CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY AND ANTI-IMMIGRATION POLICIES IN BRAZIL: A LOOK AT THE PANDEMIC PERIOD (2020 - 2021)

CRISE DA DEMOCRACIA E POLÍTICAS ANTI-IMIGRAÇÃO NO BRASIL: UM OLHAR SOBRE O PERÍODO DE PANDEMIA (2020 – 2021)

CRISIS DE LA DEMOCRACIA Y POLÍTICAS ANTIINMIGRACIÓN EN BRASIL: UNA MIRADA AL PERÍODO PANDÉMICO (2020 - 2021)

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ABSTRACT: The global scenario of international migration has been marked by practices and policies that have strengthened physical and symbolic borders. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, measures have been taken to prevent population displacement in order to contain the spread of the virus. The aim of this paper is to discuss the practices and narratives adopted in Brazil in relation to migration during the pandemic. Mobilizing democratic theories, and based on a bibliographic review and qualitative analysis of normative acts, the article seeks to reflect on the weakening of democracy in the country, observing, mainly, how nationalist, anti-democratic and anti-immigrant discourses and practices were presented during the first two years of the pandemic (2020 and 2021). We qualitatively analyzed how the then Brazilian government and other political actors mobilized the anti-immigration discourse, observing how these scenarios reflect, impact and/or relate to discussions around the crisis of democracy. Based on the analysis, it was possible to observe how the closing of borders was accompanied, in many cases, by an intensification of nationalist discourses and xenophobic actions in different arenas.

KEYWORDS: Pandemic. Migration. Democracy. Borders. Covid-19.

RESUMO: *O cenário global das migrações internacionais tem sido marcado por práticas e políticas de recrudescimento de fronteiras físicas e simbólicas. No contexto de pandemia da Covid-19, medidas de impedimento aos deslocamentos populacionais foram registradas, com o objetivo de conter o avanço do vírus. Nesse sentido, o objetivo deste trabalho é discorrer sobre práticas e narrativas adotadas no Brasil, em relação à temática migratória, durante período da pandemia. Mobilizando teorias democráticas, e com base em revisão bibliográfica e análise qualitativa de atos normativos, o artigo busca refletir sobre o enfraquecimento da democracia no país, observando, principalmente, como discursos e práticas nacionalistas, antidemocráticas e contrárias à imigração e a imigrantes se apresentaram durante os dois primeiros anos da pandemia (2020 e 2021). Analisamos qualitativamente como o então governo brasileiro e outros atores políticos mobilizaram o discurso anti-imigração, observando como esses cenários refletem, impactam e/ou se relacionam com as discussões em torno da crise da democracia. Com base nas análises, foi possível observar como o fechamento de fronteiras foi acompanhado, em muitos casos, por uma intensificação nos discursos nacionalistas e nas ações xenofóbicas em diferentes arenas.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Pandemia. Migração. Democracia. Fronteiras. Covid-19.*

RESUMEN: El escenario mundial de las migraciones internacionales se ha caracterizado por prácticas y políticas de endurecimiento de las fronteras físicas y simbólicas. En el contexto de la pandemia del Covid-19, se han adoptado medidas para evitar el desplazamiento de la población con el fin de contener la propagación del virus. El objetivo de este artículo es debatir las prácticas y narrativas adoptadas en Brasil en relación con la migración durante la pandemia. Movilizando teorías democráticas, y a partir de una revisión bibliográfica y análisis cualitativo de actos normativos, el artículo busca reflexionar sobre el debilitamiento de la democracia en el país, observando principalmente cómo se presentaron discursos y prácticas nacionalistas, antidemocráticas y antiinmigrantes durante los dos primeros años de la pandemia (2020 y 2021). Analizamos cualitativamente cómo el entonces gobierno brasileño y otros actores políticos movilizaron el discurso anti-inmigración, observando cómo estos escenarios reflejan, impactan y/o se relacionan con las discusiones en torno a la crisis de la democracia. A partir de los análisis, fue posible observar cómo el cierre de fronteras fue acompañado, en muchos casos, por una intensificación de los discursos nacionalistas y acciones xenófobas en diferentes arenas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Pandemia. Migración. Democracia. Fronteras. Covid-19.

Introduction

The reinforcement of nationalist and anti-immigration discourses, the hardening of borders and the strengthening of control and surveillance policies have been constant in Latin America's migratory reality. As Domenech and Dias (2020) point out, these situations are not new, but they have intensified in recent decades in various parts of the world, at times marked by an upsurge in the criminalization of migration and the securitization of borders. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this scenario has become even more striking. In a context of rapid contagion of the virus and health measures to prevent the spread of the disease, there has also been an upsurge in discourses and practices against any form of mobility, as well as an increase in stigmatizing narratives and violent actions against immigrant and refugee communities. The use of expressions such as "Chinese virus" and "Wuhan virus" by political actors, for example, shows how nationality can be mobilized in an attempt to find an "external enemy", which can reinforce xenophobia.

