

# ‘Brazil is a Christian and Conservative Country with Family as its Foundation’: The Role of Defender of the Faith in Bolsonaro’s Foreign Policy

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**Abstract:** Foreign policy analysts have used role theory for decades. Several recent studies have resorted to it to describe and explain Brazilian foreign policy. By complementing current efforts that seek to account for the restructuring of Brazil’s international identity undertaken by the Bolsonaro government, this article focuses on a role relatively neglected by literature, i.e., the one Holsti called ‘defender of the faith.’ In the case of Bolsonaro’s foreign policy, the faith to be defended is that of ‘Judeo-Christian civilisation’ values in its most conservative interpretation. After identifying this role in statements by official representatives of Brazilian foreign policy, we examine both its primary internal sources (the political actors identified with religious-conservative agendas in the National Congress) and its external sources (the ‘conservative transnational’ of governments close to Bolsonaro’s), to then illustrate its performance through two sets of initiatives representing drastic changes in Brazilian diplomatic positions: the support to Israel in the voting of UN’s resolutions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the shift from progressive to conservative positions in discussions on gender rights in multilateral venues.

**Keywords:** role theory; Brazilian foreign policy; ultraconservatism; israeli-palestinian conflict; gender rights

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## Introduction

Shortly after Jair Bolsonaro's arrival to the Brazilian government in January 2019, it seemed evident that Brazilian foreign policy, until then relatively stable and whose changes used to be more of emphasis rather than substance (Cervo 1994; Saraiva and Valença 2011; Mariano 2015), was undergoing significant changes in orientation, not only as compared to the democratic period but to the entire trajectory of the Republic. These changes were part of a process of restructuring national identity (both domestically and internationally)<sup>1</sup> adapting it to the ultra-conservative values and world view of the President himself, his domestic ideological bases, and his international referents.

Role theory has had a continued, albeit intermittent, presence (Thies and Breuning 2012) in the sub-field of Foreign Policy Analysis since Kalevi Holsti (1970) proceeded to 'import' it from other social sciences. It has already been used to describe and explain 'classical' Brazilian identity as a developmentalist state, defender of the liberal world order (especially under Workers' Party governments), and a country aspiring to regional leadership. It has also been used to describe the more recent ultra-conservative identity that seemingly broke with the traditional orientations and priorities. Guimarães and Silva (2021) identified three roles or 'National Role Conceptions' (NRCs) performed by states governed by leaders who reject the contemporary liberal order and who, according to the authors, would be both 'populist' and 'ultra-conservative.' The category includes, in addition to Bolsonaro's Brazil, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, India, and also Trump's USA and Netanyahu's Israel. First, there is the 'anti-globalist' role, understood as the rejection of the principles and institutions of the liberal international order (but not economic liberalisation); second, the 'sovereignist' role, that is, the exhibition of an exacerbated nationalism; and third, the 'anti-foe', expressed by the tendency toward polarisation and vilification of one's opponents. We argue that to this set of roles must be added another that is certainly part of the ultra-conservative identity of Bolsonaro's Brazil and of several – although not all – other contemporary ultra-conservative governments and leaders, namely, the role that Holsti called 'defender of the faith.' In this case, the faith to be defended is the one represented by Christianity or, in an expanded version, by 'Judeo-Christian' (according to the most conservative interpretations of both Pentecostal Evangelical Brazilian Churches and Catholicism) or 'Western' values (in line with Huntington's categorisation of 'Western civilisation') (Huntington 1996). This role is not only part of Brazil's ultra-conservative identity, but it also – due to its link to sacred values – significantly contributes to legitimising the entire set of roles performed by the group of ultra-conservative governments or, to use another usual label, 'neoconservatives' (Brown 2019). In other words, we argue that the 'defender of the faith' role has both a weight of its own and reinforces and gives cohesion to the anti-globalist, sovereignist, and anti-foe ones.

This article aims, firstly, to identify the 'defender of the faith' role in the Bolsonarist foreign policy discourse; secondly, to explain it based on its primary internal and external sources (here, the role would work as a dependent variable); and, thirdly, to postulate it as an explanation-justification (role as an independent variable) for two sets of

initiatives that broke with Brazil's traditional diplomatic positions. The first set of initiatives is Brazil's position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the country failed to condemn Israel for the occupation and violations of human rights in Palestine, as it had been doing for decades. The other is the switching of sides, from progressive to conservative, in the discussions held in multilateral forums on international gender rights. At first sight, these initiatives do not seem linked to each other.

In addition to this introduction, the article consists of four sections. The first is a brief presentation of role theory and its use so far in the analysis of Brazilian foreign policy. In the second, we show how the 'defender of the faith' role has appeared repeatedly in the discourse of those responsible for Bolsonaroist foreign policy (the President himself and the Minister of Foreign Affairs); we analyse its specificities (which faith needs defending and from whom) and how it fits into the ultra-conservative government's set of roles. The third section addresses role explanations, i.e., its internal and external sources. The fourth section shows how changes in the diplomatic positions in the two issues (Israeli-Palestinian conflict and gender rights) correspond to the performance or 'role enactment' of Brazil as defender of the faith. Finally, we summarise the findings and arguments in the conclusions.

