunteered by respondents. The coding process in turn generated new codes related to career decisions and interviewees' perceptions, following a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Even though not all interviews have been transcribed yet, interview notes taken by the interviewers were used in the analysis when the full transcription was not available. Direct quotes reported in the paper are from the 41 transcribed interviews. Quotes have been translated by the author from Portuguese to English.

4. Analysis: authoritarian policy dismantling

Elite Squad is one of the Brazilian movies that made it to international movie theaters in the late 2000s. It presents the story of Captain Nascimento, the leader of an elite squad in Rio de Janeiro, tasked with combating crime at any cost. In an infamous line and scene, Nascimento violently grabs a new recruitee who is not being able to handle the training and says: "ask me to quit, ask me to quit" (*pede pra sair*). The scene portrays the actor Wagner Moura grabbing the recruitee by his collar, shouting, and slapping him on the face multiple times. In Brazil, the scene has become a meme for any situation in which someone is forced to opt out. In theory, it is the individual's choice. In practice, it was coercion and violence that forced him/her to leave. Violent trainings at military and police academies are one of the many enduring legacies of Brazil's many years of military dictatorship (1964 – 1985).

As the data indicates below, the mechanics of policy dismantling occurring in Brazil has involved the dismantling of the bureaucracy, as many individuals have reported situations that, directly or indirectly, materialized in their own "*pede pra sair*".

4.1. Exit and invisibility

When President Rousseff was impeached in 2016 and replaced by her Vice-President Michel Temer, it was common to hear among the federal bureaucracy that they would resist policy dismantling⁸. In fact some did, possibly with the help of a broader political context that limited Temer's reach. Having become President under questionable circumstances, Temer focused his 2.5 years in government on two main agendas: Labor Reform and Pension Reform. He succeeded in the former and failed in the latter. Everything else was not central to Temer's commitment to the economic powers that rose him to office. The bureaucracy could, in some

⁸ Participant observation.

sectors, continue policy as usual. In human rights, for instance, Temer appointed a highly respected scholar, Flavia Piovesan. She was able, among other achievements, to raise the institutional status of the department of LGBTQ rights at the Ministry of Human Rights. In foreign policy, Temer sustained his predecessor's foreign policy stances, committed to join the OECD, and even sustained previous levels of South-South cooperation projects (Marcondes & Mawdsley, 2017), as a result of what I have called 'bureaucratic momentum' (Morais de Sa e Silva, forthcoming).

After the impeachment process, which many have called a coup, various federal employees decided to either leave the federal service or to move to a different institution. The reason given by some was that they were not willing to collaborate with what they perceived to be an illegitimate government. Others conversely decided to remain in their positions in order to make sure they would provide continuity to the policies they were working with. As the data below indicates, only 29% of all respondents remained in the same positions and institutions between the impeachment process in 2016 and the 2018 elections.

Table 3. Career decisions between the 2016 impeachment and the 2018 elections⁹

#	Answer	%	Count
1	I remained in the same position and institution	29.04%	106
2	I had my position terminated	7.67%	28
3	I asked to have my position terminated	10.68%	39
4	I changed teams but remained in the same institution	16.44%	60
5	I moved to another institution	16.99%	62
6	I took a leave to study	7.67%	28
7	Other	11.51%	42
	Total	100%	365

This was the beginning of a process of 'bureaucratic reshuffling', in which the bureaucracy is either purposively moved around or bureaucrats opt to leave their positions. The following quote reflects how this is not simply the result of individual choices and preferences, but also reflects a collective process, a shared perception of how the political context has become dangerous or inappropriate for work.

"Several of our colleagues at the Ministry of A¹⁰ did what they could to move a lot of people, right after the [2016] coup, because they knew those people would be

⁹ Respondents were allowed to choose more than one option.

¹⁰ All identifiable information has been removed, including the names of institutions and public policies.

persecuted. Many of us threw those ‘life saver floats’ to rescue people” (interview 04).

The feeling of discomfort and uneasiness that led many to leave their original positions after the 2016 impeachment was expressed by several respondents as reproduced below. The quotes point to an interesting combination of two elements, which also appear connected in processes occurring in the Bolsonaro administration: many of those who seek to leave their original positions and institutions look for new places where they can do invisible work, which is thought to grant them some degree of protection.

“I suffered a lot of persecution at that time and I got really upset. They offered me a political appointment at the Ministry of A. I did not want that position. I wanted to be left alone. I do not want to step foot at B, I do not want to monitor any policy anymore” (interview 104).

