



The Insurrection Wave: A Comparative Assessment of Anti- Government Attacks in Germany, the US, and Brazil

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Counter-Terrorism

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Abstract

The storming in Berlin of the Reichstag in August 2020, the US Capitol in January 2021, and the Brazilian Supreme Court in Brazil in January 2023 were all violent events where individuals and groups attempted to overthrow or challenge democratically elected governments. While the specific circumstances and motivations of each case differ, there are common action triggers, including: the widespread presence of conspiracy theories; the successful misuse of social media for anti-government mobilisation; and the mainstreaming of extremist and anti-democratic rhetoric through political legitimisation. With these three variables in mind, this policy brief conducts a comparative analysis of the elements that allowed for insurrection to happen in Germany, the US, and Brazil. This paper aims to help understand whether there are elements that make democracies especially vulnerable to violent insurrections and, in identifying them, propose ways forward to make counter-terrorism and prevention policies stronger.

Keywords: COVID-19, conspiracy, anti-government, extremist, insurrection, transnational, violence, counter-terrorism

Introduction

COVID-19 was a phase of revelation and intensification of social strains, in which social inequalities became more evident and institutional responsibilities in the overall management of society more apparent. The result was a deep economic recession and growing social discontent, from which loosely organised online circles and offline protests emerged and were frequently co-opted by radical elements. In particular, anti-democratic leaders and groups used disinformation and conspiracy theories to promote anti-government narratives and agendas up until today. The storming of the Reichstag (Parliament) in Berlin in August 2020, the US Capitol insurrection in January 2021, and the occupation of the Brazilian federal government buildings in Brasília in January 2023, were all violent events where rioters attempted to overthrow or challenge democratically elected governments. While the specific circumstances and motivations of each case differ, there are common action triggers, including: the widespread presence of conspiracy theories; the successful misuse of social media for anti-government mobilisation; and the mainstreaming of extremist and anti-democratic rhetoric through political legitimisation. With these three variables in mind, this policy brief conducts a comparative analysis of the elements that allowed for insurgency to happen in Germany, the US, and Brazil. In doing so, it not only stresses the regional factors that fuelled the attacks, but also shows the transnational elements that allowed for what may represent a short-lived but impactful global insurrection wave. Ultimately, this paper aims to illustrate what elements seem to make our democracies especially vulnerable to violent attacks, and proposes ways to make counter-terrorism and prevention efforts against them more efficient.

The Events

Germany

On Saturday, 29 August 2020, two demonstrations were organised in Berlin by the anti-lockdown Querdenken movement and led by far-right politicians of the *Alternative für Deutschland* party (Alternative for Germany, or AfD). The demonstrations gathered around 38,000 people (double the number expected) and were originally meant to peacefully oppose the wearing of face masks and other government measures intended to stop the spread of COVID-19.¹ The demonstrations had originally been banned, but a court eventually allowed them to go ahead on the condition that protective measures against COVID-19 were respected.² This did not happen. In addition, amid the protests, a group of people associated with the international and domestic far-right stormed the Reichstag building. The rioters bore hate symbols, “Merkel must go!” banners, and waved the flag of former imperial Germany, used by the anti-constitutional and conspiratorial *Reichsbürger* (Reich Citizens) movement to invoke pre-World War II borders.³ The police tried

¹ “Fast 40.000 Menschen bei Corona-Demos - Sperren am Reichstag durchbrochen” [Almost 40,000 people at Corona demonstration - barriers at the Reichstag broken], *rbb*, 24, 29 August, 2020, https://www.rbb24.de/politik/thema/2020/coronavirus/beitraege_neu/2020/08/demonstrationen-samstag-corona-querdenken-gegendememos.html; “‘Anti-corona’ extremists try to storm German parliament”, *The Guardian*, 29 August, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/29/berlin-braces-for-anti-coronavirus-protest-against-covid-19-restrictions>; “German leaders hit out at protesters’ attempt to storm Reichstag”, *The Guardian*, 30 August, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/30/german-leaders-hit-out-at-protesters-attempt-to-storm-reichstag-covid>.

² “Germany coronavirus: Anger after attempt to storm parliament”, *BBC*, 30 August, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53964147>.

³ “‘Anti-corona’ extremists try to storm German parliament”, *The Guardian*, 30 August, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/29/berlin-braces-for-anti-coronavirus-protest-against-covid-19-restrictions>; “Germany slams attempt to storm Reichstag after COVID-19 protest”, *euronews*, 29 August, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/29/thousands-of-anti-corona-protesters-flood-berlin>.

to contain the mob while outnumbered and attacked by stones and bottles.⁴ The rioters were eventually disbanded by the security forces, but the event ended with injured police and a total of 316 arrests.⁵

United States

On 6 January 2021 (henceforth referred to as January 6), following the defeat of then-president Donald Trump, a mob of supporters called to action by Trump himself attacked the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. In doing so, they sought to prevent a joint session of Congress from counting the Electoral College votes, which would formalise the victory of the leader of the opposition, Democratic candidate Joe Biden. Their actions were based on the idea that the election had been “stolen by emboldened radical-left Democrats” - a conspiratorial narrative which had been legitimised by Trump.⁶ Thousands of rioters entered the Capitol, vandalising it, and assaulting police officers and reporters along the way.⁷ Five people died during, or in relation to the event, and hundreds were injured.⁸ By the evening of that day, the Capitol had been cleared out, and the counting of electoral votes resumed on 7 January, resulting in the confirmation of President-elect Biden. A week after the insurrection, the House of Representatives impeached Trump for incitement to insurrection.⁹ As of today, more than 1,000 people have been charged in relation to January 6.¹⁰