## **Role theory and the analysis of Brazilian foreign policy**

Role theory, which Kalevi Holsti introduced in *Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA)* in 1970 (Holsti 1970) from other social sciences (especially social psychology, although it has also been widely used in sociology and anthropology) has had a continued presence in the sub-field, proving its usefulness for describing and explaining foreign policies. In the 1980s, it sparked interest for authors from the Comparative Foreign Policy school led by James Rosenau (Rosenau 1974), several of whom, including Rosenau himself, contributed to the book edited by Stephen G. Walker (1987), *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis*. In the last two decades, role theory has experienced a significant resurgence (Aggestam 2006; Harnisch, Frank and Maull 2011; Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Thies 2017; Beasley and Kaarbo 2018), mainly due to its growing affinity with constructivism (Wendt 1999: 227; Breuning 2011; Thies and Breuning 2012; Baert, Langenhove, and James 2019).

Role theory starts from the assumption that states and their leaders perform, in international relations, a series of roles or 'national role conceptions' (NRCs). NRCs are standardised patterns of behaviour fed by the ideas that the leaders responsible for foreign policy themselves hold on national identity, also shaped by the ideas of leaders and institutions with which they relate, i.e. 'an actor's perception of his or her position vis a vis others (...) and the perception of the role expectations of others as signalled through language and action (...)' (Harnisch 2011: 8). An essential theoretical assumption is that state actions and decisions are congruent (though not wholly coincidental) with NRCs (Holsti 1970: 308), i.e. that role theory links identity to behaviour (Breuning 2011: 16).<sup>2</sup> NRCs are usually inductively identified by analysing the official statements of those responsible for foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> In his seminal study, Holsti (1970) listed, from the pronouncements

of authorities in 71 states throughout the 1965-1967 period, 17 different NRCs (an average of four NRCs per State): 'bastion of revolution-liberator,' 'regional leader,' 'regional protector,' 'active independent,' 'liberation supporter,' 'anti-imperialist agent,' 'defender of the faith,' 'mediator-integrator,' 'regional subsystem collaborator,' 'developer,' 'bridge,' 'faithful ally,' 'independent,' 'example,' 'internal developer,' 'isolate,' and 'protectee.'

In research designs, roles can be dealt with as independent or dependent variables. As independent variables, roles are considered explanations (including discursive justifications) of state behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the distribution of roles among states can also be considered as one of the independent variables accounting for international system dynamics (Holsti 1970: 307). As dependent variables, NRCs are explained by multiple sources (role sources), domestic and international, that shape the understanding and perceptions of decision-makers about the identity and position of a State in the international system.

Authors working with role theory have found a highly relevant external source, and call it the Significant Other. In the role theory context, the Significant Other is another state, an essential actor to whom policy-makers relate and with which they are constantly comparing themselves. These comparisons result in both positive identifications and negative differentiations. Thus, the Significant Other is 'the main socialising agent in role learning' (Benes and Harnisch 2015: 50).

In recent years, some authors have made an effort to adapt role theory, initially focused on the foreign policies of the USA and European countries, to the specificities of Latin American foreign policies (Wehner and Thies 2014; Wehner 2015; Thies 2017; Guimarães and Maitino 2019; Guimarães 2020; Guimarães and Silva 2021). Several of these studies have used role theory to address Brazil's efforts and difficulties in exercising or attempting to exercise leadership and influence in the region, an important focus of interest both for Brazilian foreign policy analysts and for scholars of Latin American regionalism (Lima 2005; Bandeira 2009; Spektor 2010; Malamud 2011; Nolte and Comini 2016). In a broader effort, Chatin (2016) identified the set of NRCs present in the Brazilian diplomacy discourse during the Workers' Party governments: 'defender of diplomacy and the peaceful resolution of conflicts,' 'bridge-builder,' 'agenda-setter,' 'regime-deepener,' 'promoter of international law,' 'pan Southern leader,' among others, and concluded that they were effectively performed by the country, contributing to the consolidation of its soft power and its position as a global political actor.

Guimarães and Silva (2021) undertook a similar exercise concerning Bolsonaro's foreign policy. The purpose, in this case, was, from the identification of the main NRCs, to make progress towards understanding the identity of the current wave of ultra-conservative governments that Bolsonaro's Brazil is part of: leaders and governments that preach conservative values and also attack democratic institutions and the liberal international order.<sup>5</sup>