As Didier Fassin (2011) points out, control apparatuses, illegalization logics and repressive and restrictive immigration policies have been observed and reinforced by many nation states, highlighting the contradictions of globalization and forms of governance that encourage the movement of goods while restricting the mobility of people. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, these security logics have been reinforced, strengthened in contexts of

weakening democratic standards[3]. In Brazil, for example, ordinances were published that specifically restricted access to migrants and refugees from Venezuela[4], in a discriminatory and selective manner. Furthermore, while the land borders were open to tourists and international investors, the land borders remained closed, making it impossible for people who have no other resources to move to cross the border and request refuge (PRAZERES, 2020). The number of deportations of migrants was also substantially higher in 2020 compared to 2019 (SOUSA; LEITE, 2021). In addition, violent actions were recorded during the pandemic: in May 2020, João Manuel, an Angolan immigrant living in São Paulo, suffered xenophobic attacks and was murdered after an argument over the payment of emergency aid for immigrants (FIGUEIREDO, 2020). Months later, Falilatou Sarouna, a Togolese worker living in São Paulo, was arrested without evidence and arbitrarily detained for six months (PEREIRA; QUINTANILHA, 2021). In March 2021, a shelter in Roraima with more than 50 Venezuelan women and children was raided by the Federal Police who, without a court order and armed with guns and hoods, wanted to deport the migrants (FERNANDES; OLIVEIRA, 2021).

Faced with this and other scenarios, some questions emerge. What can these actions and events tell us about democracy? At the same time, is it possible to identify elements of a democratic crisis in Brazil by also looking at the migration phenomenon? How can these relationships be understood against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic? Based on these concerns, the article aims to look at the narratives and policies adopted by the Brazilian government, during the first two years of the pandemic, in relation to the migratory agenda. Based on theoretical discussions about the crisis of democracies (LEVITSKY; ZIBLATT, 2018; MOUNK, 2019; PRZEWORSKI, 2019; AVRITZER, 2018, 2019; BOZÓKI, 2015; BROWN, 2015; 2019), the paper seeks to discuss how nationalist, authoritarian and anti-immigrant practices have been reinforced during the Covid-19 global health emergency, reflecting on the impacts of these measures on the lives of migrants and refugees. The analytical path outlined, based on a bibliographical review and qualitative analysis of normative acts, is organized as

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[3] Democratic indicators are monitored by research institutes and can, from this perspective, support diagnoses about the weakening of democracies. Using data from *Varieties of Democracy 2017*, for example, Elkins (2018) found that, since 2010, some countries, including Brazil, have shown significant democratic declines in historical comparison.

[4] The first normative act published on the restriction of entry of migrants into the country was Interministerial Ordinance n. 120, of 17 March 2020, which provided "on the exceptional and temporary restriction of entry into the country of foreigners from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, as recommended by the National Health Surveillance Agency - Anvisa" (BRASIL, 2020). However, according to a note sent to Conectas (2021), Anvisa said it had not recommended a specific ban on Venezuelans entering the country (CONECTAS, 2021). Subsequently, Ordinance n. 125 was published on 19 March 2020, which extended the restriction on entry by land to people from other South American countries with which Brazil shares a border.

follows: initially, there will be a brief discussion of the current scenario of international migration, in order to discuss the strengthening of physical and symbolic borders. Next, we will present some theoretical notes on the ideas of the crisis of democracy, in order to understand, in general, how this debate has been structured in the literature. Finally, we will look at actions related to the migration agenda adopted by the Brazilian government during the pandemic, in order to observe how these measures relate to and fit into a situation of weakening democracy.

The work seeks to show that, although the democratic crisis involves countless other aspects, migration can be an important element of analysis, especially if we consider the impacts and consequences of anti-immigration policies, practices and discourses on the lives of various subjects. The analysis showed that, in relation to migration and mobility, the narratives and policies adopted by the Brazilian government during the pandemic can be understood based on the following interpretative keys: a) a reinforcement of nationalist ideas and the strengthening of the idea of the "undesirable immigrant" and the "other" as a threat (MOUNK, 2019; DOMENECH, 2015); and b) through an attack on pluralism and the idea of a *demos* made up of various and diverse citizens (BROWN, 2015; 2019). Faced with this scenario, and in a global context of impediments to the movement of people due to the Covid-19 pandemic, borders and barriers that were or are temporarily closed may remain so.

International migration and the pandemic: strengthening borders and stigmatization

The phenomenon of migration is not new, nor are the attitudes and policies adopted by different states in relation to migrant flows and populations. Eduardo Domenech (2015), when referring to the South American migratory scenario, points out that, back in the 20th century, policies to encourage immigration were adopted by various states, reaching their apogee with the consolidation of bureaucratic-administrative apparatuses. The population they wanted to attract, however, was European, which created the image of the "desirable immigrant": male, manual worker, white and of working age. Other individuals and social groups who did not meet these characteristics were the target of prohibition, detention, control policies and stigmatization. As the author argues, this paradox has been observed since the last century:

> The same policies to promote immigration, whose definition of "immigrant" implied a certain selection, implicitly contained a formula of exclusion: all foreigners were welcome, except for "exceptions", represented by "undesirable" immigrants or those who escaped the definition of a "good immigrant" (DOMENECH, 2015, p. 26, our translation).

