

The Quest for Status: Brazil's Activism in the UN Human Rights Council 2006–2020

La búsqueda de estatus: el activismo de Brasil en el Consejo de Derechos Humanos de la ONU 2006–2020

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ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to investigate changes in Brazil's activism within the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) between 2006 and 2020 and addresses the modifications of status-seeking strategies (of social mobility, creativity, and competition) applied by the state within this international body. My claim is that Brazil under the Bolsonaro administration chose the role of the defender of the faith advocating for a recreation of the global human rights protection system over being a good international citizen committed to the maintenance and development of this system. This role was selected in conformity with a populist political agenda based on a conservative set of values that the state's diplomacy had to promote. The changes, exemplified by Brazil's conduct within the HRC since 2019, undermined the state's prestige and moral authority that led to status losses.

KEYWORDS: *Brazil, Human Rights Council, status-seeking, moral authority.*

RESUMEN

El trabajo busca investigar los cambios en el activismo de Brasil dentro del Consejo de Derechos Humanos (CDH) de la ONU entre 2006 y 2020 y aborda las modificaciones de las estrategias de búsqueda de estatus (de movilidad, creatividad y competencia social) aplicadas por el Estado dentro de este organismo internacional. Mi argumento es que Brasil, bajo el gobierno de Bolsonaro, eligió el papel de defensor de la fe que aboga por una recreación del sistema global de protección de los derechos humanos en

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lugar de ser un buen ciudadano internacional comprometido con el mantenimiento y desarrollo de este sistema. Este papel fue seleccionado en conformidad con una agenda política populista basada en un conjunto de valores conservadores que la diplomacia del Estado debía promover. Los cambios, ejemplificados por la conducta de Brasil en el CDH desde 2019, socavaron el prestigio y la autoridad moral del Estado, lo que condujo a pérdidas de estatus.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Brasil, Consejo de Derechos Humanos, búsqueda de estatus, autoridad moral.*

Introduction

While the legacy that Ernesto Araújo left behind after stepping down from his post of head of the Itamaraty¹ will certainly be assessed in the upcoming months, one point remains already undisputed. As announced in January 2019, the administration of the ultraconservative Jair M. Bolsonaro has engaged in the creation of a new and unprecedented external activism for Brazil. Coined as nationalist and fundamentalist (Casarões, 2020), conservative (Medeiros, Vilas-Boas and Andrade, 2019, March 21), anti-globalist (Rodrigues, 2019), submissive (based on an automatic and unconditional alignment with the state's core ally) (Fuser, 2019), chaotic (Lima and Albuquerque, 2019) or even messianic (Gabatz & Angelin, 2021, p. 123), the foreign policy underwent a process of profound redefinition. Core values and principles which served as guidelines for Brazilian diplomats since the beginning of the 20th century have been at best questioned and at worst, refuted. Such was the case of multilateralism: one of the drivers of the state's initiatives at international fora ever since the creation of the Republic, it has been vilified by Ernesto Araújo (2019, November 21). The redefinition of the guiding principles was followed by a reformulation of Brazil's key allies as well as the themes and niches that the South American actor wanted to shape.

Human rights protection has been identified by academics as one of the main areas affected by foreign policy reformulations of the current administration (Spektor, 2019). To scrutinize the scope of these changes, this paper aims to compare Brazil's standing in the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) since 2019 with the causes promoted by the Lula da Silva (2006²–2010), Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), and Michel Temer (2016–2018) administrations within this international body. Focus is put on a global rather than

¹ As the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is commonly called.

² The first three years of Lula da Silva's first term in office have not been included in the analysis as the Human Rights Council held its first session in June 2006, substituting the former Human Rights Commission.

a regional institution as Brazil in the past three decades has been recognized as a global player using supraregional fora as leverage to gain visibility and construct its image of a norm entrepreneur and promoter of human rights (Stolte, 2015; Nogueira, 2017; Carvalho, 2020; Sá e Silva, 2020). Also, the global forum permits to capture the Brazilian realignment of partnerships into new coalitions with European, African, and Asian states. The paper is driven by the following research questions: how did the state's engagement within the HRC change (in terms of resolutions and decisions introduced and/or sponsored, as well as voting patterns)? What were the new coalitions Brazil engaged in at the HRC? How did these adjustments translate into shifts in status-seeking strategies? What is the impact of these realignments on the state's international status?

My study is aided by the conceptual contributions on the status and status-seeking strategies (Wohlforth *et al.* 2018; Hurrell, 2006; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; 2014) and recent research on the Brazilian far-right populist foreign policy (Verbeeck & Zaslove, 2017; Chryssogelos, 2017; Sá Guimarães & Oliveira e Silva, 2021). My claim is that Brazil under the Bolsonaro administration neglected the role of a good international citizen and engaged in performing the role of the defender of the faith. This role was selected in conformity with the populist political agenda, especially the conservative set of values that the state's diplomacy had to promote. The changes, exemplified by Brazil's conduct within the HRC since 2019, led to the abandonment of status enhancement through increasing prestige and moral authority causing status losses.

The empirical part of the study is based on document analysis which allowed to identify and categorize causes promoted by Brazil and the country's positions towards human rights violations in several states addressed at the HRC. It also discerns between resolutions and decisions introduced by/on behalf of Brazil, (co-)sponsored by the state, and Brazil's voting patterns, including the actor's vote on amendments to resolutions. In addition to resolutions and decisions, the primary sources used in the research include the reports of 45 regular sessions³ and 28 special sessions of the HRC, as well as the Brazilian statements explaining its vote and other comments available on the HRC Extranet website. To capture discursive practices handling the matter of international human rights promotion the paper also includes data obtained from content analysis of official speeches made by Brazilian presidents and foreign affairs ministers.

The article starts from a brief presentation of the understanding of status and status-seeking strategies. The following section reflects on the notion of populism as applied to foreign policy research and its applicability to the case of Brazil's external activism. The next part briefly elaborates on references to human rights protection made by Brazilian decision-makers and continues

³ By the time of writing, the report of the 46th session was not available.

with an overview of major changes in the state's activities within the HRC since 2019. The last part presents concluding remarks.