Brazil

After then-president Jair Bolsonaro lost the general elections on 8 January 2023 (henceforth referred to as January 8), thousands of his supporters attacked Brazil’s federal government buildings in the capital, Brasília, aiming to violently overthrow the democratically elected President Luis Inácio Lula de Silva. Rioters faced the military and riot police, most of whom physically confronted the mob. Rioters managed to take over and vandalise most of the Congress building, and ransacked ceremonial rooms in the Supreme Court.¹¹ The attack took place a week after Lula’s inauguration and followed several weeks of unrest from Bolsonaro’s supporters, who claimed fraud around the elections. At the time of the riots, neither Bolsonaro nor Lula were in the capital.¹² In spite of that, in the afternoon of January 8 Lula announced that he authorised a

4 “Germany slams attempt to storm Reichstag after COVID-19 protest”, *euronews*, 29 August, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/29/thousands-of-anti-corona-protesters-flood-berlin>.

5 “Germany coronavirus: Hundreds arrested in German ‘anti-corona’ protests”, *BBC*, 30 August, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53959552>.

6 “Read Trump’s Jan. 6 Speech, a key part of impeachment trial”, *NPR*, 10 February, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial>.

7 “January 6 Capitol riot: Charges, convictions, trials two years on”, *Al Jazeera*, 6 January, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/6/january-6-capitol-riot-charges-convictions-trials-two-years-on>.

8 “Officers’ Injuries, Including Concussions, Show Scope of Violence at Capitol Riot”, *New York Times*, 11 February, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/11/us/politics/capitol-riot-police-officer-injuries.html>.

9 “The House impeaches Trump for ‘incitement of insurrection,’ setting up a Senate trial”, *The New York Times*, 13 January, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/us/incitement-of-insurrection.html>.

10 “Over 1,100 rioters have been charged for Jan. 6. Many name Trump in their statements”, *NPR*, 30 July, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/30/1190970499/over-1-100-rioters-have-been-charged-for-jan-6-many-name-trump-in-their-statement>.

11 “*Veja as imagens dos palácios de Brasília depredados por golpistas*” [See the images of Brasília’s palaces vandalized by coup plotters], UOL – Congresso em Foco, 8 January, 2023, <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/projeto-bula/reportagem/patriotas-nao-vandalos-veja-as-imagens-dos-palacios-de-brasilia-depredados/>; “Bolsonaro backers ransack Brazil presidential palace, Congress, Supreme Court”, *Reuters*, 9 January, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/bolsonaro-supporters-invade-congress-presidential-palace-brasilia-2023-01-08/>.

12 “Brazilian police retake control of government buildings after violent breach by pro-Bolsonaro rioters”, *Le Monde*, 8 January, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/01/08/bolsonaro-supporters-swarm-brazil-congress-clash-with-police_6010814_4.html.

federal public security intervention against the riots.¹³ By the evening, the government buildings had been cleared up by Brazilian security forces.¹⁴ Dozens of people were injured, including police officers, and hundreds arrested, including senior military police officers.¹⁵

The Triggers

Conspiracy theories

Originating from among the American far-right political sphere in 2017, the QAnon conspiracy theory centres on fabricated claims about former President Donald Trump fighting a secret cabal of satanic paedophiles linked to a “deep state” - including Trump’s administration.¹⁶ Legitimising such narratives, Trump encouraged distrust towards democratic institutions by publicly stating that “unelected deep state operatives who defy the voters to push their own secret agendas are truly a threat to democracy itself”.¹⁷ By the time he lost the 2020 elections, Trump’s followers had come to believe that secretive elites had rigged the electoral process. Once again, Trump fuelled these suspicions by speaking of “stolen elections”, spreading both fear and anger.¹⁸ Two months later, conspiratorial thinking and political validation turned into violence when thousands rallied on the Ellipse in Washington on 6 January 2021, which ended in the invasion of the US Capitol.¹⁹ The rally claimed election fraud and, under Trump’s leadership, called on Vice President Mike Pence to overturn the 2020 election results by refusing to certify certain electoral votes.²⁰ At the riot, the QAnon movement was particularly relevant, with many attendees carrying QAnon symbols and signs.²¹ Since the Capitol assault, which was followed by dozens of arrests of individuals mostly associated with far-right groups and conspiracy theories, thirteen defendants have been linked to QAnon.²²

While initially American, QAnon became a mainstream conspiracy theory abroad quite quickly, including in Germany. There, the QAnon conspiracy theory was spread through the Stuttgart-based *Querdenken* movement (Lateral Thinking). The *Querdenken* was created to curb the

¹³ “*Leia a íntegra do decreto de intervencao no Distrito Fedearl assinado por Lula*” [Read the full decree on intervention in the Federal District signed by Lula], *UOL*, January 8, 2023, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/bbc/2023/01/08/leia-a-integra-do-decreto-de-intervencao-no-distrito-federal-assinado-por-lula.htm>

¹⁴ “Brazilian police retake control of government buildings after violent breach by pro-Bolsonaro rioters”, *Le Monde*, 8 January, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/01/08/bolsonaro-supporters-swarm-brazil-congress-clash-with-police_6010814_4.html.