In different countries, therefore, entry requirements and prohibitions were established, as well as deportations and exclusions, which mainly affected groups of immigrants considered "undesirable". It is worth noting that, in Brazil, the immigrant category emerged in the political field with the consolidation of the Brazilian state, according to Giralda Seyferth (2008). The author analyzes how this category, and also that of "foreigner", have acquired different meanings in legislation and political discourse on migration over time, according to political interests and different socio-economic and historical contexts. From this perspective, it is worth noting that the foreigner expected in the 19th century was the one considered "robust, healthy, diligent in the service they undertake" (SEYFERTH, 2008, p. 6, our translation).

In the 20th century, the ideal of desired immigration remained and was reinforced, as Seyferth (2008, p. 10, our translation) points out, by the whitening thesis, which defended the idea of a civilized, modern nation, formed by "selective miscegenation with the help of European immigration". Several normative acts that materialized these perspectives were issued over the years, such as Decree-Law 7,967, of 18 September 1945, which established, verbatim, that: "Art. 2 The need to preserve and develop, in the ethnic composition of the population, the most convenient characteristics of their European ancestry, as well as the defense of the national worker, shall be taken into account in the admission of immigrants" (our translation), embodying in a legal text the preference for immigrants of European origin.

Regarding groups considered "undesirable", according to Domenech (2015), Chinese immigrants were among the first to suffer from exclusionary policies. In the United States, for example, the "*Chinese Exclusion Act*" was implemented in 1882, a specific law created against these immigrants. In Latin America, Chinese immigration was also not seen as "advantageous", and measures to control this flow were recorded in countries such as Ecuador and Colombia. Around the 1930s, restrictions on Chinese immigration increased and other requirements to enter the territory were created in several countries, in a "restrictive turn in the state regulation of migration" (DOMENECH, 2015, p. 26, our translation). And despite acquiring other formats and characteristics, restrictive policies towards migrants have continued to be adopted in the 21st century.

In the Brazilian case, it is important to mention that, until 2017, the legislation that defined the legal situation of foreigners in the country was Law n. 6,815, of 19 August 1980 (Foreigner's Statute), drawn up in the context of the civil-military dictatorship. The law, which approached migration from a national security perspective (RAMOS; VEDOVATO;

BAENINGER, 2020), was only repealed in 2017, with the enactment of Law n. 13,445, of 24 May 2017 (Migration Law). This law, the result of a struggle by immigrants, refugees and civil society organizations, is aligned with a human rights perspective, although important vetoes were made at the time of its sanction (VILLEN; QUINTANILHA, 2020).

In the current scenario, migration control policies are part of a global border regime, through practices to regulate flows which, as Domenech (2015) points out, are driven by a technocracy linked to concepts such as "migratory governance", "management" and "border control". "Undesirable immigrants" are also seen as threats, as "invaders", as illegal and often as responsible for the loss of job opportunities for nationals. The condition of illegality often linked to those who move is seen by many authors (DE GENOVA, 2004; SQUIRE, 2015; FASSIN, 2011) as an ambivalent socio-political production, which has the objectives of exclusion, precariousness of labor and racialization.

If during the 19th and 20th centuries Chinese immigrants were one of the groups seen as undesirable, during the Covid-19 pandemic stigmatization against this group was also a reality. The first cases of coronavirus infection were detected in January 2020 in China, in the city of Wuhan, which became the epicenter of the pandemic. From then on, expressions such as "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus" began to appear, associating the disease with nationality or a specific location. As Deisy Ventura (2020) points out, given the spread of the disease and the increase in the number of people infected, there has been an upsurge in cases of discrimination and violence against certain groups, mainly Chinese migrants living in the West. The use of these expressions to refer to the disease has also been made by government and political leaders, as we will discuss below. And the impact of this has not been only rhetorical.

According to Seyferth (2008), immigration has always mobilized contradictory state positions, which sometimes saw migrants as necessary and sometimes as a problem. In times of crisis, as the author points out, the association of immigration with danger is reinforced, as are xenophobic, racist and nation-protecting sentiments and rhetoric. In countries whose democracies are in crisis (LEVITSKY; ZIBLATT, 2018), in governments whose leaders are authoritarian and linked to the extreme right, and in cases of "illliberal" democracies (KRASTEV; VAN TIL, 2016), these discursive strategies are added to the reinforcement of nationalism and other state actions to restrict immigration, whether by closing borders, detaining immigrants or arbitrary deportations and exclusions.