Based on statements from Bolsonaro and Chancellor Ernesto Araújo, who held office during the first two years of Bolsonaro's government, Guimarães and Silva identified three NRCs that, as mentioned, would be typical of the set of ultra-conservative

governments currently or recently in power, such as the case of the USA under Trump. Firstly, an ‘anti-globalist’ NRC, understood as the opposition to liberal values and institutions (which, in the rhetoric of ultra-conservatives, would also include ‘Marxist’ ideas) and its corrupt cosmopolitan elites that would be conspiring against it. Second, a ‘sovereignist’ NRC underlying the defence of sovereignty (supposedly threatened) and the non-interference by international institutions. Thirdly, what they call the ‘anti-foe’ NRC, which consists of holding systematically belligerent positions and a ‘tendency to denigrate political competitors’ (Plageman and Destradi 2019: 286), which would lead not only to treating any adversary as an enemy but also to creating artificial and conspiratorial enemies (other governments, elites of international agencies, national bureaucracies – including diplomacy – allied with these elites, immigrants, feminists, ‘the left-wing,’ among others), who would prevent the expression of the ‘authentic’ popular identity. Guimarães and Silva argue that Bolsonaro’s Brazil and the other far-right governments currently in power emphasise this set of roles, especially in their mutual relationships, that is, in relationships with those Significant Others that naturally strengthen them.

As for us, we have identified a fourth NRC very present in the Bolsonarist discourse, which is also part of the conglomerate of usual roles detectable in the discourse of far-right governments globally: the role Holsti identified as ‘defender of the faith’.

Some governments view their foreign policy objectives and commitments in terms of defending value systems (rather than specified territories) from attack. Those who espouse the defender of the faith national role conception presumably undertake special responsibilities to guarantee ideological purity for a group of other states. (Holsti 1970: 264)

The content of the defended faith is variable and does not need to be related to any religion. In the US case, in the period analysed by Holsti, it was about defending the ‘free world’ and the liberal values of peace, justice, and freedom. In the current Bolsonarist discourse, ‘faith’ refers to the ‘Judeo-Christian civilisation values’ (a framing similar to Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’ that includes the idea of ‘western’ superiority over other ‘civilisations’ (Huntington 1996)). As for ‘the Christian religion’ itself, it is always interpreted in ways congruent with conservatism (defence of the traditional family model against alternative family configurations and positions against minorities—for example, LGBTQIA+ and other groups who propose alternative values and ways of life—among others).<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising that far-right governments – authoritarian or with a strong tendency towards authoritarianism – invoke religion and religious values associated with a ‘natural,’ stable, and fair social order (Ostiguy 2017). The entire range of roles they represent has an external, supra-human source of legitimation, hardly contestable by those who identify themselves as believers. Thus, the criticism to ‘globalism’ (or to the liberal international order) opposes ‘authentic’ values to the lack of values (or at least of ‘legitimate’ values) of corrupt liberal elites. Along the same lines, the extreme defence of sovereignty is justified by the argument that those who supposedly try to interfere with it

are ‘infidels’ or ‘impious.’ The role of ‘defender of the faith’ also justifies the polarisation that the performance of the role (or strategy) of ‘anti-foe’ entails, which would become a kind of holy war against non-believers, as in the case of the fight against the spectre of the Islamisation of Europe, invoked by several European governments and even by the USA during the Trump administration (Khan et al. 2019) or, in the Brazilian case, of the ‘left’ and its acolytes. As pointed out by Holsti himself (1970: 293), the representation of the ‘defender of the faith’ role presupposes assuming conflicting positions in the international system.

## **The defender of the faith role in the Bolsonaroist foreign policy discourse**

Following the usual methodology followed by role theorists, we have revised a representative set of official speeches to identify the role. Those speeches were given by the two authorities whose constitutional powers make them the legitimate representatives of Brazil before the world: on the one hand, the President of the Republic, and on the other the Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>7</sup> Bolsonaro’s set of speeches includes his inaugural words as President and his statement at the opening session of the 75<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly. As for Araújo, we have worked with two compilations of his main speeches made by the Foreign Ministry itself.

The first element that we highlight is the claim of a political practice informed by religion:

I think having a policy – any policy, not just a foreign policy – emptied of spiritual content is an enormous impoverishment of the human being. The human being is part spirit, and denying this seems to me as something very brutal against the human being. And this thing of encapsulating and saying, “here you can’t talk about religion!” “here you cannot talk about God!,” why not? (Araújo 2019a: 144)

It is not only a question of assuming a new identity but also of recovering the true essence of Brazilian society, represented by Christian values: ‘Part of the problem of our societies now is that we threw away something essential to the way we behave and to our success... Christian values should be back at the core of how we see the world’ (Araújo quoted by Harris and Schiapani 2019).

These Christian values with which the Bolsonaro government identifies are clearly those supported by the more conservative currents of the Catholic and Evangelical churches. While liberation theology is slandered and equated with ‘cultural Marxism,’ the figure of Pope John Paul II, the epitome of conservative counter-reform, is systematically glorified. ‘Liberation Theology was (...) a transit, let’s say, from the Marxist ideology to the side of the Christian faith, contaminating this Christian faith’ (Araújo 2019a: 503-504). ‘Another important figure at that moment (...) is Pope John Paul II – Saint John Paul II, who acted politically to overcome this physiological enemy, communism, from a deep faith’ (Araújo 2019a: 503-504).