“[I moved to a place where] I basically worked with human resources issues that would come up, decisions on the training of civil servants, you know? Very bureaucratic and administrative issues, you know?” (interview 9).

As the table below indicates, the reshuffling continued in the Bolsonaro administration, with only 30.97% of respondents reporting to have remained in the same position and institution since the 2018 elections. Exit took many forms: for some it meant moving to a different department, as some careers restrict movement to other institutions. For others exit took the form of a temporary leave to study. Others took more drastic measures and asked to be transferred to a different agency or to a different city. There were also a few extreme cases of individuals asking for unpaid leave to work outside of the public sector or in a different country.

Table 4. Career decisions after the 2018 elections¹¹

#	Answer	%	Count
1	I remained in the same position and institution	30.97%	105
2	I had my position terminated	7.08%	24
3	I asked to have my position terminated	8.85%	30
4	I changed teams but remained in the same institution	13.57%	46
5	I moved to another institution	15.04%	51
6	I took a leave to study	8.55%	29

¹¹ Respondents were allowed to choose more than one option.

7	Other	15.93%	54
	Total	100%	339

The ideas of exit and invisibility are now also strongly related to survival:

“All civil servants [of my former department] left and went to other departments. I negotiated my transfer to another area, which did not work with a topic of my personal interest, but that is what was possible at that time. (...) You keep trying to find a place where it is possible to survive, right? This is the feeling that I have. (...) So I think my decision to move had to do with that: a search for a place where it is possible to work with some sense of dignity, that is the bottom line” (interview 8).

“The simple fact of not being in Brasilia allows me to work in peace. So I am not under all the pressure, but I think those who are in Brasilia and who work with human rights policies are suffering much more, because they are tied and they cannot work” (interview 21).

“Among colleagues of my time there, everyone has left. Everyone has left. Of my former team, only one stayed [in the agency], but he changed programs and went to work with policy A. He left the B program and ran away to the A program. He says: ‘here I am quiet’. So he is a bit distant. My other colleague ran away to the Institute C, another one went to Institute D. So everyone is now scattered around different agencies. But everyone is quiet. Everyone is quiet and doing their countdown to retire, quiet. Nobody says anything” (interview 30).

Various respondents justified their decisions to exit on the basis of dismantling processes that they saw occurring in their agencies and which they could not stand to bear witness. Interestingly and unfortunately, it created a vicious cycle in which policy dismantling led the bureaucracy to exit, therefore creating conditions for more dismantling.

“After a year of organizing activities for the Conference on E, I realized that I had to leave Ministry E, because I was not standing the dismantling of various things we had built in previous years. There was something very depressive happening there” (interview 14).

“I left the execution, the implementation of public policies, right? In the past, I worked with conceiving, designing F policies. Nowadays I do not see room for that, it is not viable. Someone like myself is out, is not allowed into the Ministry F. (...) It is another kind of approach. So now I do G, which is a backstage kind of work, a field that does not make things happen immediately. It is work in the

backstage, taking notes, building memory of the reversals that are happening” (interviewee 16).

“In a context in which the agendas for which I used to work are being weakened, the decision to leave [the government and the country] was an easy decision. (...) Nowadays, to return to Brazil is not an option. To return to the government is not an option” (interview 23).

Besides seeking invisibility and trying to escape contexts of dismantling, research participants also expressed the perception that the Bolsonaro government nurtures mistrust and contempt for civil servants. The following section is based on those expressed perceptions and on reported cases of mass removals of civil servants and of institutional dismantling that eventually led to decision-making paralysis.

4.2. Mass removal, institutional dismantling, and paralysis

When a democratic pluralist leader takes office, changes in high cabinet positions are natural and expected. Changes in mid-level positions may also occur and some institutional reforms may be undertaken in order to realize the vision of the elected leadership. In the case of Bolsonaro’s Brazil, that vision did not include appreciation for the federal civil bureaucracy, which was considered “leftist”, “communist” or “petista” (supportive of PT, the Workers Party). Bolsonaro promised to “*despetizar*” the federal government, which meant that he would get rid of those in the government he thought to be Workers Party affiliates. As a matter of fact, during a 2018 campaign rally, Bolsonaro promised to shoot all PT supporters.