In light of this, it is worth asking what this scenario and these measures tell us about these democracies. How can we understand the anti-immigration actions, practices and

discourses - reinforced during the pandemic - based on theories and analyses of contemporary democracy? Although these are complex questions and would require efforts beyond the scope of this work, we believe it is possible to outline some reflections on these points.

Democratic weakening and the crisis of democracy

The concepts of *democracy* and crisis are not consensual. As Mendonça and Cunha (2018) point out, ideas around the notion of democracy can change depending on the context and the approach or theoretical line. In this sense, several debates can be held about its variation and form (SANTOS; AVRITZER, 2002; MIGUEL, 2005), which highlights the relevance of discussing these different conceptions, even though the perspectives are vast and quite tense. In the assessment of authors such as Samuel Huntington (1993) and Adam Przeworski (2019), for example, democracy is linked to the possibility of changing groups in power through free and fair elections. In this sense, democracy is "a mechanism for processing conflicts" (PRZEWORSKI, 2019, p. 7, our translation).

The concept of crisis also has its variations and different interpretations and uses. While for Przeworski (2019) democracy is linked to procedural and electoral dimensions, the concept of crisis involves, in the author's view, aspects such as administration, politics and socio-cultural dimensions. He also believes that the economy plays an important role in maintaining democratic regimes, since, in his view, democracies are less likely to weaken when the economy is stable.

Although in different traditions, the importance of institutions for democracy is addressed by other authors and currents of democratic theory. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) argue that institutional degradation is central to understanding the crisis of today's democracies. According to the authors, who focus mainly on the US scenario following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, contemporary democracies are not weakened by coups d'état, but by processes in which they are put in check by politicians who have already been elected. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), the impoverishment of democratic standards is less evident today compared to processes experienced in some countries at other times in history. In a different assessment to that of Przeworski (2019), whose interpretation is that crises involve institutional ruptures, Levistki and Ziblatt (2018) argue that these processes are also permeated by aspects involving the degradation of informal rules and non-institutional mechanisms.

The idea is that, while in the past the failures were more evident, the impoverishment of democratic standards is more subtle today. In this sense, Haggard and Kaufman (2016) believe that military coups have given way to the excessive actions of elected political leaders, who use their powers to undermine the legitimacy of their opponents and restrict civil and political liberties. Along the same lines, Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq warn that:

> Today, many illiberal democracies arise through the victory of candidates or parties that pursue authoritarian policies, try to extinguish the political space for dissent and competition, and aim to capture the machinery of state that provides for fair elections and administration. Such politicians and parties pursuing an illiberal democratic agenda have a paradoxical quality. On the one hand, they can claim a democratic mandate. On the other hand, they strive to dismantle democracy from the inside out (GINSBURG; HUQ, 2018, p. 21, our translation).

Understanding how migration fits into this context of weakening democratic standards, however, requires the consideration of other approaches to the notion of democracy, which go beyond its interpretation focused on procedures, the existence of elections or aspects such as the alternation of power, as the authors mentioned above might suggest. In order to understand how migratory policies are accommodated to this scenario of democratic crisis, we believe it is relevant to shed light on different notions of democracy.

In this sense, for Wendy Brown (2015; 2019), democracy must be understood on the basis of principles such as political equality and the idea of *demos*. In the author's assessment, it is important for democratic regimes to be centered on the cultivation of society as the locus of the common, of sharing, of a space in which different subjects exist and are thought of as a whole for the provision of public goods and rights (BROWN, 2015; 2019).

For her, equality is fundamental to ensuring that the exercise of power is authorized, but also the responsibility of all. When equality is absent, the people (or the demos) cease to govern, popular sovereignty is not present and democracy itself is weakened. In a neo-Marxist approach, Brown (2019) argues that it is possible to observe, in many countries, the reinforcement of hate speech, public manifestations of racism and anti-Semitism, as well as an increase in exclusionary and nationalist rhetoric. According to the author, this scenario and the rise of far-right leaders have brought challenges to political theory in terms of its nomenclature and understanding. For her, however, the interpretation of these phenomena demands attention to rationalities such as the neoliberal one, in which "government is transmuted into governance and management" (BROWN, 2015, p. 20, our translation).

Wendy Brown understands neoliberalism as a rationality whose impacts go beyond the economic sphere, strengthening processes of de-democratization. For the author, neoliberal governmentality acts - in the most varied fields of social life - through a demonization of the social and the political, a discrediting of the value of the state, as well as an attack on equality combined with a defence of traditional moralities (BROWN, 2019). The processes of crisis or weakening of democracy, therefore, must take into account, in Brown's view, how this rationality played an important role in building the foundations for anti-democratic forces to grow stronger in the second decade of the 21st century, in a process that fueled racism, class resentment, violence and inequality. Exclusionary discourses and practices, in this context, are mostly directed at marginalized individuals and groups, such as women, the black population, LGBTQIA+ and migrant and refugee communities. By denying any state intervention (in the market, morality or the family), the aim, according to Brown (2019, p. 24, our translation) is to deny the idea of the social, "radically restricting the scope of democratic political power in nation states".