Status and status seeking

Status is considered as an analytical category appropriate for scrutinizing the place of states in the international system (Holsti, 1970). The notion of status allows to refer to the location of a state in the global stratified structure. Frameworks conceptualizing status as a club good also highlight the hierarchical aspect of status (Larson *et al.*, 2014, p. 15). The presence, admission, or exclusion of the state from groupings such as the club of permanent UN Security Council, the G7 of the largest advanced economies, and nuclear powers impacts the country's international standing. Despite a focus on material capabilities such as military strength and economic performance as status markers determining an actor's place in the global hierarchy, the past decade experienced a surge in research capturing an extended reading of status (Volgy *et al.*, 2011; Paul *et al.*, 2014; Renshon, 2017; Wohlforth *et al.*, 2018). This alternative angle does recognize the material aspect of status, yet it goes beyond such understanding by exploring status as a cognitive category. Such is the approach to research on status proposed by Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth (2014, p. 7) who define it as "collective beliefs about a ranked ordering of valued attributes". This outline acknowledges the hierarchical nature of status; however, it emphasizes first and foremost that an actor's positioning in the international structure is socially constructed and perceptual. Kalevi Holsti, writing in 1970 about states' roles, linked them with statuses, which were determined by policymakers' impressions. According to him, status identification was determined by the perceptions shared by decision-makers: "it seems reasonable to assume that those responsible for making decisions and taking actions for the state are aware of international status distinctions and that their policies reflect this awareness" (Holsti 1970, p. 242). Later works coped with the question of whose collective beliefs mattered in assessing the state's status and discerned between self-attributed status (by the country's political and intellectual elites and the rest of the society) and recognition received by the actor from other members of the international system (Hurrell, 2006, p. 4). The latter was indicated as crucial to determine the actor's positioning on the global stage. Furthermore, this distinction allowed to capture tensions arising when the status ascribed to the state by its elites differed from the perceptions held by other countries, leading to status inconsistencies (Volgy *et al.*, 2011).

Discrepancies in the ways status is assessed are among the factors triggering efforts made by state actors to influence the perceptions of other members of the international system. Through the declaration and performance of international roles, understood as functions states assume in the international

system based on role conceptions⁴, states strive to align the internal and external understandings of one's place in the world. These endeavors have been referred to in the literature as status-seeking. Status-seeking, closely-knit with the desire for recognition and prestige,⁵ and fueled by the intrinsic quest to strengthen one's standing within a hierarchy, relates to the state's self-esteem identified among its core needs and foreign policy objectives (Murray, 2019, p. 13). Status enhancement efforts can be identified in the behavior of all sovereign states, including small states (Carvalho & Neumann, 2015), although certain players attract more attention from researchers. Be it due to their high asset levels, significant historical shifts of their international standing or current increased activism which ensure that their efforts are not going unnoticed, status-seeking strategies of global players such as Russia, China, India, Turkey, and Brazil constitute an extensive body of literature focused on state's international mobility (Deng, 2008; Volgy *et al.*, 2011; Hurrell 2006; Wohlforth, 2009; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; Stolte, 2015; Renshon, 2017; Basrur & Estrada, 2017; Esteves *et al.*, 2020; Curanović, 2020).

Researchers, adopting varied approaches, proposed several, partially overlapping, conceptualizations of status-enhancement strategies, i.a. initiating and engaging in conflicts, arms race, and other hard-balancing options, soft-balancing, bandwagoning, recognitive discursive and material practices (such as gaining a great-power voice, increasing military power, and assuring spheres of influence), and social mobility, competition, and creativity strategies (Hurrell, 2006; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; 2014; Renshon, 2017; Murray, 2019). It is important to note that, rather than opting for one particular strategy, states apply a blend of several approaches to gain visibility, recognition, and prestige leading to status increase.

In the case of Brazil, a country that can be considered as an archetypical aspirational power, unsatisfied with its status and committed to increasing it (Mares & Trinkunas, 2016), hard-balancing strategies are not considered as options by policymakers. Emphasizing the commitment to principles of non-intervention and peaceful resolution of conflicts, Brazil gave priority to soft approaches (Sotero & Armijo, 2007). Faced with limited material capacities, policymakers on numerous occasions turned to ideational resources such as the promotion of norms, values, and causes as means to acquire status. Endeavors to increase its global standing focused on moral authority – “proper⁶ behavior as judged within the specific framework laid down histori-

⁴ National role conceptions are defined as “policymakers’ own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions, suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems” (Holsti, 1970, p. 246).

⁵ For a definition of prestige, honor and respect see Larson *et al.* (2014, pp. 7–17) and Curanović (2020, p. 84).

⁶ The definition of *proper* conduct which distinguishes the *moral* subject is – as the definition suggests – contextual. The social context at the beginning of the 21st century is determined

cally by the leading powers of the system” (Wohlforth *et al.*, 2018, p. 533) – and prestige (Larson & Shevchenko, 2014, pp. 49–52; Stolte, 2015; Esteves *et al.*, 2020). They were to be exposed and further strengthened, ensuring the state recognition via the existing global organizational setup. The international human rights protection system offered institutional space for smaller states and middle powers like Brazil to perform the roles of good international citizens and, therefore, maintain or increase its standing as moral powers. This niche permitted the state to act as a normative entrepreneur to raise awareness and contribute to solutions to global problems. What is particularly interesting in the case of Brazil is that the area of human rights protection exposed the actor’s commitment to normative underpinnings traditionally associated with Western values and priorities, on one hand, and causes raised by developing nations, members of the Global South, on the other (Carvalho, 2020, p. 25).

Placing varying emphasis on several values and topics, the administrations of Lula da Silva, Rousseff, Temer, and Bolsonaro all claimed that human rights protection was a crucial part of Brazil’s foreign policy.⁷ Applying the conceptual framework proposed by Larson and Shevchenko (2010; 2014) of social mobility⁸, creativity⁹, and competition¹⁰, it is possible to identify a blend of these strategies applied by Brazilian policymakers to promote Brazil’s image as a moral authority in the endeavor to increase its status through human rights advocacy. States employing mobility strategies are expected to voice their commitment to the protection of human rights listed in international conventions and other normative acts, seek membership in international core organizations promoting them, and align with actors perceived as exemplary in protecting these rights to promote commonly acknowledged causes, e.g., fundamental political and civil rights. The posture would be followed by declarations coming from the decision-makers about their full commitment to protecting human rights. Social creativity strategies envisage discursive prac-

primarily by norms and values promoted by developed capitalist Western countries under the leadership of the world hegemon, the U.S. These states identify proper conduct with world system maintenance, respect for international law, peaceful resolution of conflicts, human rights promotion. Authors referring to the moral authority of the state draw from classic works of Émile Durkheim (*Sociology and Philosophy* and *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*), see Hall, 1997; Neumann, 2014; Wohlforth *et al.*, 2018.

⁷ For more details, see section 5.

⁸ Social mobility assumes behavior emulating higher-ranking powers as the lower-ranked actor accepts and follows the rules of the international game. Social mobility applies to states that adhere to international regimes and promote norms and values supported by relevant actors (the world’s great powers and/or actors with a recognized high position within a particular cooperation area).

⁹ Social creativity consists of the promotion of new and alternative attributes which give the status aspiring state competitive advantage over the higher-ranked.

