Interview - Octavio Amorim Neto

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Professor Octavio Amorim Neto is a political scientist at the Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, Rio de Janeiro. He has held lecturing and research posts at several universities across Europe and Latin America and is on the editorial boards of*Brazilian Political Science Review*, *Comparative Political Studies* (USA), *Latin American Politics and Society* (USA), *Parliamentary Affairs* (UK), and *Revista de Ciencia Política* (Chile). Amorim Neto specialises in comparative political institutions and the decision-making process of foreign and defence policy, with a focus on Brazil, Latin America and Portuguese speaking countries.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I see it in the application of the new tenets of comparative-historical analysis—particularly Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), concept formation and process tracing—to the study of foreign policy-making, executive-legislative relations, civil-military relations and the political impact of leaders' psychological traits. Obviously, given the rise of right-wing populist leaders in the US, Europe, the Philippines and Brazil, cross-regional studies of this contemporary and most relevant phenomenon is also a blooming research agenda, as much as democratic backsliding (the new fad in American political science, but a topic that has always been present in research agendas on Latin America). Trump's appointment of some military officers to his cabinet, the extensive role of the military in Venezuela, the election of retired captain Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and the fact that he has appointed more than a hundred military officers into cabinet and subcabinet positions are obviously bringing the armed forces back to the center of the political arena. These events will most likely prompt comparativists in general and Latin Americanists in particular to devote their attention to the study of military politics, a topic that used to be central to political science but which had been relegated to the margins in the past two decades.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I did my PhD at the University of California at San Diego in the 1990s and at that time the US was going through one of the most brilliant phases of its history. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US became the sole superpower. The onset of the 'unipolar moment' and the quickening pace of globalisation had a major impact on the kind of political science that I learned in the US at that time. These events ended up favoring and strengthening certain approaches—such as rational-choice institutionalism and large-N econometric analysis based on global datasets—and weakening area studies and historical approaches. So, my generation of US-educated political scientists was heavily marked by the end of the Cold War. I got my PhD degree in 1998. At that time, I must confess I held a naïve belief in the analytical power of those mainstream approaches. A few years later, I began to realise their limits. While these theories and methods certainly provided—and still provide— important tools to study political phenomena, they only generated feeble findings.

What began to strike me was that all the answers to the major questions were extremely fragile. One of the key issues that concerned me at that time was the 'Juan Linz question'—namely, presidentialism *versus* parliamentarism—does it make a difference? Or more generally, what is the impact of political institutions on political outcomes and public policies? I came to realise that while the theories and hypotheses were sound, we had no consensus whatsoever on anything. There were endless academic debates that resulted in few, if any, robust and

consensual findings. Something that I came to realise a bit late was that this is the essence of political science. Then I began to search for alternatives and there were many interesting options available in the first decade of the 21st century. These alternatives included experiments, high-tech econometrics, synthetic control, quantitative content analysis and analytical narratives to name a few. But the alternative that really persuaded me was the new comparative-historical method, as developed by James Mahoney, Charles Ragin, Gary Goertz, Tulia Falleti, Daniel Ziblatt and many others.

In your book '*From Dutra to Lula: The Conduct and Determinants of Brazilian Foreign Policy'* you contend that the foreign policy of Brazil increasingly diverged from that of the United States from 1946 onwards, particularly in relation to voting patterns at the United Nations General Assembly. What were the main drivers of this divergence?

First, the increase in Brazil's national material capabilities. Second, the ideological makeup of governments. The more Brazil's national capabilities expanded, the more Brazil felt willing and able to move away from the United States. Regarding the ideology of governments, left-leaning governments—owing to their nationalism and anti-Americanism—tended to push Brazil further away from Washington on United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) roll-call votes. Finally, there is the domestic political power of the military, always important in Brazil. Ironically, the more extensive the presence of military officers in the government, the less Brazil converged with the US on UNGA roll-call votes, but only on political and security issues. Despite the Brazilian Armed Forces' innate conservatism and intense professional ties with the US, their nationalism ended up pushing the country away from Washington, even during the Cold War.

Brazilian President-elect Jair Bolsonaro has praised the current US administration and advocated distancing Brazil from several countries who have strained relationships with the US. Do you expect to see Brazilian foreign policy converging with the US under Bolsonaro's presidency?

Yes, I expect they will converge. Not only because of the government ideology factor that I identified in my book (Bolsonaro leads a rightwing administration), but also because during the 2018 election campaign, the then-candidate Bolsonaro explicitly promised to bring Brazil closer to the United States. I highlight the role of the 2018 election campaign because foreign policy issues have rarely been important to presidential campaigns in Brazil. This was not the case last year. Since Bolsonaro took office on 1st January 2019, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ernesto Araújo and the president himself have time and again asserted that a rapprochement with the United States is a high priority. Furthermore, in March President Bolsonaro went on his first state visit to a country, precisely the United States. This is a crystal-clear sign of Brasilia's willingness to strengthen ties with Washington.

Your previous research into Latin American presidents has shown that the greater the proportion of non-partisan ministers in the cabinet, the greater the likelihood that a president will try to rule by decree rather than by legislative statutes. How do you expect executive-legislative relations in Brazil to evolve under the Bolsonaro presidency?