These attacks on democracy and the very notion of *demos* are present in workplaces, educational logics, discourses and state actions, and also represent a loss of political meaning and citizenship. And beyond the epistemic and ethical dimensions, this attack on pluralism, the idea of the social and the notion of *demos* has practical impacts on the lives of many people, mainly through the dismantling of public policies, stigmatizing discourses and the reinforcement of inequalities. The weakening of democracy, in this sense, goes beyond institutional and procedural aspects, as argued by the authors mentioned at the beginning of this topic, but also involves processes in which basic requirements for democracy are undermined. Precariousness that already exists is thus reinforced, to the extent that there is a loss of state capacity, the dismantling of public structures and an increase in restrictive measures for certain social groups, such as migrants and refugees (BIROLI, 2020).

These processes are also part of scenarios of exacerbated nationalism and the rhetoric of national unification, as Bozóki (2015) points out. According to the author, who focuses on the process of de-democratization experienced in Hungary, strategies adopted under the guise of nationalism reinforce inequalities, expose xenophobia and criminalize certain groups - such as immigrants, especially undocumented ones - under the pretext of protecting the nation and the *demos*, of which these groups are not considered part. Nationalist rhetoric is adopted with the aim of defining the nation as a safe space that must be protected from external threats and

enemies, which can be either the government's opponents or various minorities considered dangerous to the nation's values, ideals, identities and "social cohesion".

As Gozdziak (2019) and Yascha Mounk (2019) point out, this fear of the "other" has led to a series of anti-immigrant actions and policies in various places. The strengthening of surveillance and border control procedures, policies to indiscriminately restrict immigration flows and narratives that criminalize migration and migrants, for example, are reinforced by these logics. As Seyferth (2008, p. 2, our translation) points out, "nationalist ideologies assume the existence of univocal communities, appealing to a subjective idea of nation that excludes those classified by the category 'foreigner'", articulating processes of exclusion and racialization against those individuals considered "other".

During the Covid-19 pandemic, discourses and practices of this nature were observed in several countries. Under the pretext of containing the transmission of the virus, borders were selectively closed, harming populations of certain origins, as we will discuss below. In addition, narratives against immigration have intensified, as already mentioned, especially those focused on stigmatizing certain migrant communities, reinforcing pre-existing racism. In the United States, for example, Donald Trump announced, while he was still president and shortly after the pandemic broke out, that the US would break off relations with the World Health Organization, since the organization, according to him, was following directions from China, which was responsible for the emergence and worldwide spread of Covid-19 (IFANGER; POGGETTO, 2020). According to Ifanger and Poggetto (2020), Trump's accusations, very much induced by fear strategies and reinforced by fake news, have deepened actions of racism and xenophobia against Chinese and their descendants, who have been the target of violence and intolerance.

According to Adida, Dionne and Platas (2018), in research conducted on the Ebola epidemic, politicization around the threat to public health, such as the discourse of political leaders in relation to China and the spread of the virus in the current public health context, can mobilize public opinion and increase the exclusion of immigrants, generating short- and medium-term effects for vulnerable populations. As Daniel Vega Macías (2021) points out, metaphors and representations of migrants as "invaders" and as potential "transmitters" of diseases were already common in other historical periods, but have been reinforced in the recent context of the pandemic. According to the author, these positions are being targeted by far-right groups, who are strategically evoking these narratives in order to question the phenomenon of migration and the presence of immigrants in the territory.

In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, after Donald Trump used the term "Chinese virus" on Twitter in March 2020, the number of mentions of the term increased from around 16,500 to 177,327 the following week (BUDHWANI; SUN apud VENTURA, 2020). In addition to personifying the threat and associating it with a specific nationality or ethnicity, these attitudes reinforce stigmas, xenophobic acts and violence against minorities. As Ventura (2020) points out,

> Stigma and xenophobia have the effect, especially during a pandemic, of not only spreading verbal and physical violence against their victims. It also leads stigmatized populations to fear society and the authorities, and to stay away from health services, which hinders disease control, thus putting both their health and that of the community at risk (VENTURA, 2020, p. 96, our translation).

In addition to these impacts, it is possible to see how this strategy of naming and personifying is also about an attempt to find "culprits" for the recent global pandemic scenario, especially in view of the social and economic impacts it has had. The issue of constructing a "threat" to society has been analyzed by several authors (KAYA, 2017; INGLEHART; NORRIS, 2016) when looking at the rise of far-right leaders and parties in contemporary democracies. The rhetoric adopted against diversity and this "other" is an element that plays an important role in influencing certain sectors of the population, especially the most "insecure" layers of society - informal workers, the unemployed, families living in areas with a concentration of immigrants, for example. These discourses, often exploited by political groups and leaders, can reinforce resentment and stimulate manifestations of xenophobia, racism and religious intolerance, for example (KAYA, 2017).