¹⁰ Social competition, of a more conflictive nature, takes place when the status aspiring state identifies areas in which it could outstrip the higher-ranked actors and engages in activities challenging the existing stratifications.

tices also emphasizing such obligation, yet indicting gaps and deficiencies in the institutional setup which need to be overcome. A state using this approach offers to bring in new perspectives into the debate, due to its distinctive profile and experiences – for instance, affiliation with the developing world leading to increased interest and authority to promote social and economic rights. Social competition can be identified as postures defying acknowledged understandings of fundamental rights and freedoms and opposing them to alternative sets of values or unconventional interpretations of certain norms and standards. Such an approach can be manifested by abstaining from voting on resolutions condemning human rights abuses. Criticized by Western liberal democracies, the posture is frequently adopted by developing countries and explained by a Southern point of view which places the value of dialogue maintenance at all costs and non-interference in domestic matters over more assertive ways of protecting human rights. Contrary to social creativity behavior, social competition entails more confrontational attitudes, at times based on dichotomist and conflictive assessments of the subject matter in question. Actors using this strategy perceive the set of human rights norms they defend as threatened; their promotion becomes a moral imperative. Discursively social competition would be manifested by statements undermining the existing human rights protection architecture and claims of a deep value crisis which the status aspirant could handle due to its moral superiority.

Between 2006 and 2018¹¹ Brazil applied all three approaches in its conduct within the HRC, whereas in 2019 and 2020 Brazilian policymakers resorted to mobility and competition strategies. The differences in Brazil's activism derive from distinct roles played by Brazil in both periods, stemming from diverse identities and objectives. If until the end of 2018 Brazil identified its function of a good state sustaining a normative order as an appropriate way to manifest its moral authority, since 2019 the state, as a defender of the faith¹², adopted a confrontational approach. It was based on the claim that the human rights protection system – corrupted and decaying – required reconstruction. If in the first decade of the HRC Brazil, within the mobility strategy, introduced and sponsored documents on topics important to Western liberal democracies, it neglected this approach after 2019, proving its affinity with the West by a more critical standing towards selected human rights offenders identified as Brazil's foes. In regard to the state's creativity in human rights promotion, Brazil during the Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff administrations aimed at raising awareness and supporting initiatives of other members of the Global South on subjects related to such rights as just access to medicines and the

¹¹ Although shifts leading to a partial alignment with standings applied since 2019 became noticeable during the Temer administration and will be highlighted in the fifth section.

¹² This role is not limited to strong commitments to religious values, but generally to causes, norms and ideas deemed crucial by policymakers and “those who espouse the defender of the faith national role conception presumably undertake special responsibilities to guarantee ideological purity for a group of other states” (Holsti, 1970, p. 264).

highest healthcare standards as well as the elimination of hunger and poverty. Country delegates also voted in favor of documents introduced by Cuba and other members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM); a posture mostly abandoned by the Bolsonaro government. A striking change occurred also in the way Brazil employed social competition within the HRC: before 2019 tensions between Western states and the Latin American player arose mainly due to its restraint in votings on human rights abuses in such states as North Korea, Sudan, and Sri Lanka. The Bolsonaro government, persistently asserting its distinctiveness from liberal democracies, assumed competitive postures by promoting a conservative normative agenda on such matters as the protection of the family, women's rights, and persecution of religions.

Before moving to a more detailed analysis of changing narratives and practices reflecting Brazil's human rights record within the HRC and for a deeper understanding of the changes in the state's participation in the body, a brief overview of the new features of the Brazilian foreign policy is required.

A populist foreign policy¹³

The claim that the Bolsonaro administration provides yet another example of a populist political style should not raise objections. What enabled the far-right statesman to come to power was a deep national crisis of political representation and economic performance. Political parties in power for over two decades have been to varying degrees discredited by a corruption scandal of an unprecedented scale which had dire consequences for the country's economic output. Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters used this opportunity to position the former army captain as a figure rejecting the rules of conventional policymaking, a political steadfast outsider who was not engaged in corrupt practices (Casarões, 2019). He was thus not a member of the elites (although these claims can surprise coming from a person who served seven consecutive terms in the Brazilian Congress) but a true patriot representing the people, tired of traditional politics. Already in office, the Brazilian head of state adopted an antagonistic and Manichean discourse starkly juxtaposing virtuous Brazilian citizens with corrupt elites and bandits (Bolsonaro, 2019, January 1). Bolsonaro's most ardent supporters – former foreign affairs minister Ernesto Araújo, federal deputy and member of the commission of foreign affairs and defense in the lower house of the Brazilian Congress Eduardo Bolsonaro, Filipe Martins, special foreign policy advisor to President Bolsonaro, and Damares Alves, minister of human rights – constitute the ideological axis of his administration. Araújo, Bolsonaro, and Martins are admirers and followers of Olavo de Carvalho, a self-proclaimed philosopher and the ideologi-

¹³ For a detailed conceptual clarification see Verbeek and Zaslove (2017) and Chryssogelos (2017).

cal mentor of the Bolsonaro family, described as “the intellectual founder of the Brazilian far-right” (Duarte, 2019, December 28) known for his radicalism and propensity for conspiracy theories. The conservative values of Damare Alves reflect the moral and social agenda of evangelical churches, a stakeholder that in the past two decades gained significant influence over Brazil’s political life (Zilla, 2020). Minister Alves, an evangelical pastor herself, represents therefore the interests of a powerful political actor committed to curtailing liberal family and lifestyle visions. Olavists and evangelicals are seen by other segments of the government – the military and neoliberals – as the ideological fraction as they place a set of identified principles and values over pragmatic postures focused on the state’s material interests.

If on the domestic level the Bolsonaro administration uses the fear of loss of one’s material and social status (which millions of Brazilians saw compromised by the economic crisis) – therefore strengthening and exploiting status anxiety¹⁴ – a similar logic underpins the perception of the international system. Its consequence is a rupture with traditional ways of policymaking not only internally but also externally. Ernesto Araújo made numerous references to the exogenous threats the state is facing: globalism, socialism, cultural Marxism, and communism.¹⁵ The worldview of the first foreign affairs minister in the Bolsonaro cabinet was clearly an antagonistic one: Brazil was presented as a member of a conservative informal avant-garde coalition that needs to resist rogue globalist forces (Araújo, 2019, January 2; 2019 September 11). As observed by Sá Guimarães and Oliveira e Silva (2021, p. 350), within this logic Brazil was morally obliged to engage in a civilizational struggle which required combating liberal institutionalism, for global institutions constituted the framework that legitimized international groups of elites against the will of the people in sovereign states. If criticism of globalism and the architecture of international institutions along with a strong attachment to sovereignty were not new in Brazil’s external affairs and can be found in the narratives on the foreign policy of the Lula da Silva, Rousseff, and Temer administrations, the radicalism permeating the new policymakers’ discourse was unprecedented. An explicit classification of states into friends and foes was a novelty and went against past efforts to promote Brazil as a country able to maintain good relations with all international actors (Interview with Brazil’s President Lula on his legacy, 2010, September 30). What distinguished the foreign policy discourse of the Bolsonaro administration were references to international conspiracies and complots that could harm Brazil’s interests and values (Casarões, 2020, p. 83).