On his third day in office, 3,500 people were dismissed of their federal appointments (Batista, 2019). For those who were not civil servants, this meant having to leave the government. For civil servants, the termination of their appointments meant that they were no longer in senior positions. Note that, by the time Bolsonaro took office in 2019, it had been two and a half years since the PT government had ended and a lot of bureaucratic reshuffling had already occurred, as indicated above.

Also on January 3rd, 2019, Onyx Lorenzoni, who had just taken office as Minister of the Center of Government (Casa Civil), tweeted: “We will fire all political appointments working at Casa Civil. We have to have people who are committed to what we represent”¹². The mass lay-offs on the third day of the administration were symptomatic of the assumption that no one previously working at the federal government might be possibly committed to ‘what the new administration represented’.

On the same day, the Presidency’s official tweeter account (@planalto) tagged Lorenzoni and announced: “We will review issues related to [participatory] Councils. On the executive order, *Conselhão* [Economic and Social Development Council] has already been extinguished. We will do a detailed review (*pente fino*) of all the councils within federal administration”. In Brazilian Portuguese, the image of “*pente fino*”, a thin comb, signifies a strict process of scrutiny meant to detect parasites.

¹² Author’s translation.

This massive removal process, along with abrupt changes in ministerial structures, left numerous policies in a limbo, as recounted by an interviewee:

“I worked in this sector until the beginning of 2019. Precisely until January 2019, when Secretariat H was extinguished. The General Coordination where I worked from 2006 to 2016 and, in fact, the whole Department were extinguished at that time. There have been no policies for H at the Ministry of I since then. The entire department for J policies was also extinguished. Those policies were in a limbo for a long time, for the entire year of 2019. They were in a limbo! They formally still existed, but in practice there was no specific sector responsible for them” (interview 47).

The removal process did not stop in the early months of the Bolsonaro government. As explained by an interviewee, every new appointment goes through a ‘background check’ at the presidency, which is now meant to verify not only if an individual is a PT supporter, but also if he/she had a political appointment during any of the previous governments. Interviewees expressed perceptions of an environment of generalized mistrust and contempt for civil servants.

“My view, which proved to be wrong, was that the Bolsonaro government would slam the door and chop off heads right away. This did not happen, my forecast was wrong. In fact, they did the opposite, they slowly controlled the state machinery, it was a gradual and slow process which resulted in the fact that, nowadays, I do not have a single colleague who occupies a political appointment position in this government. They were removed, one by one, from where they were, because of the positions they had occupied in previous governments. (...) There are military officers at the Cabinet for Institutional Security (GSI) who investigate people’s social network accounts. If anyone says anything that seems left-leaning, they do not approve their appointments” (interview 04).

“There was some nasty political persecution at the Ministry of I, of civil servants who were ostracized because they were thought to be linked to political parties. All these changes happened because all civil servants were seen with distrust. I had to earn the trust of those who arrived, to convince them I wanted to do a good job and that I was not there to sabotage what was being done” (interview 47).

The rationale for new appointments has not been technical or less political, despite the President’s claims about him representing a new era in the federal government.

“In fact, there was much dismantling there [the Institute for K] during the Bolsonaro administration. I should not say there was, because it is still occurring. They started replacing superintendents that had been very important, people with 30, 40 years of dedication to policy K, high-level individuals. They have been replaced by movie-makers, friends of members of Congress, etc. Various directors

have been fired in recent months (...) It is widespread and objective dismantling and it is not just my opinion, people are being replaced by anyone, you see? At all levels. (...) It is a kind of change without any project, that is what bothers me the most. If you have a project that indeed won the elections and you have control of the situation, that is normal, there is no problem. This is politics, let's discuss it. But no, there is no project, the project is to dismantle what has been done and this is very evident in what has been happening at Institute K" (interviewee 35).

The idea of purposeful destruction of the state is present in other interviews, along with decision-making paralysis.

"I think there is an explicit project to destruct the state, which is compatible with the authoritarian State that is intended. (...) In some fields, the laws are not being formally struck down, but there is an internal destruction of processes that, in turn, is destroying rights in a way that we do not know how to reverse" (interview 41).

"We see a lot of paralysis. The Minister is a church pastor. A pastor who had no past career in the field of I. He was supposedly linked to a University, but he was just a professor there, he was not part of the University's administration. He was a church pastor. (...) So it is a policy of dismantling, of not doing anything" (interview 58).