According to this argument, outsiders, such as immigrants and refugees, would be partly responsible for the economic recession, for depriving nationals of job opportunities or for being to blame for the spread of the virus in the context of a pandemic. As Mara Luna (2020) points out, discourses associating the virus with specific ethnic-racial groups have been common in many governments, as mentioned above. These practices reflect, once again, the reinforcement of imaginaries that construct an "other" as a threat, from whom the nation must be protected, in scenarios of defense of nationalisms and an idea of a homogeneous nation.

Brazil and the setbacks

Although the crisis of democracies is a phenomenon that affects several countries, there are differences in the processes and scenarios experienced in each place. The Brazilian case, according to Leonardo Avritzer (2019), differs from the dynamics experienced in other countries because, among other factors, the country does not have such a consolidated democratic tradition, especially in relation to the validity of rights and civil and judicial elements. On this issue, Avritzer (2018; 2019) argues that there is a pendulum nature to democracy in Brazil, marked by moments of democratic expansion and regression. According to the author, from 1946 to 1964, and from 1994 to 2010, public policies and democracy were in harmony. In this context, the expansion of participation - which took place after the 1990s - was part of a pendulum structure of democratic expansion, with the establishment of participatory institutions, an upsurge in participation and the adoption of important social policies. After the military dictatorship and the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, the country reasonably consolidated a democratic political system, which guaranteed the rotation of powers, free and fair elections, public policies for the population, a reduction in poverty and growing support for democracy.

However, the scenario has changed. After 2013, this process of democratic consolidation took a turn for the worse, beginning a period of democratic degradation that worsened over the years. As Avritzer (2018) points out, the democratic pendulum has swung back, showing strong opposition to established public policies, rejection of the institutionalization of participation, and the extinction of secretariats and ministries linked to the expansion of rights. Added to this was the constant strengthening of discourses, practices and measures that were markedly anti-democratic and against participation, adopted in the period that coincided with the start of the pandemic. For the author, these regressions cannot be understood simply as a "slip", but are part of a pendulum movement in the process of Brazilian democratic construction.

There are various interpretative perspectives and possible analytical focuses for understanding the Brazilian political-institutional scenario in recent years. The actions of the armed forces, the actions of the judiciary, the role of the media and the elites, the impacts of the interruption of Dilma Rousseff's presidential mandate, the dismantling of public policies and the ultra-conservative agenda are some of the aspects that involve the context of setbacks in the country. It would not be possible - nor plausible - to cover all the points here. As Avritzer (2018; 2019) argues, part of these setbacks observed in the country involve violations of constitutional guarantees, tensions between powers and also a situation marked by a high and unprecedented

level of intolerance, present in speeches, policies and an anti-rights agenda. The discourse of national sovereignty, homeland and a "Brazil above all" is legitimized under the attack on political pluralism, human rights, diversity and a *demos* (BROWN, 2015) made up of people with diverse values and characteristics. In Angela Gomes' (2018) assessment, Jair Bolsonaro (President of the Republic from 2019 to 2022) took advantage of a local scenario of weakening democracy and rejection of the left in the country (mainly based on the image of the fight against corruption), and a global context of the advance of the extreme right and nationalist actors. For the author,

> However, it is important to understand how Bolsonaro alters this tradition. He does so, in my opinion, when he articulates a discourse of anger, whose rhetoric is designed to mobilize support for violent actions, to be carried out by his government and by members of his political bases, authorized to arm themselves to fight those identified as enemies of the government/country. In this way, he gives a positive signal, in the public world, to behaviors and feelings that, existing in the private world, were not presented as a model to be taken by citizens (GOMES, 2018, p. 145, our translation).

Against this background of setbacks, we therefore return to aspects that make it possible to analyze the Brazilian case based on the measures taken in relation to the migratory agenda. In this sense, the creation of enemies and the attack on plurality are, in yet another case, central elements. With regard to the migrant population, the actions and speeches adopted by the last government were not far removed from this logic. Even before he was elected, when he was still a federal deputy, Bolsonaro classified refugees as "the scum of the earth" (AZEVEDO, 2015). At the beginning of 2019, the government announced Brazil's withdrawal from the Global Compact for Migration and, in the same year, Ordinance n. 666, of 25 July 2019, was published by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, which allowed for the summary deportation or barring of entry of foreigners considered "dangerous"[5]. And if anti-immigration rhetoric and the politicization of issues by political leaders promote and reinforce stigmatization and violence, it's no different in Brazil. With the increase in the immigration flow of Venezuelans in recent years, there has been a request to close the border with the neighboring country by the former governor of Roraima (RODRIGUES, 2018), the burning of the house of Venezuelan migrants in Boa Vista (NUNES, 2018), as well as other manifestations of xenophobia against this population. In addition, in September 2019, a bar run by Palestinian