President Bolsonaro's statement at the opening of the 75th UN General Assembly, according to which 'Brazil is a Christian and conservative country with family as its foundation' (Bolsonaro 2020a, our translation), makes the double identification with Christianity and conservatism very clear. In its heteronormative and patriarchal version, the family, one of the main pillars of conservatism (Brown 2019), appears here as an essential link between both.

The Bolsonarist discourse openly confronts the fact that the Brazilian State has been officially secular since 1890, when the definitive separation between the State and the Catholic Church took place. Also, the 1988 Constitution reaffirmed secularism. 'The State may be secular, but Jair Bolsonaro is a Christian, (...) today we have a government that respects family values, we have a government that owes loyalty to its people and who, above all, is God-fearing' (Bolsonaro 2020b, our translation). 'On occasion, the "Christian" identity is expanded by the Bolsonarist discourse to "Western civilisation" or even the "Greco-Roman" or "Judeo-Christian" civilisation: I think it's the Western civilisation, the Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, let's call it whatever you want' (Araújo 2019a: 99).

As we will see later, the inclusion of the 'Jewish' element makes it possible to respond to the demands of 'Christian Zionism,' a current with which a significant part of the Evangelical base in Congress identifies and which has facilitated strengthening ties with Israel.

In order to clarify the content of the 'defender of the faith' role, it is necessary to show from whom it needs defending. Numerous statements by Minister Araújo allude to the threats facing Western civilisation and, specifically, Christianity, all over the world, including Brazil:

We know that people of all religions are being persecuted worldwide. Now, in our case, a predominantly Christian country, 90% Christian, which has Christianity as part of its essence and part of its identity, we feel a responsibility to draw attention, especially to the problem of Christophobia. (...) I think there is insufficient awareness around the world of the problem (sic) of Christophobia, including in countries with a Christian majority or that at other times were mostly Christian, where sometimes the Christian faith is denigrated and attacked when other faiths are not. (Araújo 2020a, our translation)

Finally, it should be noted that Minister Araújo's statements make clear the importance of the 'defender of the faith' role in the Brazilian political project and the importance of Brazil for the global conservative project

I think this is our project, our adventure, in which we have a fundamental role, not a secondary role. Because, within this civilisation, today, at least numerically, Brazil is the second largest country in this group, which gives us responsibility. I think we must assume

this role because everything we are and feel is based on that.  
(Araújo 2019a: 99)

Summarising, through foreign policy, the Bolsonaro government promoted and defended conservative Christian values (also identified with the elusive ‘Western civilisation’ label) – supposedly threatened by ‘globalism’ and ‘cultural Marxism’ – assuming an important role, even leadership, within the group of states currently governed by ultra-conservative governments.

## **The defender of the faith role as a dependent variable: domestic and international sources**

Ultra-conservative governments tend to govern for their constituency, not for society as a whole, seeking to promote the universalisation of their particular values. For them, foreign policy is no longer a state policy. Instead, it works as a domestic mobilisation strategy and a tool to attract international allies. There are several examples, from Trump’s US withdrawal from international institutions and agreements to the policies towards the European Union partners of Poland and Hungary in recent years (Applebaum 2021).

Thus, domestic political forces are significant sources for the current ultra-conservative governments’ role generation. In Brazil, Christian-conservative political forces claiming to base their positions on religion and Christian morality have increased considerably since democratisation. They are very influential in the National Congress, with a high capacity for political coordination.

Although some parties have an especially close bond with particular churches (for instance, Republicanos with the Universal Church, or the Social Christian Party with the Assembly of God) (Valle 2018), it is possible to find politicians with a solid religious identity associated with all sectors of the ideological spectrum and a wide range of political parties. However, the coordination of members of Congress by religious identity occurs through the two major parliamentary fronts (groups bringing together members of different political parties) in the National Congress: The Evangelical Parliamentary Front (Frente Parlamentar Evangélica) and the Roman Catholic Apostolic Parliamentary Front (Frente Parlamentar Católica Apostólica Romana). The first, known informally as the ‘Evangelical Caucus,’ emerged in the Constituent Assembly from a core of 37 members of Congress (among the 559 elected) related to several Evangelical churches; more than half of them were Pentecostal. They have drawn the attention of the media and academia due to their use of religious discourse, unprecedented in Brazilian politics (Pierucci 1989; Dantas 2011). One of its first ‘successes’ was to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation being included as a crime in the Constitution (Corrêa and Kalil 2020). In 2003, already in full growth, the Evangelical caucus obtained the status of a formal political group, constituting itself as a parliamentary front. Currently, more than 200 parliamentarians belong to the Evangelical Parliamentary Front (in Portuguese, Frente Parlamentar Evangélica, FPE). However, curiously, less than half call themselves

Evangelicals (Marchesini 2020), demonstrating the attraction power of the front among the spectrum of conservative parliamentarians in favour of the religious core flags.