¹⁴ This logic was indicated as a hallmark of populist policies already by Seymour M. Lipset (1955).

¹⁵ They can be found in most of his speeches and posts published on his blog *Metapolítica* 17 (<https://www.metapoliticabrasil.com>).

The traditional principles which members of the ideological fraction usually referred to were that of God, homeland, and family. Deus, Pátria, Família is not a new catchphrase, it reminds us of the slogans of large-scale protests organized by conservative social movements against the government of João Goulart in 1964 as well as of the military regime that followed shortly after (Cordeiro, 2021). Yet, contrary to the administration of Jair Bolsonaro, the junta's foreign policy was more restrained in applying these values on the international level, guided by pragmatism (Cervo & Bueno, 2008). What distinguished the administration of Jair Bolsonaro is the fact that far-right populism as a style of governance was not limited to the domestic sphere, as had been the case of, for instance, the Getúlio Vargas era, but became ingrained in the country's foreign policy (Sá Guimarães & Oliveira e Silva, 2021, p. 352). Therefore, since 2019 and for the first time in the history of Brazilian diplomacy, one of the driving forces of the Brazilian external engagement was the belief that the state is morally obliged to defend Christianity and traditional family values, as they were threatened by leftist forces in the global cultural struggle. The international human rights architecture with the HRC at its center became an important arena for Brazil's performance as a defender of the faith.

Human rights in the political discourse

With the adoption of the Constitution in 1988 (Title I, Article 4, Point II) human rights gained explicit recognition as one of the core principles guiding the country's foreign policy. Their protection was thus seen as both a moral obligation for the Brazilian diplomatic corps and a niche enabling the country to build up prestige and international recognition. Between 2006 and 2020 all Brazilian heads of state and ministers of foreign affairs referred to human rights protection in speeches addressed to both domestic and international audiences. Nevertheless, significant changes in the way Brazil's international commitment to human rights protection is perceived are discernible in the last two years.

Presidents Lula da Silva, Dilma Rousseff, and Michel Temer as well as their heads of diplomacy all emphasized their strong commitment to human rights protection. They reminded that Brazil was party to international treaties constituting the legal-normative human rights protection framework of binding nature. The state's political elites, therefore, acknowledged the fundamental human rights norms and assured of their obligation to implement them internally, assuming thus a posture that fitted within a social mobility strategy. Given the institution in question – modern liberal democracies bound by the rule of law do not contest the human rights principle – such standing was expected. Signs of Brazil's efforts to strengthen the normative system can also be distinguished in declarations about the state's aspirations to be not only a norm-taker but also a norm-maker. President Lula da Silva and Minister

Amorim stressed that Brazil contributed to the institutional setup of the HRC by promoting the universal periodic review of countries' mechanisms and voluntary human rights goals (Amorim, 2009, p. 432). Brazil further aimed at gaining visibility by advocating for economic, social, and cultural rights. Among the main promoted causes were the right to development, including the fight against hunger and poverty, universal access to medication, and the impact of the global economic crisis on human rights. Another important issue area the country engaged in was the combat of racism. Brazilian policymakers were also using this opportunity to highlight Brazil's internal successes to eliminate hunger and poverty, and willingness to engage in technical cooperation projects to share its own success stories with other nations. President Lula da Silva (2007, September 25) was particularly vocal in addressing the world's obligation to fight hunger, poverty, and inequalities as well as advertising Brazilian homemade, tried-and-tested solutions to these problems. A focus on topics exposing Brazilian achievements coupled with an insistence on the handling global challenges at times overlooked by the most developed economies can therefore be considered a social creativity strategy.

Despite the administration's efforts to perform the role of a good international citizen guided by the principle of human rights protection, the state also attracted attention due to its ambivalent standing towards regimes notorious for human rights abuses, especially between 2006 and 2010. Policymakers faced with accusations of disregard for fundamental human rights were trying to defend the country's posture. According to Celso Amorim (2009, pp. 432–433), Brazil was choosing constructive cooperation and dialogue over conflict and condemnation, which would only lead to the isolation of the accused country. The head of the diplomacy expressed his frustration over criticism faced by Brazil at the 65th session of the UN General Assembly, calling such posture arrogant and criticizing the "moral superiority" which some members of the international community conferred upon themselves (Amorim, 2010, p. 147). The palpable irritation reflected a deeper disappointment over the outcomes of Brazil's efforts to strengthen its status through social competition. The approach of holding to the non-intervention principle, dear to Brazil as a member of the Global South, did not bring the expected gains and diverted the international audience's attention from the state's successes to controversial postures. Dilma Rousseff, aware of the critique, decided to introduce adjustments to Brazil's policy and made sure to advertise the modification. In an interview for the Washington Post after her election in 2010, asked about Brazil's lenient posture towards women's rights in Iran, Ms. Rousseff replied that her government would assume a more explicit standing towards the violators within the UN body (Weymouth, 2010, December 3). She made this also clear when speaking for the first time at the UN General Assembly in September 2011: "There are violations in all countries, without exception. Let us recognize this reality and accept, all of us, the criticism. We should benefit from it and criticize,

without mincing words, the flagrant cases of violation, wherever they occur” (Rousseff, 2011, September 21). On the other hand, what stayed unchanged was the policymakers’ posture of avoiding critical comments about human rights records in Cuba and Venezuela. Questioned about this matter, Rousseff’s first foreign affairs minister Antonio Patriota gave answers in line with the argumentation used by his predecessor – human rights protection had to be less selective and politically motivated (Rossi, 2011, January 29). Slight changes in the way Brazil addressed the issue of human rights violations in other states were introduced by the Temer government. The main change referred to the fact that Brazil, mainly through the discourse of minister Aloysio Nunes Ferreira, voiced criticism of the human rights record of the Venezuelan regime (Ferreira, 2019, March 7).

Between 2006 and 2018, human rights were depicted as an important area of Brazilian international activism – the country’s commitment to their promotion and protection remained an unquestioned guiding principle of its external activism. The main differences consisted in the postures towards practices of condemning human rights violators. The changes notable in the administration’s discourse after January 2019 were of a different nature.