¹⁵ “Brazil arrests 7 senior military police officers over Jan. 8 riots”, *AP*, 18 August, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/brazil-riots-bolsonaro-military-police-arrests-a852eefdd7b7dfd5764bda686b612d0c>.

¹⁶ Kevin Roose, “What is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?”, *The New York Times*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>.

¹⁷ Andrew H. Kydd, “Decline, radicalization and the attack on the US Capitol”, *Violence. An International Journal*, vol. 2 (I) (2021): 14-15; Sean Illing, “The ‘deep state’ is real. But it’s not what Trump thinks it is”, *Vox*, 13 May, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/5/13/21219164/trump-deep-state-fbi-cia-david-rohde>. See quote here: “Trump: ‘Deep state’ is a threat to democracy”, *CNN*, 7 September, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/politics/2018/09/07/donald-trump-deep-state-montana-rally-sot-vpx.cnn>.

¹⁸ “Audio reveals Trump campaign bid to spread lie of stolen election”, *The Guardian* (Associated Press), February 3, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/feb/03/trump-campaign-wisconsin-election-lie-audio-reveals>.

¹⁹ “Capitol riots timeline: What happened on 6 January 2021?”, *BBC*, 2 August, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56004916>.

²⁰ “Trump Says Pence Can Overturn His Loss in Congress. That’s Not How It Works”, *The New York Times*, 5 January, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/05/us/politics/pence-trump-election.html>.

²¹ Miles T. Armaly et al, “Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: *Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks*”, *Political Behaviour*, 44 (2022): 940, 946.

²² Bart Jansen, “‘A nightmare scenario’: Extremists in police ranks spark growing concern after Capitol riot”, *USA Today*, 21 March, 2021, <https://eu.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/elections/2021/03/21/police-charged-capitol-riot-reignite-concerns-racism-extremism/4738348001/>.

COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, using conspiracy theories that undermined the government as a mobilising tactic.²³ The threat posed by the movement is that it can fuel anti-government sentiments and, in doing so, accept or even endorse extremist views which may ultimately lead to violence. In fact, during the pandemic, a few rallies organised by the *Querdenken* movement turned into violent riots.²⁴ This might be in part explained by the close relationship between the movement and the far right, which pushes for narratives that aim to destabilise the democratic structures and spread distrust towards the established institutions among *Querdenken* online channels.²⁵ And violence certainly took place in Berlin on 29 August 2020, when the *Querdenken* movement organised its biggest protest against the government. An estimated 38,000 people attended. A turning point in the history of Germany's modern democracy, some demonstrators tried to "force their way into the Federal Parliament building".²⁶

Even though QAnon also reached Brazil, how exactly it shaped the events of January 8 is not too clear.²⁷ That day, on the week of the US Capitol attack anniversary, thousands of pro-Bolsonaro rioters invaded the *Praça dos Três Poderes* (Three Powers Square), which is home to Brazil's Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Presidential Palace. Violence and chaos followed the occupation. The reason why QAnon has been brought into the picture to fully understand this event results from the "obvious parallels" between the events of January 6 and January 8, both of which developed around false "election fraud" claims associated with a "deep state" – claims which were part and parcel of QAnon's narrative around the US elections.²⁸ In addition, *Infowars* owner and prominent conspiracy theorist Alex Jones argued that Brazil's riot had been instigated by government informants disguised as Bolsonaro supporters, a theory that echoed on the media outlet *Trump-word*, portraying the events of January 6 as a "false flag operation."²⁹ Those wishing to highlight the connection between both events even further spread news of an "extravagantly dressed rioter sporting a horned indigenous headdress" in Brazil who appeared to invoke the memories of American QAnon supporter Jacob Chansley, also known as "QAnon shaman".³⁰ However, the so-called "Brazilian shaman" was never involved in the January 8 insurrection. The images of him dressed as a shaman were actually taken on 7 September 2021, at a right-wing rally in São Paulo, more than a year before the attack.

Just as in the US and in Brazil, conspiracy theories on election fraud were also present in Germany, especially influencing the far-right scene and fuelling anti-government mobilisations surrounding the country's national elections in September 2021. Before the elections, But Höcke, head of a radical faction of the AfD far-right party, and a strong supporter of the *Querdenken* movement, encouraged sympathisers to vote in person and not by mail, which was allegedly

23 Daniel H. Heinke, "The Security Threat Posed by the Corona-skeptic Querdenken Movement in Germany", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 15, issue 3 (March 2022): 18.

24 Heinke, "The Security Threat Posed by the Corona-skeptic Querdenken Movement in Germany".

25 Maximilian Zehring and Emese Domahidi, "German Corona Protest Mobilizers on Telegram and Their Relations to the Far Right: A Network and Topic Analysis", *Social Media + Society*, vol. 9, issue 1 (February 2023): 3, 7-8.

26 Aleksander Gowin, "Querdenker. New social movement under observation by German constitutional protection authorities in context of COVID-19 pandemic", *Internal Security Review*, no. 27 (14) (2022):314.

27 Robert Muggah, "In Brazil, QAnon Has a Distinctly Bolsonaro Flavor", *Foreign Policy*, 10 February, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/10/brazil-qanon-bolsonaro-online-internet-conspiracy-theories-anti-vaccination/>.

28 Caleb Ecarma, "The Right-Wing Media's Coverage of Brazil's Insurrection Is a Rerun of January 6", *Vanity Fair*, 10 January, 2023, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2023/01/right-wing-media-brazils-insurrection>; Sergio Olmos, "Bolsonaro backers in Florida decry what they see as a stolen election in Brazil", *NPR*, 25 January 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/25/1149984117/bolsonaro-backers-in-florida-decry-what-they-see-as-a-stolen-election-in-brazil>.

