

Why Evangelicals Believe This Politician Is an Answer to Prayers

On a visit to Israel two years ago, far-right Brazilian lawmaker Jair Bolsonaro leaned back into the River Jordan in a white robe to be baptized in the arms of a fellow congressman and evangelical pastor.

While still an avowed Catholic, Bolsonaro is riding a wave of support from Brazil's evangelical Christians, who have helped make him the presidential front-runner heading into the first round of voting slated for Oct. 7.

Evangelicals account for one of every four voters in the world's largest Catholic country and more than 20 percent of its federal lawmakers. Many have been captivated by Bolsonaro's eager embrace of the culture wars and his strident anti-gay rhetoric. In a 2011 interview with *Playboy Brazil*, for example, the father of five said he would not be able to love a gay son. "I would rather that my son died," he said.

These voters now want the former Army captain to lead a conservative counter-attack against the progressive agenda of the leftist Workers Party (PT), which led Brazil for most of the past 15 years.

These supporters view Bolsonaro's election as critical to ending recognition by Brazil's courts of same-sex civil unions and to stopping momentum towards gay marriage.

They also want to halt legislative efforts to legalize abortion, drugs, gambling and stem-cell research. And they aim to block any attempts to penalize discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Above all, they want to see education on LGBT rights removed from public schools.

"The left went too far," said Bishop Robson Rodovalho, founder of the Brasilia-based Sara Nossa Terra church, which has 1.6 million followers. "Indoctrinating school children on sex revolted many parents. Today we are seeing a boiling over of reaction."

Like many other evangelical leaders, he is calling on his followers to back Bolsonaro, whose middle name is Messias, Portuguese for "Messiah."

Bolsonaro's campaign managers say those votes will be decisive in securing victory. They have met with religious leaders throughout the country to hear their vision for Brazil. Bolsonaro regularly attends prayer sessions held by evangelical pastors in their congressional offices in Brasilia. And the thrice-married candidate accompanies his evangelical wife to church on Sundays, aides said.

Evangelical volunteers have responded by distributing campaign flyers outside churches and talking up Bolsonaro to friends and neighbors. Such grassroots organizing is critical to Bolsonaro's low-budget campaign; he has no major political party behind him and very little ad time on radio and television.

Still, he draws nearly five times the support from evangelical voters as does environmentalist Marina Silva, the only evangelical politician among major candidates. Recent surveys by Brazilian polling firms Ibope and Datafolha said 36 percent of evangelical voters will cast their ballot for Bolsonaro next month, and only 7 percent or 8 percent for Silva.

Bolsonaro's popularity grew further after he was stabbed in the abdomen by a mentally disturbed assailant at a campaign rally earlier this month. The candidate was forced to stop campaigning while he recovers.

Support for the front-runner has since leveled off at 28 percent in a crowded field of 13 contenders. If no candidate

wins a majority on Oct. 7, as is predicted, the top two vote-getters will square off in a second round of voting on Oct. 28.

The fiery Bolsonaro has the highest rejection rate of all candidates, which could be a handicap in a run-off.

Polls currently predict his likely challenger will be PT candidate Fernando Haddad, the former mayor of Sao Paulo. He replaced jailed former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva on the ticket when Lula was barred from running due to a corruption conviction. An Ibope poll on Wednesday showed Haddad defeating Bolsonaro by a 6-point margin in a head-to-head race.

SEX IN SCHOOL

Many of Bolsonaro's evangelical supporters are united in their fear that the family, the main institution of a Christian society, is under threat from a godless state.

These voters chafed when Lula's government set up a national program to promote LGBT rights. But evangelicals were particularly incensed when the administration of Lula's hand-picked successor, Dilma Rousseff, attempted to distribute a manual instructing educators on how to teach children tolerance of gay and lesbian relationships. Opposition to the material, which critics dubbed the "Gay Kit" was so fierce that the initiative was dropped.

Pastor Everaldo Pereira, the politician who baptized Bolsonaro in the River Jordan, said parents, not the state, should teach their children about sex and traditional marriage between a man and a woman.

Pereira, the leader of the Social Christian Party, is now running for the Senate. He wants to push through a law reversing a 2011 Supreme Court decision that allowed same-sex civil unions. He says putting Bolsonaro in the nation's top

job could help that dream come true.

"Bolsonaro will restore order to the chaos," Pereira said.

The faithful, meanwhile, have turned away from one of their own. Support for Silva, the former senator who won about 20 percent of the votes cast in the two previous presidential elections, has plummeted mainly among evangelical voters.

Silva has long advocated keeping her evangelical faith separate from politics. That is a position many believers interpret as unwillingness to defend their values.

Bolsonaro, for example, has vowed to veto any legislation seeking to legalize abortion, which is allowed only in cases of rape, fetal deformation and to save a mother's life. Silva favors a plebiscite to let Brazilians decide.

"That's Marina. Let's save the turtle eggs but kill fetuses," said unemployed teacher Madalena Venancio, 44, at a Bolsonaro rally. "I prefer his frankness."

LAW AND ORDER

Bolsonaro has cast himself as an anti-establishment figure in the mold of U.S. President Donald Trump, whose policies he admires.

But despite nearly 27 years in Congress he has few legislative achievements to show for it. Instead, his career has consisted largely of courting controversy. He has repeatedly expressed support for the nation's 1964-1985 military dictatorship, and made headlines with racist, sexist and homophobic comments.

Reviled by many critics as a backbench blowhard, Bolsonaro displayed shrewd political instincts by tapping into public anger over rampant corruption and rising crime. He wants to loosen gun laws so more Brazilians can arm themselves. And he favors giving police carte blanche to kill suspected criminals.

That get-tough stance has won admirers in a nation that saw a record of nearly 64,000 murders last year.

Leaving an evangelical church service recently in Ceilandia, a working class suburb of Brasilia, Maria de Conceição said she was leaning toward voting for Bolsonaro.

“He says he will restore discipline in schools, where students do what they want and hit their teachers,” Conceição said. “Maybe we should try a military officer now.” {eoa}

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