Something similar happens with the Roman Catholic Apostolic Parliamentary Front, even though self-declared Catholics are the majority (68.4%) of its members (Marchesini 2020). Created in 2015 with the endorsement of 257 parliamentarians from both chambers who declared themselves 'spokespersons of the Catholic Christian commitment in the Federal Chamber' (Carimbão 2015, our translation), it congregates a slightly smaller number of members than the Evangelical Parliamentary Front. It is also open to Christians of different denominations and even to politicians not ascribed to any religion in particular.

In the 2019-2022 term, 60% of members of federal Congress (306) were part of one or both fronts (Estado de São Paulo 2019). Both tended to vote together on matters related to 'pro-life, Christian morality' (Carimbão 2015, our translation), that is, in defence of maintaining traditional hierarchies in society and the family, trying to overturn – or at least slow down – the concession of rights to women, the LGTBQIA+ community, and other vulnerable groups; rights that they see as incompatible with their supposedly universal vision of Christian morality. Thus, they are opposed to the decriminalisation of abortion (and also trying to eliminate exceptions currently allowed by law), the fight against homophobia, and the introduction of gender discussions in school curricula.

The Brazilian State is, however, secular. In fact, secularity has been increasing in the country, although at a slower pace than in the rest of the world (Power 2020). How, then, to explain this growing presence of parliamentarians identified with Christian-conservative agendas in the National Congress?

The main explanation is the growing strength of Evangelicals of several conservative religious currents congregating politically active leaders in the Brazilian population and, therefore, in the constituency. The growth of Evangelicals – mainly at the expense of the Catholic segment of the population – occurs everywhere in Latin America. However, it is especially noticeable in Brazil, where, between 2000 and 2010, Evangelicals went from 15.5% to more than 20% of the population, with 2 out of 3 converts being from Catholicism (which, in turn, loses 1% of their believers per year) (Freston 2010). Thus, some predict that by 2030, Evangelicals will replace Catholics as the religion with the most followers (Alves et al. 2017: 217). Pentecostals, notorious for their moral conservatism, are the evangelical religious current growing the most. Among their followers there are very active and influential leaders, able to attract votes for 'their' candidates by defending the traditional values they proclaim. Evangelicals were essential in the 2018 election and formed the supporting base of the government in the National Congress (Casarões 2020).

A second factor behind the increasing strength of Christian-conservative agendas in the National Congress is the growing political influence of the more conservative sectors of the Catholic hierarchy. The Catholic Church has traditionally had a significant social and political influence in Latin America and Brazil, and continues to do so despite its loss of followers. A clear proof of this influence is the Brazil-Vatican agreement that took effect in December 2009, granting tax benefits to the institution and also favouring religious

teaching in public schools (Presidência da República 2010). During the authoritarian period, while conservative Catholic currents (such as those linked to the Tradition, Family, and Property group, TFP) had governmental support, progressive sectors (especially the ecumenical currents linked to the Second Vatican Council) experienced persecution. Also, the authoritarian governments and the conservative sectors of the Catholic hierarchy mutually supported themselves to combat communism and ecumenism, which were considered ideologically close and equally dangerous. During democratisation, while the progressive sectors close to Liberation Theology were weakened (for reasons that were not only internal: since 1979, John Paul II undertook a conservative restoration of the Catholic Church), the conservative Catholic sectors, heirs of the TFP, remained strong. They also maintained a clear link with the government (Cowan 2021). In recent years, mainly by emulating evangelicals, there has been a re-politicisation of Catholicism in Brazil. The very constitution of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Mixed Parliamentary Front is proof of this, as well as the efforts by the Catholic hierarchy to maintain direct contacts in Congress.<sup>8</sup>

The resonance among voters of a discourse that appeals to Christian morality has encouraged the strategy of emphasising religious identity among conservative politicians. Bolsonaro himself was, during his parliamentary career, a conspicuous representative of Christian-conservative forces, with a significant role opposing discussions on gender in education and of 'gender ideology' (Corrêa and Kalil 2020). Once elected, he gave access to the executive to his religious conservative associates. As a result, they began to play a significant role in the formulation of foreign policy and, thus, in framing the 'defender of the faith' role.

The current international context is favourable to this role's performance. Fuelled by increasing inequality and the false promises of capitalism, ultra-conservative forces have grown globally, either within traditional parties (as is the case of Republicans in the USA) or through the creation of new ultra-right parties (such as Vox in Spain). Also, in several countries (USA, Hungary, Poland, Turkey) they have reached the government. The subgroup of Christian conservative political forces is powerful and cohesive. There is, in effect, a 'Christian conservative transnationalism' that some consider one of the most influential phenomena of our time, both culturally and politically (Cowan 2021). Similar to transnational networks that support progressive causes linked to the defence of human rights or the environment, members of Christian-conservative networks support each other, share common ideas and concepts (such as 'globalism' or 'gender ideology'); they also share common strategies in their attacks on the liberal order. Its ideologues (Steve Bannon, Olavo de Carvalho, Alexander Dugin) exchanged ideas and influenced each other (Teitelbaum 2021). To a greater or lesser extent, they all reproduce the victimised discourse of the threatened Christian religion or civilisation, either by secularism, by 'radical Islamism,' by immigrants, by 'cultural Marxism,' or by liberalism. In other words, they perform the 'defender of the faith' role.