29 David Edwards, "Trump suggests FBI staged Jan. 6 false flag attack: 'It seems like that'", *Raw Story*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.rawstory.com/donald-trump-false-flag/>.

30 Yevgeny Kuklychev, "Fact Check: Was 'QAnon Shaman' Spotted at Brazil Congress Invasion?", *Newsweek*, 9 January, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/fact-check-was-qanon-shaman-spotted-brazil-congress-invasion-1772352>.

vulnerable to fraud.³¹ On Telegram, the party's supporters spread this message further, claiming that postal ballots “will be used to steal the election [as] the election will be hijacked by rigged voting machines”, a claim that also circulated in the US during the 2020 elections.³² Miro Dittrich, a researcher for the Berlin-based Centre for Monitoring, Analysis, and Strategy, explained that far-right claims of election fraud have been in play for a few years now in Germany, but they gained prominence after Trump put the subject at the centre of his own campaigns.³³ While vote fraud narratives have existed everywhere for a while, including before Trump's disinformation campaign in 2020, there is reason to believe that he fuelled distrust towards the electoral system both at home and abroad, as argued by Karolin Schwarz, a Berlin-based author and journalist who tracks far-right disinformation online.³⁴

Social media

The relationship between social media and the *Querdenken* movement began with Facebook. The founder of the *Querdenken* movement, Michael Ballweg, offered €25,000 on Facebook in April 2020 “to anyone who would help him file a complaint in Germany's constitutional court against the new restrictions on gatherings.”³⁵ Ballweg found a lawyer and the case was heard on 17 April. They won, and then held their first demonstration in Stuttgart the very next day. While the demonstrations gathered only a few hundred people at first, soon thousands were showing up to support the *Querdenken* movement and its mission against the government.³⁶ In the lead-up to the storming of the Reichstag in August 2020, however, Telegram played the biggest role in the spread of narratives against the COVID-19 mandates led by the *Querdenken* movement.³⁷ In fact, Ballweg called Telegram “one of the key success factors” of his movement, with the official *Querdenken* Telegram channel amassing some 70,000 followers, resulting in more than 1,200 local channels and groups, many of them led by far-right activists and/or QAnon conspiracists.³⁸ In fact, “renowned far-right actors and activists [played] a key role in determining who *Querdenken* channels take content from”.³⁹ As a consequence, the online *Querdenken* network facilitated messages that “amplified skepticism [sic] and distrust within the community”, echoing far-right attitudes and beliefs towards established institutions.⁴⁰ This included conspiracy theories, anti-elitist narratives, and calls for (violent) activism indicating a “radicalization dynamic” within the *Querdenken* online communication.⁴¹

31 Emily Schultheis, “As Germany prepares for a historic election, far-right leaders are embracing Trump's Big Lie”, *Coda*, 23 September, 2021, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/germany-election-disinformation/>.

32 Schultheis, “As Germany prepares for a historic election, far-right leaders are embracing Trump's Big Lie”.

33 Isaac Stanley-Becker, “Election fraud, QAnon, Jan. 6: Far-right extremists in Germany read from a pro-Trump script”, *Washington Post*, 25 September, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/09/25/german-election-far-right-trump/>.

34 Schultheis, “As Germany prepares for a historic election, far-right leaders are embracing Trump's Big Lie”.

35 Darren Loucaides, Alessio Perrone, Josef Holnburger, “How Germany became ground zero for the COVID infodemic”, *OpenDemocracy*, 31 March, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/germany-ground-zero-covid-infodemic-russia-far-right/>.

36 Loucaides, Perrone, and Holnburger, “How Germany became ground zero for the COVID infodemic”.

37 Gowin, “Querdenker. New social movement under observation by German constitutional protection authorities in context of COVID-19 pandemic”, 314.

38 Zehring and Domahidi, “German Corona Protest Mobilizers on Telegram and Their Relations to the Far Right: A Network and Topic Analysis”, 8; Loucaides, Perrone, and Holnburger, “How Germany became ground zero for the COVID infodemic”.

39 Zehring and Domahidi, “German Corona Protest Mobilizers on Telegram and Their Relations to the Far Right: A Network and Topic Analysis”, 8.

40 Boris Holzer et al, “Einleitung: Protest in der Pandemie” [Introduction: Protest in the pandemic], in *Die Misstrauensgemeinschaft der Querdenker. Die Corona-Proteste aus kultur- und sozialwissenschaftlicher Perspektive* [The distrust community of the Querdenker. The Corona protests from a cultural and social science perspective], ed. Reichardt S. (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2021), 7–26.