I expect much confusion and instability because as a candidate throughout the 2018 presidential campaign, Bolsonaro harshly criticized Brazil's traditional politics (which are heavily based on clientelism, patronage and pork-barreling) and the country's so-called 'coalitional presidentialism'. And he insisted that ministers would not be appointed on the basis of political negotiations. In doing so, Bolsonaro ended up tying his own hands when he became president. It is very difficult to preside over a country that has the most fragmented party system in the history of democracy without forming coalitions through the appointment of politicians from many parties to cabinet or sub-cabinet positions. The cabinet appointed by Bolsonaro has no less than eight military officers, nine technocrats and only five party politicians (all of them lightweights). Moreover, his party, the PSL (Social Liberal Party), and its few allies do not command a stable legislative majority. In Brazilian history, a president who leads a government with such a political makeup is unlikely to end his or her constitutional term. In Brazil's two democratic experiences (that is, between 1946 and 1964 and between 1985 and the present), all presidents who had failed to form a legislative majority, or who had lost it, failed to complete their terms. The first term of Lula (2003-2007) is the only exception. Therefore, either Bolsonaro makes changes throughout this year or he will have to put up with the same grave,

daunting difficulties which have been faced by all the minority presidents in Brazilian history.

You have argued the Portugal became the natural reference point for constitution-makers in democratising Portuguese speaking countries (primarily in Africa) since the 1980s, and these countries constitutions have therefore maintained a 'family resemblance' with Portugal. How far can this 'family resemblance' be compared to groups of countries which share 'Westminster' or French systems of government?

In the research that Marina Costa Lobo and I undertook, we tried to compare the semi-presidential constitutions of Portuguese-speaking countries with their European and Francophone African counterparts, and found that there was indeed a common and distinctive core among Portuguese-speaking countries. When we consider only the Portuguese-speaking countries, there are clear differences among them. However, when we compare these countries with their European and Francophone counterparts, the Lusophone countries stand out for granting extensive prerogatives to their presidents in their relationships with the cabinet and legislature rarely matched in other semi-presidential regimes. This is the essence of the 'family resemblance' that we identified. Ironically, despite the hard feelings against Portugal harbored by the leaders of the Lusophone African countries after they became independent in the 1970s, these countries ended up adopting constitutional designs relatively similar to that of democratic Portugal. This is an important finding for students of constitutional diffusion in general and, more parochially, for students of the specifically Lusophone world.

To what extent did Portuguese jurists actively promote their system of government to democratising Portuguese speaking countries or was this process lead by other actors?

The process was led by other agents as well, but Portuguese jurists played an important role because of the strong cultural and political ties that still existed between Portugal and its former colonies in Africa and Asia (East Timor). And we cannot forget that after these countries starting gaining their independence in 1975, most of them were in a very difficult situation both economically and politically. Some of them went through very brutal and bloody civil wars. When it came to the time to draw up constitutions, Portuguese jurists were extensively consulted and, of course, they brought their constitutional law experience that had already been successful in terms of the consolidation of a semi-presidential democracy in Portugal.

Brazil has had seven constitutions since becoming independent from Portugal in 1822 and experienced periods of democratic politics long before other Portuguese speaking countries gained their independence in the second half of the twentieth century. To what extent, if any, have Portuguese speaking countries looked to the example of Brazil as opposed to Portugal when making constitutional choices?

This is a good question because Brazil has very strong diplomatic, economic, cultural and military ties with Lusophone African countries. So why did Brazil not have as much influence over the design of their constitutions as Portugal had? Well, one of the first reasons has to do with the fact that democracy was a fairly recent phenomenon in Brazil. Brazil only became a democracy again in 1985. Before that, it had experienced the longest military regime in Latin American history, lasting 21 years from 1964 to 1985. Thus Brazil, with its presidential system, was not a very appealing example for Portuguese-speaking elites in Africa because it was a very recent example. It had not yet proven to be as successful as the Portuguese democratic regime, which began in 1976 and became clearly consolidated in the early 1980s. Thus, when Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe began their constitution-making processes in the early 1990s, Portugal offered the attractive example of not only a consolidated semi-presidential democracy but also of a country that had become developed. By the early 1990s, Brazil was a young and very unstable presidential democracy, both politically and economically. It is no wonder that Portugal was more influential.

What is the most important advice you could give to scholars of International Relations or constitutional politics?

For the international relations scholars my main advice is that they should not stop communicating intensely with political science. I am very concerned about the artificial separation between international relations and political science. I think both sides will lose if this separation deepens, but I believe that international relations scholars will suffer the most because it is an infant discipline outside the US and Europe. If internationalists seek to assert themselves in opposition to political science, I do not know what good may come of it.

For scholars of constitutional politics, the most important advice is that when making recommendations regarding the constitutional design that a country should adopt, they should not just stick to the findings provided by comparative quantitative research. For example, one often reads scholars asserting that parliamentarism should be adopted by country X because many cross-national quantitative studies have shown that this system of government is more associated with democratic stability than pure presidentialism or semi-presidentialism. But this cross-national finding only provides us with the mean effect of a variable. It tells us nothing about the match between a given executive type and the specific problems a country faces, problems that always have deep historical roots. It is absolutely essential to take into account the historical context of each country.