## **Role performance: international positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and gender rights**

In this section, we describe two sets of foreign policy initiatives we consider performances (role enactments) of the ‘defender of the faith’ role: On the one hand, diplomatic positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, on the other, those on the international women’s rights (and on gender rights in general), both expressed in multilateral venues, especially the UN system. Next, for each of them, we:

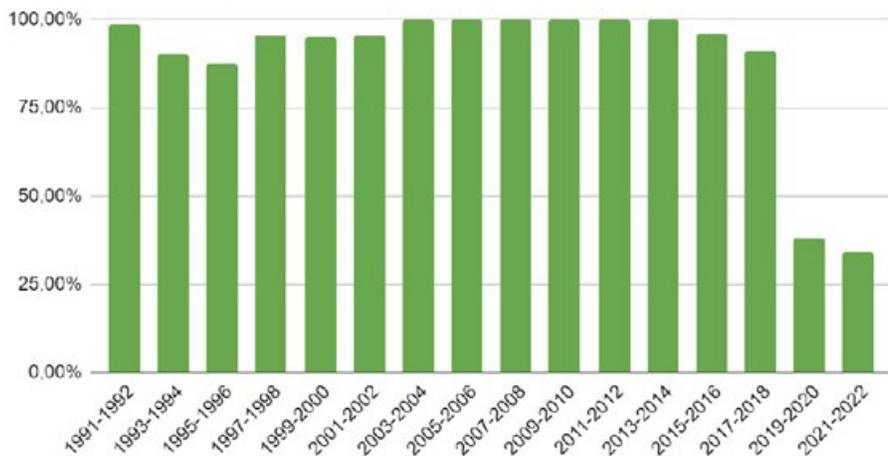
1. Identify the changes relative to previous governments;
2. Show how these changes respond to domestic and external actors identified here as role sources’ demands; and
3. Show that the new positions (role enactments) are explicitly related to the role conception (NRC) of ‘defender of the faith.’

### *The Israeli-Palestinian conflict*

During his presidential campaign, Bolsonaro announced that, following Trump’s administration’s footsteps, he would move the Brazilian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Vilela 2019). This gesture signalled a notorious change in position concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, given that it assumed an acceptance of the Israeli thesis that Jerusalem is the indivisible capital of the Jewish State, a position questioned by numerous UN resolutions. It is important to remember that only the USA and Guatemala have diplomatic representation in the city. Although the decision was never implemented, its announcement was a clear signal that Brazil was changing its traditional position regarding the conflict, especially as manifested through the votes in UN General Assembly resolutions. If, until then, Brazil had been part of the group of states that habitually condemned the Israeli occupation of Palestine and human rights violations in the occupied territories, under Bolsonaro they were much more aligned with Israel.

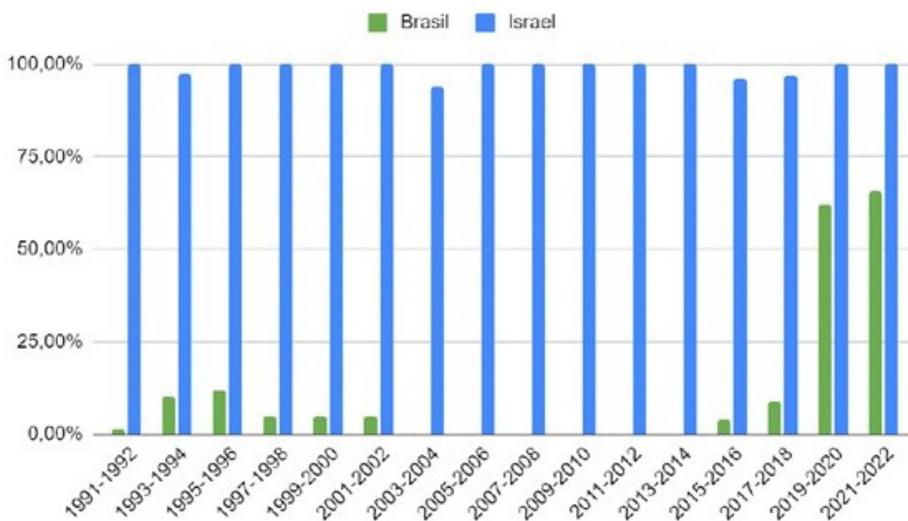
Graphics 1 and 2 show the transition from divergence to convergence between Israeli and Brazilian votes in the history of 557 votes in the UN General Assembly on the Palestinian question from 1991 to 2022.

In general terms, until 2019, the convergence with Israel was very low. Brazil used to vote ‘yes’ on resolutions condemning Israel, although during both administrations of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) led by Presidents Itamar Franco and Fernando Henrique Cardoso between 1995 and 2002, and also under Michel Temer (2016-2018), there was a low percentage of ‘no’ votes and abstentions. During Worker’s Party administrations (2003-2016), Brazil consistently voted ‘yes’ to the resolutions, following the Arab group.