41 Heidi Schulze et al, “Far-right conspiracy groups on fringe platforms: A longitudinal analysis of radicalization

In the US, both Twitter and Facebook allowed for the dissemination of harmful rhetoric on their platforms in relation to the January 6 insurrection.⁴² In fact, Twitter “refused to ban Trump in response to the statements” which, at the very least, encouraged violence against the state when calling upon his followers to “walk down to the Capitol [and] if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.”⁴³ A “direct disseminator of disinformation”, Trump’s call to action was even reproduced by traditional media, including Fox News, which further amplified his violent messages.⁴⁴ Although Facebook established an in-house task force to handle disinformation around the US 2020 presidential elections, it “rolled back protections” ahead of January 6, which led to the reporting of six hundred and fifty thousand (unflagged) messages attacking the legitimacy of President Joe Biden.⁴⁵ The disinformation landscape surrounding the US 2020 elections also included fringe platforms, such as Gab, which gained popularity “on the back of promises not to moderate content”, or Parler, where harmful and violent messages get amplified easily as their content “echoe[s] more and receive[s] more impressions” than average posts.⁴⁶ In general, in the US digital platforms benefitted from Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (1996), which states that “no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider.”⁴⁷ This act gives online intermediaries broad immunity from liability for user-generated content posted on their sites.⁴⁸

During the US 2020 elections, the Brazilian independent journalist organisation *Agencia Pública* found “an upsurge of tens of thousands of tweets” disseminated by pro-Bolsonaro users and bots “spreading conspiracy theories about election fraud.”⁴⁹ For the next two years, Bolsonaro and his supporters continued the active spread of disinformation about the democratic electoral process on social media, including planting the idea that “voting machines [in Brazil] were rigged”.⁵⁰

dynamics on Telegram”, *Convergence*, 28 (2022): 1103–1126.

42 Craig Timberg, Elizabeth Dwoskin and Reed Albergotti, “Inside Facebook, Jan. 6 violence fuelled anger, regret over missed warning signs”, *The Washington Post*, 22 October, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/22/jan-6-capitol-riot-facebook/>.

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44 Charissa Yong, “US Capitol riot: How social media helped enable attack by die-hard Trump fans”, *The Straits Times*, 8 January, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/how-social-media-helped-enable-the-storming-of-the-us-capitol>.

45 Craig Silverman, Craig Timberg, Jeff Kao and Jeremy B. Merrill, “Facebook Hosted Surge of Misinformation and Insurrection Threats in Months Leading Up to Jan. 6 Attack, Records Show”, *ProPublica*, 4 January, 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-hosted-surge-of-misinformation-and-insurrection-threats-in-months-leading-up-to-jan-6-attack-records-show>; Clare Duffy, “On the anniversary of January 6, social media platforms are on high alert”, *CNN Business*, 6 January, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/06/tech/social-media-january-6-anniversary/index.html>.

46 Duffy, “On the anniversary of January 6, social media platforms are on high alert”; Lynnette Hui Xian Ng, Iain J. Cruickshank, Kathleen M. Carley, “Cross-platform information spread during the January 6th capitol riots”, *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 12, n. 133 (2022); Lynnette Hui Xian Ng, Iain Cruickshank, and Kathleen M. Carley, “Coordinating Narratives and the Capitol Riots on Parler”, *CASOS - Institute for Software Research* (2021).

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48 Michael Al. Cusumano, Annabelle Gawer, and David B. Yoffie, “Social Media Companies Should Self-Regulate. Now.”, *Harvard Business Review*, 15 January, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/01/social-media-companies-should-self-regulate-now>.

49 Julian Borger, “Brazil’s failed coup is the poison flower of the Trump-Bolsonaro symbiosis”, *The Guardian*, January 10, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/10/brazil-coup-bolsonaro-trump-us-far-right>.

50 John Cherian, “Right-wing rampage in Brazil as Bolsonaro supporters storm government buildings”, *Frontline*, 24 January, 2023, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/right-wing-rampage-in-brazil-as-bolsonaro-supporters-storm-government-buildings/article66397311.ece>.

In fact, federal prosecutors in Brasília said that Bolsonaro’s campaign of distrust “effectively incited the crimes that occurred in the wake of the elections, culminating in the rampage on January 8.”⁵¹ It was then when open “calls for violence” on social media surrounding the Brazilian elections emerged.⁵² Such calls included coded messages appropriating military jargon, such as the use on WhatsApp of the word *Selma*, a play on the word *selva* (jungle), used by the Brazilian military as “war cry”.⁵³ On Twitter, the hashtag *#festadaselma* went viral, spread to invite users to attend the riot of January 8.⁵⁴ On Telegram, the rhetoric evolved from explicit petitions by pro-Bolsonaro users to “hackers and IT experts” to “invade all government systems” and armed men to “protect the patriots”, to coded language such as “general strike” or “popular intervention” in addition to “*Festa da Selma*”.⁵⁵ The successful use of coded language surrounding January 8 exemplifies how easily (automatic) content moderation can be evaded to spread disinformation and encourage violence.

Anti-democratic leaders

In times of social change and crisis, authoritarian or strong leaders “appeal to more voters ... than in times of relative stability.”⁵⁶ Authoritarian tactics and skills are often used to confront alleged “bad actors” and contribute to socio-political polarisation, increasing distrust towards the political elites and paving the way for disinformation to spread. This was the case in both the United States and Brazil in particular. Confronted with instability, Trump adopted an authoritarian tone, ‘joking’ about how “he might be President for life” and showing “utter lack of commitment to democracy”, endorsing a “conspiratorial mind-set” around it.⁵⁷ During the 2020 elections specifically, he appealed to Republican elected officials to “find more votes” in his favour; he appealed to the courts to set aside the election results in swing states that went for Democratic candidate Joe Biden; and he suggested imposing martial law if or when facing electoral fraud, legitimising violent action were he to lose the elections. In other words, he encouraged suspicion towards the democratic process.⁵⁸ In this context, the events of January 6 were “undeniably partisan in nature”, in favour of Trump and against a democratic system that was perceived as corrupt and manipulated against the people’s will.⁵⁹ Distrust even spread among many law

51 Tara John, Rodrigo Pedrosa and Kareem El Damanhoury, “Brazilian President Lula criticizes police for protesters’ breach of government buildings”, *CNN*, 10 January, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/10/americas/brazil-brasilia-police-congress-attack-intl-latam/index.html>.