The assessment of the approach adopted by the current government in the international debate on human rights is complex and controversy prone as Jair Bolsonaro made over the past twenty years numerous comments depreciating and criticizing the rights of i.a. women, indigenous people, members of the LGBTQ+ community, victims of the military rule, and the poor. These statements came again to the limelight during the presidential campaign and his electoral victory, making international headlines (Londoño & Darlington, 2018, October 28; Phillips, 2018 October 29). The critical approach towards human rights was maintained after January 2019, although in official declarations this was (compared to past statements) tempered and expressed in a more moderate manner. In his inaugural speech, President Bolsonaro referred to “the distortion of human rights”. They have been presented as an ideology that “protects the bandits and criminalizes police officers” (Bolsonaro, 2019, January 1). Speaking for the first time as head of state in front of an international audience, President Bolsonaro (2019, January 22) also referred to “true human rights” the country would defend. These were clear signals of a new goal: rather than sustaining the global human rights protection system, Brazil challenged its normative underpinnings aiming at a reconstruction of this system. In his first speech at the UN General Assembly, President Bolsonaro assured of Brazil’s “uncompromising commitment to the highest standards in human rights”, yet a focus on family and God along with the obligation to defend the society from criminals suggested that Brazil had a very narrow and ultraconservative understanding of human rights. This vision would be defended in international organizations including the UN bodies as, according to the new administration, “The UN can help defeat the materialistic and ideological climate that puts in check some of the basic principles of human

dignity” (Bolsonaro 2019, September 24). Similar views were expressed by the head of Itamaraty. A cause particularly promoted by Araújo at the UN (2019, September 27) was religious freedom: the diplomat made references to the increase in persecutions of Christians, which did not resonate with topics promoted by Brazil earlier.

As the Bolsonaro government has been criticized for neglecting or even violating human rights in Brazil, using this issue area to strengthen the country’s status would not seem plausible. Yet, efforts to use global fora, including the HRC, to promote conservative values of God, the protection of the family and the “innocence of children” have been indicated by members of the Brazilian administration as a core element of Brazil’s international positioning. The basis for Brazil’s moral authority was its membership in the club of a new conservative avant-garde of the West, along with the US (under Donald Trump), Israel, Hungary, and Poland (Araújo, 2019, January 2). Equipped with such moral authority, making it fit for a renewal of the international system, the state engaged in a cultural crusade to combat “nihilism disguised as multilateralism”, communism and Marxism, which were destroying humanity (Araújo, 2019, June 10). Therefore, the Brazilian administration, rather than promoting the image of Brazil as a good international citizen, conceptualized Brazil as a defender of the faith. Seen from this angle, the discourse of the administration can be classified as a somewhat distorted effort of status enhancement through social competition. The next section shows whether and how political declarations were followed by Brazil’s engagement in the HRC.

Brazil in the HRC: constants and variables

To verify the changes in Brazil’s activism within the HRC I analyzed the subject matters of resolutions and decisions introduced by the country (or on behalf of it), sponsored and co-sponsored by Brazil, the state’s vote on amendments to documents, and on resolutions/decisions which were not adopted without a vote. Noteworthy shifts between 2006 and 2020 concern the Brazilian vote on resolutions addressing human rights violations in several countries, including the country’s stance towards the regimes in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua; the support for initiatives promoted by developing countries; and several causes traditionally supported by Brazil, in particular religious freedom, the rights of sexual minorities, the protection of the family as well as women’ and girls’ rights.

Resolutions on human rights violations

Although Brazil during the Lula da Silva administration was praised for its efforts to increase human rights protection levels, especially those related to

social and economic rights (Costa da Silva, 2020; Sá e Silva, 2020), the country also faced criticism because of its resistance to condemn human rights violations in a number of undemocratic regimes (Ricupero, 2010, August 29). In 2006 Brazil, along with Cuba and Mexico, voted in favor of a decision addressing the issue of human rights violations in Darfur introduced by African states, which was considered by European countries as too restrained. Brazil was the only Latin American country to abstain from voting on the amendments proposed by European states (Cuba voted against, other Latin American states – in favor). In 2009, Brazil abstained from voting on a resolution on the People’s Republic of Korea, explaining that this way it was giving the Kim regime a chance to maintain dialogue with the Council. At the 11th special session, also in 2009, convened to discuss the human rights situation in Sri Lanka, Brazil co-sponsored a resolution introduced by the Sri Lankan representative and did not support European efforts to amend the text. These were clear manifestations of a social competition strategy that brought negative outcomes as Brazil was criticized for such postures, as mentioned earlier.

Despite Brazil’s complaints about the selective and political nature of human rights monitoring and protection in the Human Rights Commission, spotted by state officials also within the HRC (Amorim, 2010, p. 147), Brazil’s neutrality was also questionable. Between 2006 and 2010 the Latin American actor voted in favor of resolutions condemning human rights violations in Palestine. The Council’s focus on abuses committed by Israel, as evidenced by the number of resolutions addressing the issue adopted in regular as well as special sessions¹⁶, was considered politically motivated as numerous violations in other parts of the world never received similar attention (Asano & Nader, 2011, p. 128).

During Dilma Rousseff’s first term in office from 2011 to 2014, Brazil’s vote on resolutions condemning human rights abuses in specific countries was less controversial. Brazil supported the resolutions on Iran, Syria, North Korea, and Sri Lanka. In 2011 Brazil also co-sponsored a resolution on the human rights situation in Libya, adopted at the 15th special session. The country’s posture changed in March 2015 with the Brazilian abstention in the case of both Iran and Syria. The Temer administration maintained such a posture towards Iran. In the case of Syria, Brazil voted in favor of the resolutions, however, country representatives expressed concerns also raised by the previous government. They referred to the interference of external actors into the conflict, including arms supply, which was aggravating the situation. Further, at all three sessions in 2018 Brazil supported several amendments submitted by Russia. The amendments called upon states and non-state actors to render support to the parties engaged in the Syrian conflict, referred more explicitly to the engagement of several terrorist groups in the conflict, and criticized

¹⁶ Until 2020, out of 28 sessions 7 were held to discuss the situation in Palestine and 1, the situation in Lebanon.

“unilateral coercive measures” applied against the Assad regime as leading to a deterioration of the human rights situation within the war-thorn country. Such a position once again voiced the concerns of Brazil as a member of the Global South driven by the non-intervention principle and thus ready to provide competitive standing in the international body.