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[5] After receiving criticism from sectors and organizations working on migration issues, a new ordinance was published by the federal government, n. 770, of 11 October 2019. Despite being similar to the previous one, the new normative act introduced relevant changes in some points, such as increasing the deadline, in the case of deportation, for the migrant to present a defense or leave the country voluntarily, from 48 hours to 5 days.

and Syrian refugees was the target of attacks with bottles and gas in São Paulo (AMENDOLA, 2019), and in the 2020 elections, anti-immigration and anti-Venezuelan rhetoric was mobilized by candidates for the mayoralty of Boa Vista, the capital of Roraima (ZANINI, 2020).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, this process intensified. Like Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters used the expression "Chinese virus" to refer to the coronavirus, while Eduardo Bolsonaro, a federal deputy and the president's son, blamed China for the pandemic and compared the country's stance to the former Soviet Union's attitude towards the Chernobyl nuclear accident (FELLET, 2020). A similar stance was adopted by Ernesto Araújo, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, who, at a ministerial meeting in April 2020 and in an article on his blog, also blamed China for the spread of Covid-19, denouncing the country's ideological plan to spread what he called the "communistvirus". According to Araújo's blog post called *Metapolítica*, the coronavirus accelerates a "globalist project" which, according to him, "was already being carried out through climatism or climate alarmism, gender ideology, politically correct dogmatism, immigrationism, racialism or the reorganization of society by the principle of race, anti-nationalism, scientism" (ARAÚJO, 2020, our translation).

The stance against immigration, evident in what he calls "immigrationism", can be seen not only in speeches, but also in government regulations and xenophobic actions adopted by the population. Narratives such as these demonstrate how, in Brown's (2019) assessment, these reactions or this backlash also speak of an idea of resentment for dethroned privileges, in which the blame for crises lies in the theft of jobs by immigrants, minorities and other groups that do not deserve inclusion and are not part of the nation. The proposal of the then Brazilian government was expressed, on many occasions, in the rescue of Christian values and the fight against "globalism", "immigrationism" or even "gender ideology".

Stigmatization, prejudice and violence against migrants are reinforced by this hostile rhetoric towards immigrants and refugees. As in the United States, there have been cases of racism against Chinese people and their descendants during the pandemic (MOREIRA, 2020), as mentioned above, as well as other acts of discrimination against immigrants. As mentioned in the introduction to this text, in May 2020, João Manuel, a 47-year-old Angolan, was stabbed to death by a Brazilian in São Paulo, after an argument over the payment of emergency aid for migrants (FIGUEIREDO, 2020). In June 2021, an online event about LGBTQIA+ migrants was interrupted by racist attacks, shouts of "Bolsonaro 2022" and violent sexual and xenophobic speeches (MANTOVANI, 2021). The same happened in June at two other online events on migration, which were interrupted by hate messages against migrants, women, black people

and LGBTQIA+ people, as well as Nazi-like demonstrations (DELFIM, 2021). As Gomes (2018) points out, political rhetoric can mobilize violent actions against those considered to be the enemy or against those who, because they are foreigners, would not be able to access the same rights as nationals.

Anti-immigration actions during the pandemic did not stop there. In 2020 alone, 2,901 people were deported, an increase of 5,708% compared to 2019, when the number was 36 migrants (SOUSA; LEITE, 2021). Among other measures adopted by the government, Interministerial Ordinance n. 120 of 17 March 2020 stands out, the first normative act that, under the pretext of the pandemic, established specific restriction measures on the entry of Venezuelan people into Brazilian territory. As Ruseishvili and Truzzi (2020) point out, the text of the Ordinance establishes, at various points, differentiated and discriminatory treatment of Venezuelan migrants, both by depriving them of circulation in the border region in Roraima, by threatening them with immediate repatriation and disqualification from applying for refuge, and by prohibiting them from entering the country even with a residence permit and identification document and migratory registration. At the end of July 2020, tourists were allowed to enter the country by air, while land and water borders remained closed, preventing asylum seekers who did not have the resources for other forms of entry from entering the country (PRAZERES, 2020), which conflicts with the provisions of the Refugee Law[6], the Migration Law[7] and international treaties such as the Cartagena Declaration[8].