52 Sheera Frenkel, “The pro-Bolsonaro riot and Jan. 6 attack followed a similar digital playbook, experts say”, *The New York Times*, 9 January, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/technology/brazil-riots-jan-6-misinformation-social-media.html>.

53 Odilon Caldeira Neto, “The Brazilian Far-Right and the Path to January 8th”, *GNET*, 23 January, 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/01/23/the-brazilian-far-right-and-the-path-to-january-8th/>; Hannah Gelbart, Juliana Gragnani and Ricardo Senra, “Brazil: The code word used to invite protesters to a riot”, *BBC*, 10 January, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-64223574>; Jack Nicas, “What Drove a Mass Attack on Brazil’s Capital? Mass Delusion”, *The New York Times*, 9 January, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/world/americas/brazil-riots-bolsonaro-conspiracy-theories.html>; Stuart Davis and Joe Straubhaar, “Producing Antipetismo: Media activism and the rise of the radical, nationalist right in contemporary Brazil”, *International Communication Gazette*, vol. 82, issue 1 (2020).

54 Frenkel, “The pro-Bolsonaro riot and Jan. 6 attack followed a similar digital playbook, experts say”; Neto, “The Brazilian Far-Right and the Path to January 8th”.

55 Gelbart, Gragnani and Senra, “Brazil: The code word used to invite protesters to a riot”.

56 Robert Vidigal, “Authoritarianism and Right-Wing Voting in Brazil”, *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 57, issue 3 (2022).

57 Chris Cillizza and Brenna Williams, “15 times Donald Trump praised authoritarian rulers”, *CNN*, 2 July, 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/02/politics/donald-trump-dictators-kim-jong-un-vladimir-putin/index.html?utm_content=2019-07-02T17%3A38%3A05&utm_term=image&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twCNNp; Andrew H. Kydd, “Decline, radicalization and the attack on the US Capitol”, *Violence. An International Journal*, vol. 2 (I) (2021): 15.

58 Kydd, “Decline, radicalization and the attack on the US Capitol”, 15.

59 Armaly et al, “Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support

enforcement officers who overlooked threats of violence before and during January 6.⁶⁰ Not only did the FBI and other intelligence agencies dismiss warnings that far-right groups, including the Proud Boys, were planning for violence during the certification of President Biden's victory, but a number of police and other officers either participated in, or sympathised, with the insurrection.⁶¹ In particular, some police officers seemed to have ties to far-right groups such as the Proud Boys, the Three Percenters, the League of the South, and even the Ku Klux Klan.⁶²

Echoing former President Trump's sentiment, during his presidency Bolsonaro declared that he was not planning on leaving: "I will only leave in jail, dead or victorious."⁶³ Likewise, compromise and neglect at the security level was present in Brazil as it was in the US. Indeed, large numbers of local government and public security officers from the *Distrito Federal* (Federal District) were complicit in the disruptions in favour of Bolsonaro, a sign of the weakening of political institutions that became fertile ground for attacks on democracy and its electoral system.⁶⁴ Alexandre de Moraes, a Brazilian jurist currently serving as president of the Superior Electoral Court and as a justice of the Supreme Federal Court, stated that the attacks of January 8 "could only have happened with the acquiescence, or even direct involvement, of public security and intelligence authorities." Lula da Silva said that capital law enforcement bodies showed "incompetence, bad faith or malice" during the events, and that the military prevented the immediate arrest of some of the insurrectionists.⁶⁵ Shortly after the event, *The Washington Post* revealed that a post examination of more than 150 videos and images from January 8 showed that "rank-and-file members of PMDF, [Policía Militar Distrito Federal, tasked with securing the streets surrounding government buildings], did little to stop the initial assault".⁶⁶ This is despite the fact that protesters of January 8 attacked the headquarters of the Federal Police, as well as setting buses and cars on fire during the certification ceremony of Lula da Silva – attacks coordinated over digital platforms.

While there was no 'strong leader' in Germany to lead on anti-government protests and attacks against the democratic establishment, the *Querdenken* movement attracted the attention of a

for the Capitol Attacks".

60 Jason Wilson, "How US police failed to stop the rise of the far right and the Capitol attack", *The Guardian*, 17 January, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/17/us-police-far-right-capitol-attack>.

61 Wilson, "How US police failed to stop the rise of the far right and the Capitol attack"; Mary Clare Jalonick, "FBI, Homeland Security ignored massive intelligence before Jan. 6 riot, Senate report says", *Los Angeles Times*, 23 June, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-06-27/fbi-homeland-security-ignored-intelligence-jan-6-riot-senate-report>.

62 Jaweed Kaleem and Kurtis Lee, "Why veterans of the military and law enforcement joined the Capitol insurrection", *Los Angeles Times*, 15 January, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-01-15/capitol-riot-police-veterans-extremists>; Wilson, "How US police failed to stop the rise of the far right and the Capitol attack"; Kevin Rector and Richard Winton, "Law enforcement confronts an old threat: far-right extremism in the ranks. 'Swift action must be taken'", *Los Angeles Times*, 17 February, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-02-17/lapd-other-police-agencies-struggle-with-where-to-draw-the-line-with-political-extremism-in-their-ranks>.