The cabinet composition of the Bolsonaro administration has been marked by highly controversial figures who represent his extreme-right ideological stances both on social media and in their official duties. Among those were/are:

- Ricardo Salles, Minister of the Environment, who has suggested that the government should take advantage of the pandemic to pass environmental deregulation;
- Damares Alves, Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights, who defends that girls should wear pink and boys should wear blue;
- Abraham Weintraub, former Minister of Education, who cut funding to all federal universities in reprisal for critiques to the Bolsonaro administration;
- Ernesto Araújo, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, who subscribes to the theory of 'globalism' and sees a global plot to destruct the Christian world;
- Felipe G Martins, International Relations Special Advisor to the President, who was caught on live video making a white supremacy hand gesture;
- Paulo Guedes, Minister of the Economy, who alluded to civil servants as being 'the enemy' in a cabinet meeting in April 2019.

With time, some of the controversial ministers were replaced by either more moderate and unknown figures or by military officers. Nozaki (2021, p. 10) notes the substantial increase in the number of military officers occupying political appointments in the Bolsonaro government, from 2,765 in the last year of the Temer administration to 6,157 in 2020 under Bolsonaro. At the time

of the study, there were ten military Ministers. Nozaki (2021) calls it “the militarization of public administration in Brazil” .

4.3. Intimidation and fear

The table below represents the frequency of some terms when interviewees were asked about their current careers paths. The numbers are illustrative of how present some issues have been in the experience of some civil servants, such as dismantling, fear, persecution, suffering, leaves of absence and firings (“*exonerações*”).

Table 5. Text queries of interviews

Codes	Transcribed interviews (41)		All interview notes (129)	
	Number of times term is used in interviews	Number of interviews in which term is mentioned	Number of times term is used in interviews	Number of interviews in which term is mentioned
Authoritarian	3	3	12	12
Destruction	13	7	13	8
Discomfort	3	2	5	5
Dismantling	39	13	44	25
Fear	49	19	70	41
Harassment	20	8	26	14
Leave of absence	77	21	94	50
PAD (disciplinary inquiry)	3	2	11	7
Persecute/persecution	34	33	50	39
To embarrass -	12	9	11	6
To fire	41	12	58	28
To suffer	39	17	50	31
Tough_Heavy (<i>pesado</i>)	17	10	16	10
Worry	10	5	12	8

Fear and worry are common elements in many interviews. They are expressed either as a direct consequence of an experience lived by the research participant or as a reflection of cases of persecution and intimidation experienced by colleagues. In general, there seems to be an overall institutional climate of worry, retraction, and self-censorship.

“Currently, there is a process of curtailing our individual freedom to express as civil servants; there are various agencies in which people are being persecuted for any kind of public statement in opposition to the government. I remember, for instance, that I used to go to street demonstrations, I had my opinions, and I expressed myself on social media, in protests, etc. Nowadays, I do not say anything anymore, because I feel there is monitoring of what we say in private forums. And there is real risk, political persecution is the least that may happen” (interview 7).

“Today I was shocked by the news that professors at the Federal University of Pelotas will be administratively prosecuted because they criticized the President. It is shocking that we are taking this route” (interview 13).

“They tried to end policy L. (...) There are groups who are against L books, so I am still working in a landmine. So I started doing work that is more technical and (...). We know there is a political background, so more and more I cannot express myself and I have less influence on what is decided, even though I have been working as an advisor. I do not have any freedom and I need to be careful all the time, with what I say, with how I say it, everything.” (interview 47).

“Things were bad during the Temer administration but nothing compared to Bolsonaro. The ability to make things worse seems endless! Now everything is very fragile. (...) The difference is that now we are afraid. Before we were afraid in relation to our career: ‘well, maybe I will lose my senior position (DAS), maybe I will be stigmatized’ (...). But now we are afraid of being really persecuted. I made a presentation about a proposal that existed to amend the Constitution. The person who invited me to make the presentation later called me and said: ‘I was worried about you, because you are very critical to the current fiscal rules’. To which I replied: “Look, of course we are all afraid, but we also have courage” (interview 51).