In addition to the aforementioned normative act, more than 30 ordinances were published during this pandemic period[9], following the same exclusionary perspective towards certain migrants, mainly from Venezuela. The significant number of deportations, as mentioned above, was made possible by these ordinances that barred the entry of immigrants, especially those who tried to enter Brazilian territory via land borders (SOUSA; LEITE, 2021). After complaints and pressure from organizations and civil society, Ordinance n. 655, of 23 June 2021, which dealt with the "exceptional and temporary restriction on the entry of foreigners of any nationality into the country", was issued, without, however, removing existing loopholes. The text, which was the most recent at the time of writing this article, expressly provided for limiting the reception of migrants in situations of vulnerability according to the "means

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[6] Law n. 9,474 of 22 July 1997.
[7] Law n. 13,445 of 24 May 2017.
[8] 1984 Cartagena Declaration.
[9] The normative acts issued by the federal government during the Covid-19 pandemic, including those not related to migration, are available on the website: https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/Portaria/quadro_portaria.htm

available" and opened loopholes for the delimitation of migratory quotas, contrary to the meaning of the Migration Law in force in Brazil[10], as denounced by civil society organizations (CONECTAS, 2021). Furthermore, according to Serra and Amorim (2021), in addition to being late, the new normative act did not explicitly address the complete reopening of borders, nor did it preserve the restriction on people entering the country by land and water, maintaining obstacles for migrants in vulnerable situations to apply for refuge in Brazil.

In different spaces, people who migrate are inserted into logics and contexts that criminalize them and see them as illegal or unwanted. It is important to mention that, for migrants who are in an irregular situation, the processes are even more complex. The condition of being undocumented is often produced and reinforced by states, which impose bureaucratic, financial and political barriers that make it difficult for people to acquire or regularize their documents. For some scholars, this is a policy of undocumentation, which reinforces the invisibility and precariousness of the most vulnerable migrants, mainly informal workers. As Caggiano and Mombello (2020) describe, these measures adopted by many states depend on the production and expansion of illegality, since border control measures become more socially acceptable when they are adopted for people seen as "threats". This is also related to the different treatment given to immigrants depending on their nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, etc., since, as Feldman-Bianco, Domenech and Sanjurjo (2020) point out, migration practices, discourses and policies are adopted unequally and differently for citizens of certain nationalities - which is noticeable in Brazilian history, even with express legal provisions to this effect, as reported above.

Conclusion

This paper sought to discuss aspects of the Brazilian democratic and migratory scenario in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the aim of shedding light on the measures adopted by the then government in relation to the immigration agenda. The idea was to reflect on the weakening of democracy, looking mainly at how nationalist and anti-migration narratives, practices and policies appeared and strengthened during the first two years of the health emergency caused by the coronavirus. Based on the discussions, it was possible to

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[10] Law n. 13,445 of 24 May 2017, instituted the Migration Law, establishing, among other aspects, that Brazilian migration policy is governed by the principles of "universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights" (item I of art. 3), as well as providing for non-discrimination on the basis of criteria or procedures for admission to national territory (item IV of art. 3) and the repudiation of "any form of discrimination" (item II of art. 3) (BRASIL, 2017).

observe that the actions adopted in relation to immigrants and refugees expose logics that further foreignize these subjects, seeing them as threats, as undesirable immigrants or as guilty for the spread of the virus. In addition, the use of expressions such as "Chinese virus" and the association between Covid-19 and immigrant communities can reinforce stigmatization, racism and xenophobia, especially among those who are most vulnerable.

As has been pointed out throughout the discussion, the issue of migration has always mobilized contradictory positions on the part of states, which have sometimes valued the presence of immigrants and sometimes seen them as dangerous or enemies. Racism, economic and political interests, social and geopolitical contexts all have an impact on these perceptions. In recent scenarios, such as a major health emergency like the Covid-19 pandemic, practices and policies against immigration and migrants have become stronger and more acute, especially in a country where important democratic principles are being called into question.

The measures presented have a direct impact on the lives of immigrants and refugees, and are also part of and reinforce a broad scenario of democratic weakening, the loss of the idea of *demos* and the loss of democratic values, such as respect for plurality and diversity. The "other" as a threat, constructed by nationalist and exclusionary rhetoric, is even more striking in a scenario of pandemic and socio-economic crisis, in which the future is uncertain and the present is chaotic.

In practice, these actions end up preventing migrants from accessing their rights in places of destination, people from requesting refuge to flee situations of persecution, or causing these populations to have their lives threatened or impacted by measures such as deportation or expulsion. Bureaucratic deadlocks, exclusion, fear, racism, xenophobia and violence are some of the difficulties faced by migrants in accessing public policies and services in Brazil, as well as in carrying out procedures such as document regularization.[11]

It should be noted that there are other aspects, such as historical and institutional factors, which would merit a more in-depth analysis in order to understand the phenomenon of migration and democracy. The point here was to try to demonstrate that migration is not outside discussions about democracy and, above all, its crises. To understand the weakening of

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[11] Due to these difficulties in documentary procedures, collectives and migrant organizations in the country launched the #RegularizaçãoJá campaign during the pandemic, which proposes the permanent, immediate and unconditional regularization of immigrants in Brazil. Other countries such as Portugal and Italy have promoted the regularization of migrants who had pending regulatory processes and applications, in order to ensure that these people obtained their documents and were able to access public services and aid during the pandemic. For more information, see: Delfim (2020).

democracy without capturing the exclusions of people who build and make up this *demos* is to disregard some of the possible reasons for the very idea of a democratic crisis.

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