The main modifications notable in Brazil's standing towards the debate on human rights violations since 2019 relate to Israel. For the first time since 2006 Brazil voted against the resolution on human rights in the occupied Syrian Golan and abstained from voting on the issue of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Explaining such posture, Brazilian representatives pointed to an excessive number of resolutions referring to Israel within the HRC (Brazil, 2019b) and the selective nature of the draft tackling the situation in the Golan Heights as it omitted abuses in Syria (Brazil, 2019c). The shift was a consequence of a major recalibration of Brazil's strategic partnerships. In an effort to align with the position of the United States in international organizations, Brazil followed the direction of its partner, who complained of the anti-Israeli bias within the HRC. Additionally, as already signaled by Ernesto Araújo in his inauguration speech, the Latin American state perceived Israel as a crucial ally. In the diplomat's view, both countries, bound by the Judeo-Christian tradition, were members of the coalition of virtuous states in the global cultural war to save humanity.

Another alteration visible in 2019 referred to the state's antagonistic posture towards the regimes in Venezuela and Nicaragua. In the case of Nicaragua, Brazil was one of the main sponsors of the initiatives in 2019 and 2020. In the Venezuelan case, the country sponsored in 2019 and introduced in 2020, at the request of the Trump administration (Sá Guimarães & Oliveira e Silva, 2021, p. 355), a draft proposal condemning human rights abuses committed by the Maduro regime. This was unprecedented as Brazil's leftist presidents firmly avoided referring to this issue, including when explicitly questioned in interviews (Vivanco, 2015, June 29). The Temer administration in September 2018 voted in favor of a resolution on Venezuela introduced by Peru, although the country did not sponsor it. Temer's successor went further, leaving aside the non-interference principle, which was emphasized since the beginning of the 20th century in Brazil's relations with regional partners. These modifications, reflecting an alignment with Western democracies on the matter of human rights violations, represent a shift from social competition to social mobility. Yet, this posture was not fully consistent.

A much softer stance was shown by Brazil on the situation in Iran and the Philippines. The state abstained from voting in both cases. Particularly surprising was the state's posture towards Iran as it was inconsistent with the current administration's support for a tough stand on the Islamic Republic.¹⁷ The

¹⁷ Brazil participated in the US-led Middle East conference in Warsaw in February 2019 considered anti-Iranian and even offered to host another similar event (Desideri, 2020, January 8).

Brazilian delegate in an explanation of the vote expressed the state's "understanding that Iran will undertake additional measures on the protection and promotion of human rights" (Brazil, 2019a), which reminded the approach assumed by Brazil between 2015 and 2018. In the case of the Philippines, the decision raised criticism as it was perceived as ideologically motivated. President Bolsonaro, oftentimes compared with President Rodrigo Duterte, did not want to point fingers at another far-right and conservative regime (Brasil se abstém em votação na ONU sobre violações de direitos humanos nas Filipinas, 2019, July 12; Duchiaide, 2019, July 11).

Causes promoted by the Global South

Between 2006 and March 2016, Brazil voted in favor or even co-sponsored resolutions referring to topics promoted by developing countries, thus expressing its affiliation to the Global South. This affinity was mostly manifested in a less confrontational manner than was the case of human rights abuses and it can be classified as an example of a social creativity approach. The promoted causes focused on economic, social, and cultural rights as well as national sovereignty, such as the right to food; the right to development; international solidarity; the right to peace; promotion of a democratic and equitable international order; the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights; the effects of foreign debt on economic, social, and cultural rights; the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights. The initiatives were promoted by Cuba and other members of the NAM – Venezuela, Egypt, and Iran – on behalf of the group. Adjustments in Brazil's vote were made after the impeachment of President Rousseff. The administration of Michel Temer decided to vote against a Cuban-sponsored resolution on foreign debt and it abstained from supporting documents referring to the democratic and equitable international order and unilateral coercive measures (the latter sponsored by Venezuela on behalf of NAM). Since 2019 Brazil voted against the resolution on the impact of unilateral coercive measures on human rights and the effects of foreign debt on human rights. Also, by abstention, the state no longer supported the resolutions on the democratic international order and the use of mercenaries. The only Cuban-sponsored drafts still backed by Brazil were resolutions on the promotion of the right to peace and international solidarity. What stood out making a stark contrast with past practices was an extremely critical assessment of the Cuban and Venezuelan regime when explaining its vote on documents introduced by the Caribbean countries. For instance, at the 42nd session in September 2019 the Brazilian delegate explained that despite the state's support for a democratic and equitable international order, principles of self-determination and sovereignty, Brazil would abstain in the voting as "the Government of Cuba lacks the necessary legitimacy to lead the initiative" (Brazil, 2019f). When commenting

on a resolution regarding Venezuela, sponsored by Brazil at the same session, the state's representative complained about the criticism faced "at the HRC corridors" by the country due to the initiative. Emphasizing the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis and the Brazilian support for refugees from the Bolivarian Republic, the representative mentioned twice: "We are not the bad guys." (Brazil, 2019e). The statement was another example of Brazil's black and white perception of the international system, torn by the clash between forces of good and evil. Yet, the necessity to remind the UN audience about who the "good guys" were, albeit undoubtedly sarcastic, can be read as a signal that Brazil's moral superiority lacks recognition and representatives of the government are aware of it. The strong inclination towards ideologically motivated initiatives not only exposed a much more critical posture towards regional neighbors. The changes, visible since the Temer government and continued in the last two years, signal changes in the Brazilian commitment to causes close to members of the Global South, thus questioning the state's adherence to this group. In line with the declarations made by Ernesto Araújo who promoted Brazil's profile as a member of the Western civilization, Brazil continues to distance itself from developing countries, a shift clearly noticeable in the HRC. Yet, a deepening cleavage between Brazil and other developing nations was not the only novelty, as it was followed by several unprecedented decisions which distanced Brazil also from Western democracies.

Topics introduced and supported by Brazil

Despite criticism faced by Brazil on several occasions due to abstentions in votings on human rights violations in several countries, the state also managed to gain recognition and prestige as a promoter of human rights causes. Brazilian diplomats proudly emphasized the state's efforts to raise awareness on the incompatibility between democracy and racism, access to medication for developing countries, the rights of people with HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, rights of people struggling with mental illnesses, older persons, and journalists. At the initiative of Brazil, the HRC held special sessions to discuss the impact of the global economic crisis on human rights in 2009 and the situation in Haiti in 2010. Celso Amorim in 2009 stressed that although Brazil led in sponsoring documents referring to economic, social, and cultural rights – initiatives developed within the social creativity strategy through which Brazil was gaining visibility as a member of the Global South, able to provide innovative solutions and raise awareness on causes particularly important for the South – the state also paid attention to political and civic rights traditionally promoted by members of the North. By giving the example of the incompatibility between democracy and racism, a cause first introduced by Brazil in 2006 at the 2nd HRC session, the diplomat reassured that Brazil was also identifying itself as a member of the block of Western liberal democra-

cies, thus, willing to take on mobility strategies.¹⁸ In addition, Brazil advocated for the adoption of human rights voluntary goals as well as resolutions on the enhancement of technical cooperation and capacity building in the field of human rights. Another topic raised by Brazil regarded human rights and the Internet as well as the right to privacy in the digital age.