The testimonies given by several participants, as reflected in the quotes above, coincide with the high number of cases of harassment reported by ARCA, the National Association of Public Careers for Development. Up to 22 July 2021, 867 cases of harassment in the Bolsonaro administration had been reported by federal civil servants to ARCA’s online platform.¹³

This oppressive setting and the way it pushes civil servants to exit their positions, to censor their own ideas and to make their professional work invisible, constitute a

¹³ See <http://arcadesenvolvimento.org/assediometro/>

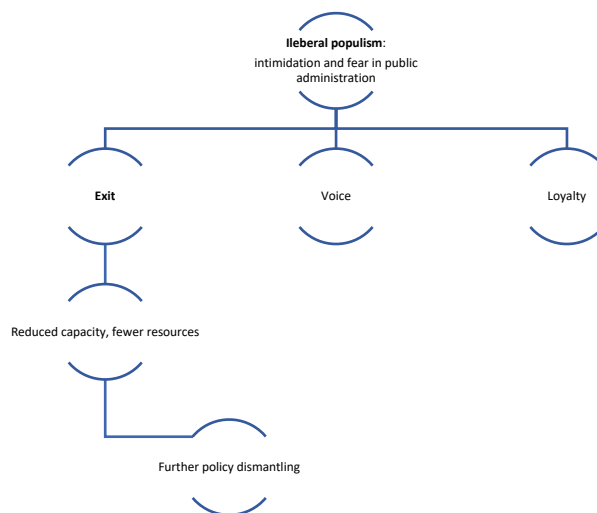
process of no ordinary policy change, but rather of policy dismantling that assumes authoritarian features.

4.4. Bureaucratic reshuffling and policy dismantling

As a result of some of the processes described above, many federal bureaucrats are no longer working in their places of expertise. Instead, they have escaped to agencies where they have less exposure and greater protection. Some institutions, by the nature of their mission, are recognized as technical rather than political and have served as important harbors for bureaucrats fleeing potential persecution. Some became popular destinations¹⁴ for those in careers of greater mobility, such as EPPGGs. For diplomats, demand for positions away from Brasilia hit high levels and, for the first time, even so-called C and D posts were in high demand.

As bureaucrats are either actively reshuffled or as they “voluntarily” choose to exit, the conditions for policy dismantling become more acute. As recounted earlier by interviewee 47 at the Ministry of Education, eventually there is no one left to maintain a public policy. There is no one with the knowledge and the institutional memory of how the policy works, what the instruments are, or who the stakeholders are. Everything is lost, as there is barely anyone left to operate the policy. This process, as represented below, further feeds into greater policy dismantling.

Figure 1 – Authoritarian policy dismantling



This is not to say that voice or shirking and sabotage do not happen. In fact, some research participants did tell us of examples of ‘resistance’, the most common being the stalling of administrative processes in the hopes that, with time, there would be leadership turnover or the issue would fall out of the agenda. There were also examples of bureaucrats who took they

¹⁴ In order to protect research participants and given the overall climate of fear, the names of those institutions will not be listed in this paper.

resistance outside of the state and became engaged in government opposition outside of their work time and official duties. But even in those cases, fear was present in participants' accounts.

5. Concluding remarks

This research sought to contribute to the literature on policy dismantling in contexts of illiberal populism. In the case of Brazil during the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, policy dismantling is not simply an expected form of policy change that results from the democratic process. Instead, Brazil presents a kind of authoritarian policy dismantling, in which federal workers are subject to an overall process of intimidation and fear, of institutional dismantling, and of decision-making paralysis. A good number of them respond by opting to exit their positions, their agencies, the federal government, and even the country. Without experienced civil servants, especially those who had spent time working with the implementation of needed policies, further policy dismantling occurs.

It is hoped that the paper will add to the experimental findings presented by Guedes-Neto & Peters (2021). If, on the one hand, civil servants are inclined to shirk from undemocratic projects, when put under authoritarian pressure they may be less able or willing to do so. There may be less shirking and sabotage when the bureaucracy is too afraid or when exit, in its various forms, is an available option.

The paper also supplements the findings of (Sabourin et al., 2020), indicating that bureaucratic adaptation may be restricted either to the minority who were left behind by their colleagues or to the new-comers who are being initiated into a new policy field and therefore do not have a clear sense of the dismantling occurring.

In Brazil's 2021 federal government, senior political positions are relatively low-paying jobs if compared to the private sector and considering Brasilia's high cost of living. In this scenario, the easiest option would be to appoint civil servants, who already receive a base salary. But as Bolsonaro and his ministers do not trust the established bureaucracy, how are the senior positions filled? Mostly with the military and the evangelical church. What about the bureaucracy? The bureaucracy will remain being reshuffled and asking the new Captain to quit.

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Contribuição dos autores

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Declaração de conflito de interesse

A autora declara que não há conflito de interesse com o presente artigo.

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