A racial democracy?

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These days, the myth of Brazil being a 'racial democracy', where everyone is colour blind and no one is discriminated against because of the colour of their skin, finally seems to be crumbling.

Following the abolition of slavery in 1888, Brazilian authorities refused to implement any kind of public policy to integrate Black people into society. Instead, over the course of the 20th century, they carefully constructed a narrative in which Brazil is cast as a rare haven where people of all races are able to live in harmony. As a result, despite Black and mixed-race Brazilians suffering the worst of police violence, having limited access to education, making up some 64 percent of the unemployed, having limited representation in prominent decision-making bodies, and being almost three times as likely to be victims of homicide, most of the Brazilian population remained convinced there is effectively no racism in their country.

The recent Black Lives Matter protests in the US and beyond, however, led to a rapid increase in racial awareness across the country – a process that had started some years ago, and already resulted in promising developments such as the Supreme Court's 2012 decision to recognise the legality of racial quotas for Blacks in Brazilian public universities. Not only did many Black Brazilians publicly embrace their racial identity and take to the streets to say "Black lives matter in Brazil too", but activists increased the pressure they have long been putting on authorities to abandon the flawed discourse of "racial democracy" and implement measures and policies to eliminate race-based discrimination in the country.

In response to these growing calls for social and racial justice, an unprecedented number of Black candidates registered to take part in the local elections in November. In the white-majority state of Parana, for example, the number of Black candidates increased by a whopping 40 percent. The increase in the number of Black candidates has also been striking on the national level. Actually, according to numbers published by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the total number of Black candidates running for local office (for mayor, vice mayor and city councillor) in the 2020 municipal elections is now higher than the total number of white candidates.

The increase in the number of Black candidates has been hailed by many as an important step towards achieving diversity in Brazil's public bodies and eliminating institutional racism in the country, but the reality is, as always, a bit more complicated than that.

It is true Brazilian institutions are, albeit slowly, taking steps to dismantle the tools and systems of racial discrimination that traditionally prevented Brazilians of colour from gaining public office. For example, in August, Brazil's top electoral court decided Black political candidates must get a fair share of air time and public funding in future elections. In Brazil, elections are largely publicly funded, with parties granted money as well as free TV and radio time to run their

campaigns. Before the court's decision, political parties would spend a disproportionate portion of these funds on the campaigns of their white candidates, effectively slashing the few Black candidates' chances of getting elected.

But the fact that there is now a higher number of Black candidates contesting the elections and that the political parties are obligated to spend some money on their campaigns does not necessarily mean the upcoming municipal elections are going to lead to more diversity, let alone racial justice.

For a start, while the total number of Black and mixed-race candidates is now higher than the total number of white candidates when it comes to mayoral elections – the position that holds the most power – white people still dominate the lists. Indeed, of the 19,100 people who registered to run for mayor in the upcoming election, only 35 percent are Black – this in a country where 56.2 percent of the general population identify as Black.

Moreover, the high number of Black city council candidates do not guarantee more racially diverse city councils either. In the Brazilian electoral system, not only the votes received by an individual candidate but also the total number of votes received by all of a political party's registered candidates influence the outcome of an election. So it is possible for a popular candidate to fail to be elected solely due to the overall poor performance of his or her party. Knowing this, Brazilian parties often register a high number of candidates for each contested seat, just to gain a few more votes that can prove decisive in a tight election.

Because of this, many fear that Black candidates running for a position in the municipal elections will only help their party's strongest candidates (many of whom are white) to get elected, but fail to gain a seat themselves.

Furthermore, while the Supreme Court's decision in August obliges political parties to spend a proportional percentage of the public money they receive on the campaigns of their Black candidates, it does not instruct them to divide that money equally between these candidates. This means a party with 30 percent Black candidates can lawfully spend 30 percent of the public funds it receives on a single Black candidate's campaign, and completely ignore the rest.

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