Many of these initiatives were continued by the administrations of Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro. Access to medication and the right to physical and mental health continues to be a cause the Brazilian delegation in Geneva advocates for. Other issues include the rights of older persons, the safety of journalists¹⁹, the negative impact of corruption on human rights, technical cooperation in the field of human rights, and the right to privacy in the digital age. In 2016 and 2017 Brazil also introduced documents aimed at addressing the issue of racial discrimination, however, the attention given to this topic decreased after January 2019 as the state did not introduce any draft referring to this issue since then.

Other causes which Brazil supported between 2006 and 2018, most commonly by co-sponsoring them, were i.a. the rights of indigenous peoples, migrants, freedom of religion, prevention of genocide, human trafficking, the question of the death penalty, enforced voluntary disappearances, the right to peaceful protests, and combating torture. After 2019 Brazil showed signs of continuity, backing many of these initiatives as a co-sponsor. Causes that were no longer supported by the Latin American state included the rights of indigenous people and migrants.²⁰ A novelty since 2019 was the state's increased commitment to combat discrimination based on religion. On numerous occasions leading members of the Brazilian administration, including President Bolsonaro, ministers Araújo and Alves raised the issue of persecuted Christians. Brazil along with Poland and Iraq organized an event to discuss the matter of religious persecutions at the 41st HRC session in 2019. During the event, the Brazilian representative claimed that Christians were the most persecuted religious group in the world (Chade, 2019, July 9). What gained even more attention, however, was Brazil's unprecedented standing on women's rights and gender identity. These initiatives were clear manifestations of social

¹⁸ At later sessions Brazil also introduced resolutions on education as a tool to eliminate racism (in 2013), addressing the impact of racism on women's rights (in 2016) and advocated for the elaboration of a declaration promoting the rights of African descendants (in 2017). Brazil's commitment to combating racism was also expressed by co-sponsoring resolutions urging to eliminate racism, other forms of racial discrimination and xenophobia, an initiative promoted by African states.

¹⁹ President Bolsonaro was accused of inciting violence against journalists (Medeiros, 2010, January 16).

²⁰ In January 2019, the Bolsonaro administration decided to withdraw from the UN Global Compact for Migration initiative despite the state's engagement in negotiating the international non-binding deal in 2018.

competition, through which Brazil was to exert and further increase its moral authority.

Brazil was the first country to introduce a resolution proposal on the topic of sexual orientation and gender identity at a UN human rights protection body in 2003 (Nogueira, 2017, p. 550). After several attempts and adjustments of its content, finally, in 2011 the document passed and was reintroduced in 2014 and 2016²¹ granting Brazil visibility as a promoter of a progressive human rights agenda. Although in 2019 the country together with Argentina introduced a document on the mandate of the independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, its standing on the rights of sexual minorities underwent a significant change. At the 41st session in July 2019, the Brazilian representative emphasized that the term “gender” lacked a clear definition in HRC documents and therefore explained that for the Brazilian delegation it was synonymous with “sex”, understood as a biological category (Brazil, 2019d). This new caveat to the term “gender” came in line with the instruction received by the Brazilian diplomats from Ernesto Araújo to exclude the term “gender” from their vocabulary and use solely the word “sex” (Valadares, 2019, August 7). It also stood in stark contrast with previous practices as Brazil actively supported documents using this expression. For instance, in September 2017, Brazil introduced a resolution addressing the importance of “mainstreaming a gender perspective” into the human rights protection system.²²

Efforts to present Brazil as a country engaged in the protection of sexual minorities were also limited since 2019. In 2020 at the 44th session, a debate was held after the presentation of a report on the global practice of “conversion therapies” for members of the LGBT community. The report stated that such practices were taking place in Brazil, provided by religious institutions, and pointed out that national legislation prohibiting them did not address the problem of “therapies” by “religious interventions”. The Brazilian delegate in response after the presentation (Brazil, 2020) tried to clarify the state’s official position towards these “therapies”. Although it was emphasized that such practices were illegal, the influence of religious groups on the rights of sexual minorities was not addressed.

Jair Bolsonaro and Ernesto Araújo on numerous occasions emphasized the strong commitment to defending the value of the family, making references to the traditional understanding of the family as based on the bond between a man and a woman (Bolsonaro, 2019, August 10; Araújo, 2019, October 22). These statements contrasted with Brazil’s position on the matter before 2019,

²¹ In 2016 Chile introduced the proposal on behalf of Brazil who was not a member of the Council at the 32nd session.

²² Resolution 36/8 *The full enjoyment of human rights by all women and girls and the systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.*

also expressed within the HRC. At the 21st session in September 2012, when human rights protection in Brazil was under scrutiny within the universal periodic review mechanism, Brazil refuted a recommendation made by the Holy See to protect the “natural family”. The state’s delegate reminded the audience that Brazilian institutions “recognized other family arrangements as also being eligible for protection” (HRC, 2015, November 11, p. 169). In 2014, 2015, and 2017 Brazil abstained from voting on resolutions on the protection of the family sponsored by African and Arab states. The country did not support the proposal as amendments extending the definition of the family (by adding that “various forms of the family exist”), introduced in 2014 by Uruguay and in 2015 by Brazil, were refuted. Although in 2019 and 2020 the topic was not raised within the HRC, it is highly improbable that Brazil would back an extended understanding of the family including same-sex couples.

Another area that witnessed unparalleled adjustments referred to women’s rights. Since 2009 Brazil sponsored resolutions on women’s rights (on accelerating the efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women – a Canadian initiative – and on the elimination of discrimination against women, promoted by Mexico and Colombia) and voted against amendments proposed to these documents by Arab states and Russia. This was the case still in 2018 when Brazil was against amendment proposals aiming at deleting references to the right to evidence-based comprehensive sexual education as well as the acknowledgement of violence caused by intimate partners. In the same year at the September session, Brazil also rejected an amendment sponsored by Egypt and Russia to the resolution on preventable maternal mortality and morbidity in humanitarian settlements. The changes once again aimed at deleting references to the right to sexual education. One year later, at the 41st session in June, Brazil not only ceased to sponsor drafts introduced by Canada, Mexico, and Colombia but also voted in favor of amendments intended to erase references to the right to sexual education. Brazil was the only Latin American country that backed the Pakistani and Russian proposals, joining the club of such countries as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, China, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Bangladesh. The Brazilian neighbors, along with European states, were against the amendments. At the same session, Brazil voted in a similar vein on the European resolution addressing the consequences of child, early, and forced marriage. The Latin American state supported a controversial amendment introduced by Bahrain. The proposal suggested binding the right to a comprehensive education for women and girls aimed at gender equality and women empowerment with “appropriate direction and guidance from parents and legal guardians”, thus introducing a reference to the girl’s family’s consent. Brazil’s new alignment with states associated with ultraconservative postures and poor human rights records came as a surprise to Brazil’s partners within the HRC as well as the domestic audience. Latin American diplomats, for years coordinating initiatives with their Brazilian counterparts, were stunned by the drastic shift and new Brazilian vocabulary, questioning established human