63 Neto, "The Brazilian Far-Right and the Path to January 8th".

64 Leonardo Avritzer and Lucio Rennó, "The Pandemic and the Crisis of Democracy in Brazil", *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, vol. 13, issue 3 (2021); Valerie Wirtschafter and Ted Piccone, "Anti-democratic sentiment boils over in Brazil", *Brookings*, 12 January, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/anti-democratic-sentiment-boils-over-in-brazil/>; V-Dem Institute, "Defiance in the Face of Autocratization", *Democracy Report 2023*, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf.

65 Tom Phillips and Andrew Downie, "Brazil protests: Lula vows to punish 'neo-fascists' after Bolsonaro supporters storm congress", *The Guardian*, 9 January, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/08/jair-bolsonaro-supporters-storm-brazils-presidential-palace-and-supreme-court>; Tara John, Rodrigo Pedroso and Kareem El Damanhoury, "Brazilian President Lula criticises police for protesters' breach of government buildings", *CNN*, January 10, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/10/americas/brazil-brasilia-police-congress-attack-intl-latam/index.html>; Cherian, "Right-wing rampage in Brazil as Bolsonaro supporters storm government buildings".

66 Meg Kelly and Imogen Piper, "Brazil's military police initially stood by as Bolsonaro supporters rioted", *The Washington Post*, 28 January, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2023/01/28/brazil-police-capitol-riot/>.

few parties, including the neo-Nazi *Der III Weg* (The Third Way) and *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (The Homeland). More importantly, the movement obtained the public support of the parliamentary party AfD and its youth organisation *Junge Alternative* (Young Alternative).⁶⁷ In its beginnings, the *Querdenken* movement was initially a more libertarian than far-right motivated movement whose followers were diverse in composition but united (on Telegram) in anti-elitism, conspiratorial ideas and a general distrust towards the established institutions.⁶⁸ Soon enough, however, the far-right successfully capitalised on it to push for their own anti-government positions, helping facilitate radicalisation processes among sympathisers of the movement. In doing so, they helped undermine the acceptance of government regulation and ultimately deny the state's monopoly on violence.⁶⁹ In this process, AfD allowed the *Querdenken* movement to have visibility and to become mainstream.⁷⁰ More than that, AfD members actively participated in protests organised by the *Querdenken* movement, including violently doing so as it was the case of an AfD member sentenced to prison time on parole for assaulting a police officer.⁷¹ Interestingly, AfD was never able to increase electoral support because of its proximity to *Querdenken* by gaining votes from among the latter's followers, as most of them expressed desire to "vote for fringe parties not represented in parliament, such as Basis2020 and Wir2020" rather than for a party that, after all, belongs to the establishment.⁷²

Conclusions and Recommendations

While COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted, anti-government sentiment has largely remained, constituting a threat that is adaptable, intersectional, and transnational. This is due to a global increase in the connectivity of groups and individuals from mixed scenes, equally aiming to destabilise or overthrow existing democracies. This includes violent groups but also protest movements and conspiracists. Due to the oftentimes decentralised nature of such an anti-government threat, as well as its unprecedented presence in the borderless online sphere, resilience of harmful actors to traditional prevention and intervention practices may challenge counter-terrorist policies in place.

In this brief, the analysis of the anti-government attacks in Germany, the US, and Brazil allowed for the observation of some common patterns that help understand what factors may weaken, and even endanger our democracies in contexts where there is widespread distrust towards established institutions. These are the dissemination of conspiracy theories, the misuse of social media, and power abuse from mainstream political leaders, as well as security forces. Below are outlined some actions and recommendations to tackle this threat.

67 Heinke, "The Security Threat Posed by the Corona-skeptic Querdenken Movement in Germany", 21.

68 Zehring and Domahidi, "German Corona Protest Mobilizers on Telegram and Their Relations to the Far Right: A Network and Topic Analysis", 3. It is worth highlighting that although the Querdenken movement never denied the existence of COVID-19, they believed "its risks have been overstated and that the measures to contain it are disproportionate." See: *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, "Anti-lockdown Activity: Germany Country Profile", 28 January, 2021, 4.

69 Heinke, "The Security Threat Posed by the Corona-skeptic Querdenken Movement in Germany", 21.

70 Daniel Oppermann, "Corona protests in Germany: insights into a new movement", in *Diálogos Institucionais e Políticas de Enfrentamento da Crise [Institutional Dialogues and Crisis Coping Policies]*, ed. Eduardo de Farias (Rio de Janeiro: Gramma Editora, 2021), 28-29.

71 Heinke, "The Security Threat Posed by the Corona-skeptic Querdenken Movement in Germany", 20.

72 Anna-Sophie Heinze and Manes Weiskircher, "How Political Parties Respond to Pariah Street Protest: The Case of Anti-Corona Mobilisation in Germany", *German Politics*, vol. 32, issue 3 (2022) 18; ISD, "Anti-lockdown Activity: Germany Country Profile", 4; Thomas Plumper, Eric Neymayer, and Katharina Gabriela Pfaff, "The strategy of protest against Covid-19 containment policies in Germany", *Social Science Quarterly*, 102(18) (2021): 2237.