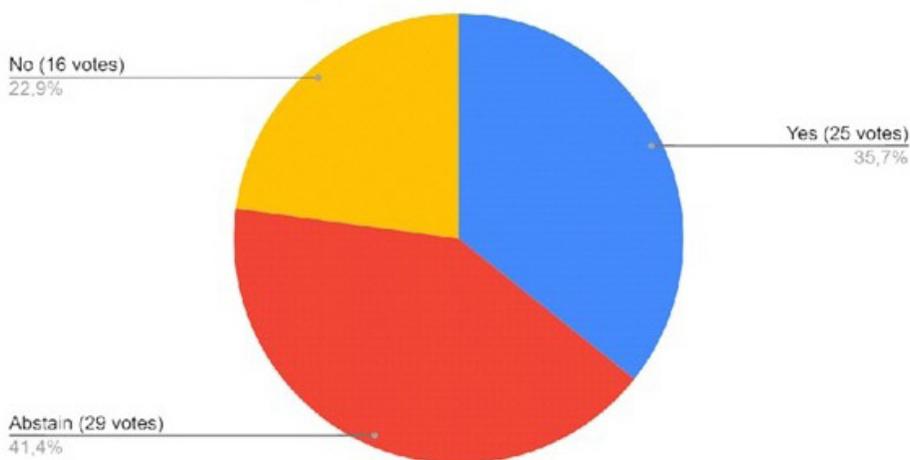
Graphic 1. Percentage of Brazil's votes "yes" on the Palestinian question at the UN General Assembly (1991-2022).

Source: Created by the authors from United Nations General Assembly Voting Data (2020) and UN Watch (2023).



Graphic 2. Percentage of votes "no" and "abstain" on the Palestinian question at the UN General Assembly (1991-2022).

Source: Prepared by the authors based on United Nations General Assembly Voting Data (2020) and UN Watch (2023).



Graphic 3. Distribution of Brazil's votes on the Palestinian question at the UN General Assembly (2019-2022).

Source: Prepared by the authors based on United Nations General Assembly Voting Data (2020) and UN Watch (2023).

The change in the Brazilian voting pattern since 2019 is evident. Under Bolsonaro, the percentage of positive Brazilian votes decreased and the country began to converge much more with Israel, moving away from the Brazilian diplomatic traditional position on this matter. Graphic 3 confirms the new position with data from Brazilian votes on the Palestinian matter between 2019-2022.

Those responsible for Brazilian foreign policy were very clear, at the beginning of the Bolsonaro administration, about their decision to change the diplomatic position on Israel in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

What we understand here is that Israel was being unfairly singled out in the treatment regarding human rights in the United Nations context. Suffering some kind of treatment that practically turned Israel into an outcast from the international community, not only in the human rights commission of the United Nations but in several forums (Araújo 2019b, our translation).

At the domestic level, this change of position met the demands of Evangelical/Pentecostal groups represented in the National Congress who identify with so-called 'Christian Zionism,' that is, the political position based on the belief (which, in turn, would be based on biblical prophecies) that Jewish people have a right return to their homeland, i.e., Israel (Haija 2006). Two strong religious doctrines among Brazilian Pentecostal Evangelicals, the Dispensational Theology and the Alliance Theology, coincide on this point.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in the Pentecostal logic, supporting Israel means respecting

the divine mandate to return to the promised land that appears in the Old Testament. For them, God will bless Christian supporters of Israel in this world. For this reason, numerous Pentecostal leaders have repeatedly criticised the conduct of Brazilian foreign policy towards Israel during Worker's Party governments, systematically pressing for a more decidedly pro-Israeli foreign policy. The two excerpts below are representative of this set of manifestations.

90% of our population is Christian, and Israel is the second homeland of all Christians. The Brazilian people love Israel! How is it possible that the Itamaraty does not consider this? How is it possible that we continue to turn our backs on the yearnings of our people, our sense of justice and truth and the blessings that come from God's promises that bless Israel? (Congressman Roberto de Lucena 2017, our translation)

There is, unfortunately, a feeling of anti-Semitism in Brazil on the part of some political groups, (...) it is important to remember that President Lula, when he was on an official mission in the Middle East, refused to visit the tomb of the father of the Zionism, Theodor Herzl, visiting the tomb of Yasser Arafat instead (Congressman Alan Rick 2019, our translation)

With the arrival of Bolsonaro to the presidency in 2019, religious groups demanded the fulfilment of electoral promises: 'I hope that our President of the Republic fulfils as soon as possible his campaign promise to move the embassy to where Israel wants it' (Congressman Marco Feliciano 2019: 11, our translation).

The State of Israel, in turn, demonstrated that it was aware of the domestic group's importance influencing Brazilian foreign policy and sought to foster Evangelical/Pentecostal support for its cause. At a meeting between the then-prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, and several Evangelical leaders on October 30, 2018, in Rio de Janeiro (Agência Brasil 2018), Netanyahu (2018) made a point of highlighting the religious identity of the two peoples: 'We have no better friends than the evangelical community, and the evangelical community has no better friends than the State of Israel, (...) you are our brothers and sisters. (...) Christianity grew out of Judaism.' Therefore, it seems clear that Israel is a crucial Significant Other that stimulates the development of the 'defender of the faith' role.