rights protection standards (Chade, 2019, June 20). The topic was also thrust into the national spotlight: main news outlets decried Brazil's new controversial alliances within the HRC (Duchiade, 2019, July 11; Queiroz, 2019, July 29; Senra, 2019, July 17; Chade, 2020, July 3; Maneo, 2020, July 7). In 2020 at the 44th session, Brazil tried to take a less controversial stand by abstaining from the vote on five amendments sponsored by Russia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, yet it did not sponsor the Mexican resolution (on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls).

It remains highly questionable whether under the Bolsonaro administration Brazil will manage to overcome associations with a group of countries opposed to strengthening human rights. It remains also an open question if the state's decision-makers are interested in overcoming such associations. For the past two years, Brazil within the HRC presented an ultraconservative posture in the debate over the protection of sexual minorities, the family, the rights of women and girls, and by advocating for the protection of persecuted Christians rather than focusing on such challenges as discrimination based on gender identity and domestic violence that Brazil itself is also facing. The state's decision-makers preferred alignments with countries criticized for human rights abuses such as Saudi Arabia and Russia over alliances with Western democracies. The described changes can be classified as a move to challenge the existing agenda on human rights protection and promote alternative understandings of rights, within the civilizational war over morality in which Brazil is supposedly "the good guy". If this move is an effort to purge the international system by bringing back fundamental values through competing with positions defending their established understandings, it is a failed one. For Brazil instead of recognition as a member of the global avant-garde gained visibility as a state that is losing its credentials as a human rights promoter and responsible member of the international community.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most surprising declaration made by a foreign affairs minister of a country traditionally recognized for its strive for greatness, the desire of *grandeza*, was the affirmation of Ernesto Araújo in October 2020 that Brazil preferred to be an international pariah rather than a "guest at the banquet of self-interested cynicism of the globalists". For the head of Brazilian diplomacy, being a pariah was a virtue (Araújo, 2020, October 22). These assertions starkly contrasted with past moments when Brazil was in the spotlight as an example in the fight against inequality and poverty, a credible actor able to convince the international community of its willingness to assume increased responsibility for world affairs.

Human rights protection is not an area associated with great power politics, contrary to mediation in high profile conflicts, acquisition of nuclear

power, and other increases in strategic material capabilities. States seeking status without resorting to hard measures select other areas and non-material resources which could increase their standing. International human rights promotion is one of them. Actors who aim at proving their international responsibility and commitment adhere to a set of rules and standards acknowledged by the dominant powers: the United States and, in the niche of human rights protection, Western modern liberal democracies having uncompromised human rights standards. Yet, for states with a long tradition of allegiance to human rights as a fundamental principle orienting foreign policy, this niche of international cooperation remains even more indispensable. Brazil did not procure a strengthened global standing through increases in hard power but, since the 20th century, remained committed to the notion of constructing prestige through other means. Mediation and diplomatic dialogue, peaceful resolution of conflicts, respect for national sovereignty as well as the promotion of human rights, were typical instruments used by Brazilian diplomats until recently. If advocating for human rights solely cannot be considered a sufficient condition for status enhancement, in the case of soft powers, it is a necessary one as moral authority becomes an important way to gain visibility and recognition. The commitment to human rights protection is a baseline which must be fulfilled for the country to be taken seriously and considered as a responsible global player.

The paper presented two alternative ways of Brazilian status-seeking focused on the state's moral authority which brought differing results. Between 2006 and 2018 Brazil, expressing its profile as both Western liberal democracy and a member of the Global South (the latter identity promoted less vigorously by the Temer administration), identified opportunities for status gains by engaging in efforts to sustain and develop the international human rights system. Performing the role of a good international citizen, the state applied a blend of social mobility, creativity, and competition strategies. Although the last approach, manifested in reticence towards condemning human rights abuses within the HRC, cost Brazil image losses, applying social mobility and creativity strategies brought positive outcomes. Brazil was recognized as an actor contributing both to causes supported by Western liberal states as well as topics important for developing countries.

The changes palpable within the HRC since 2019 resonated with major policy shifts and ideological convictions of key figures responsible for the foreign policy design. The populist foreign policy adopted by the government was a nod towards President Bolsonaro's most radical followers and evangelicals, the religious community whose representatives were increasing their influence over political life in Brazil. The state since 2019 was no longer interested in sustaining the human rights protection system. As a defender of the faith and endowed with moral superiority, Brazil wished for its thorough redefinition. As frequently repeated by President Bolsonaro and Ernesto Araújo in an obvious reference to Evangelist John, it was necessary to bring

“the truth back in[to]” the international system. To this end, Brazil engaged in a range of activities adopting approaches of social mobility and competition. Country representatives aligned their votes with Western states on matters of human rights abuses in Venezuela and changed the state’s position on some resolutions regarding Israel. Yet, the determination to raise awareness over the situation in Cuba and Venezuela seemed to be first and foremost triggered by a Manichean vision of the global reality in which those countries, due to their ideological affiliations, were classified as foes. This also explains the reticent posture towards Duterte’s rule in the Philippines. The most visible shift in the past two years refers to Brazil’s posture on matters of religious freedom, the protection of the family, sexual minorities, and women. Putting itself in the same row alongside countries such as Russia and Saudi Arabia, known for their ultraconservative normative agenda and compromised human rights protection standards, took a heavy toll on Brazil’s prestige and authority as a human rights promoter.

The international alignments of Brazil were clearly exposed in January 2019, when the head of the Brazilian diplomacy stressed the country’s admiration for the U.S., Israel, and Hungary. Nevertheless, entitlement to moral authority requires recognition from a broader number of states, including members of the clubs recognized for high human rights protection standards. Should policymakers stop seeking such recognition, Brazil might fail not only to prove who “the good guys” are but also face accusations of “not being a serious state”.²³

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²³ An expression incorrectly attributed to President Charles de Gaulle in the context of the Lobster War (a diplomatic dispute in 1961–1963 between Brazil and France) became a saying in Brazil.

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