Understand anti-government threats

In the absence of an agreed upon definition of terrorist threats, including anti-government threats, some local governments have deployed counter-terrorism measures which may violate a broad range of rights. Those measures are also used to target political opposition, thereby shrinking civic space. At times, they also have unintended consequences for humanitarian action. This is also true for the private sector. As seen above, during the insurrections in Germany, the US and Brazil social media and messaging platforms failed to address the online calls for violence that preceded the events. This was partly due to negligence on the part of social media platforms and legislative loopholes, but also because of their vague approaches to hate speech, which allowed “awful but lawful”⁷³ content to spread.

Due to difficulties in identifying threats resulting from contemporary merging concerns, ideologies, and cross-border links, gaining knowledge on anti-government threats and their role in domestic and transnational extremist behaviour is crucial. In order to do so, a systematic assessment of this threat, and its potential for violence and terrorist action, may help. Along these lines, having public institutions and governments collaborate with local law enforcement units in order to build an interdisciplinary and evidence-based risk assessment tool may facilitate the gathering and cross-referencing of useful information on new threats. This process can also ensure more effective information exchanges between different organisations within a region or a country, allowing for quicker responses.

Fight disinformation

To address the harmful spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation, a problem present in all three case studies, having public institutions build a relationship with the tech sector is crucial. This includes reaching out to internet service providers and social media companies in order to address the spread of violent extremist content on their platforms as it affects local and national threats. Engaging with the tech sector also includes supporting counter-messaging efforts by tech companies, non-governmental organisations, and civic partners, who aim to steer individuals away from messages of violence.

Security services and governments can support these efforts by sharing threat information when possible with these partners; by evaluating the efficacy of counternarrative efforts in place by these institutions; and by providing grant funding to effective campaigns. In addition, they can actively amplify credible voices online, and promote counter narratives against violent extremist messaging. These efforts will prioritise freedom of expression, privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties, while seeking to convey the harm done by targeted violence and terrorism. For the specific problem of online disinformation with potential for violence, partnering with fact-checking institutions that flag and archive disinformation used for harmful purposes is advisable. It is important to foster partnerships with independent, or non-governmental, fact-checking organisations that can hold our political leaders accountable when abusing their power or when causing polarisation and fear for their own benefit.

⁷³ EU DisinfoLab, “Odysee: List of geo-blocking requests shows the EU and EU Member States are far from doing enough to enforce the law”, 15 December, 2022, <https://www.disinfo.eu/advocacy/odysee-list-of-geo-blocking-requests-shows-the-eu-and-eu-member-states-are-far-from-doing-enough-to-enforce-the-law/>.

Invest in non-automatic reporting mechanisms

As seen in the case of Brazil, coded language can successfully be used to circumvent the Terms of Service of media platforms. This was possible in part due to the lack of manual monitoring and reporting, which would have provided context to potentially harmful content and proportionate action. Given this, encouraging public reporting mechanisms and investing in a public referral system is recommended.

This can be done by encouraging public sector staff to use their existing safeguarding mechanisms in the first place to deal with such concerns, which can often be managed informally and without onward referral. This process might lead to an increase in the proportion of referrals that come from communities and friends and families of vulnerable individuals – people who are often the first to have concerns. For such a reporting mechanism to work, ensuring publicly available material and means to understand and counter violent extremism, is crucial. To that end, governmental institutions may closely engage with the media and the education system, both of which have played key roles in promoting positive values that could counter violent extremist tendencies, and promote social cohesion and connections with community support.

Rebuild trust in democracy

The emergency measures established during the pandemic contributed to creating a sense that political agency and security in democratic countries was eroding. As a consequence, distrust towards established institutions increased and anti-government sentiment became widespread. A sense that the “social contract” (the implicit pact by which citizens allow governments to rule in exchange for protection) was broken developed in parallel to a loss in the belief that democracy was enough to keep people safe. In this context, strong and authoritarian-like leaders gained in popularity, as it was evident in the cases of the US and Brazil alike.

In order to prevent political leaders from abusing power, trust in democracy needs to be rebuilt. On the one hand, this can be achieved through education. On the other hand, democracy is not perfect, and so allowing new policies to foster participatory democracy, that is allowing citizens to imagine an improved social contract collaboratively, could help restore the sense of political agency, as well as enhance our political systems. In addition, governments should prioritise the implementation of strategies and policies that reduce corruption towards rebuilding public trust and demonstrate commitment to accountability and transparency. Finally, independent organisations could help support electoral integrity in democratic countries, which would contribute to counteracting disinformation around the voting process, as seen in the cases of the US and Germany especially.

Multidisciplinary collaborations

Since individuals mobilise to violence due to various grievances and ideologies, collaboration among the widest possible cross-section is important for effective identification of problems and intervention. Above all, this would allow to monitor governmental individuals and groups, including law enforcement and intelligence agencies. For example, forming partnerships between public institutions and key CT and P/CVE stakeholders nationwide to share information that supports the mitigation of risk factors would enhance practices for prevention and intervention when faced with anti-government threats.

Intervention is inherently multidisciplinary, requiring coordination and cooperation among multiple partners, including non-profit organisations, professional associations, and academia, as well as

exchanging information at the state level. In order to achieve this, local and national approaches to prevention and intervention may prioritise the optimisation of interoperability of information sharing through the digitisation of tools that allow for the sharing of high-volume data at the speed and accuracy that human networks cannot replicate. Such a process would also alert a greater number of agencies of individuals of potential concern, improving effective reaction by bringing in a broader and larger set of intervention mechanisms. Finally, and in view of emerging transnational threats, it is important to sustain these collaborations at the international level, coordinating efforts against terrorism.

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