Those responsible for Brazilian foreign policy emphasised the link between common religious-civilisational values and the change of position on Israel and on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In other words, the common Judeo-Christian identity was used as an argument for the changing political orientation.

Israel, for many Brazilians, because of their faith, is the Holy Land, there is an association, and it is where the Holy Sepulchre is located. This is not a trivial thing. Of course, for a totally technocratic civilisation, it doesn't matter, but for people who have another type

of connection with their past, with their reality, with their faith, in this case, it is different. So, this symbolic aspect – not in the sense of a minor significance, but in the sense of a symbol, in a more profound sense – is also fundamental in our relationship with Israel. (Araújo 2019a: 103)

We know Israel is not as rich as Brazil in natural resources, among other things, so: Look at what they don't have and see what they are. Hence, I would speak to my Brazilian brothers, look at what we have and see what we don't have. How could we be like them? Having the same faith they have. (Bolsonaro 2019a, our translation) I'd like to say also that Jerusalem is a perfect symbol of what we want to accomplish. It's a symbol of development, growth, technology, creativity. And, at the same time, it's a symbol that we must cultivate the spiritual dimension. We have been in business events, these days, where, at the same time, we talk about the latest technologies, and we recite the Bible.. (...) And this holistic vision of the human being, where you can see the human being, and human life, and nations, not only under an economic perspective, but under a perspective of values, it is this vision that is creating a new Brazil, and is allowing the creation of this new relationship with Israel. (Araújo 2019a: 169-170)

We were separated for some time, considering the ideologically left-wing government, but our origins spoke louder, the people understood that we should change the destiny of Brazil and against many things, but with God at our side, we got the victory. (...) therefore, more and more we become closer to countries that are aligned with us in faith, traditions, culture, worship of freedom and democracy, and in the fear of God. (Bolsonaro 2019b, our translation)

## *Gender rights*

Since democratisation, especially since the Itamar Franco (1992-1995) and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003) governments, Brazilian diplomatic positions in international forums (UN, OAS) dealing with women's and LGBTQIA+ rights have been consistently progressive (Sardenberg 2015; Miguel 2015; Corrêa and Kalil 2020). Since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), the feminist movement has been a partner of the government, both in building the Brazilian diplomatic position on multilateral venues and in preparing reports on the status of women's rights required by international organisations to their members. The Secretariat for Women's Policies (in portugese 'Secretaria de Políticas para as Mulheres' (SPM)), created in 2003 by Lula's government, in consonance with the Brazilian and transnational feminist movement, began to play a prominent role setting the agenda on women's rights in multilateral forums

(Salomón 2020). Brazil used to stand out for its leadership on international efforts to advance sexual and reproductive rights, including the decriminalisation of abortion, (Oliveira 2004; Miguel 2015), as well as for the promotion of rights related to sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI).<sup>10</sup>

Even before Bolsonaro was elected, the change of position on gender rights was predictable. Bolsonaro himself had been one of the leading activists against ‘gender ideology’ in Congress, especially since 2012, when he started leading the opposition to the programme against homophobia proposed by the Ministry of Education – which the religious ultra-right mocked as the ‘gay kit’ (Miguel 2021) – and became ‘the main representative of the fight against “gender ideology”<sup>11</sup> in politics’ (Correa and Kalil 2020: 95). Bolsonaro prioritised this issue both in his presidential campaign and in his political agenda as president. At the inauguration ceremony of the presidency in the National Congress on January 1, 2019, Bolsonaro gave a speech summing up his political project as follows: ‘to unite people, value the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, fight against gender ideology, preserve our values’ (Bolsonaro 2019c, our translation).

Thus, in the first half of 2019, Brazil’s diplomatic position on international gender rights was ‘updated’, to use the term with which Minister Araújo, described the change (Araújo 2019a: 311). During this period, Brazil participated in the 63<sup>rd</sup> Commission on the Status of Women (March 2019), the 52<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Commission on Population and Development, the 72<sup>nd</sup> Session of the World Health Assembly, and the 41<sup>st</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council. In all these forums, Brazilian representatives proceeded to position themselves according to the new government guidelines.

Chancellor Araújo himself summed up Brazil’s new position in five points: First, the term ‘gender’ was to be understood as synonymous with biological sex, that is, denying its meaning as a social construction.<sup>12</sup> Second, Brazil had to defend the ‘right to life since conception,’ prioritising thus an unborn child’s supposed rights in relation to women’s rights to bodily autonomy. Third, Brazil ought to promote ‘family rights,’ and family here is understood in its heteronormative and patriarchal version, in which women assume a subordinated role. Fourth, Brazil was to reject ‘inappropriate terminology’ in international documents, that is, any mention of ‘sexual and reproductive rights’ (or even sexual education) in official documents. Fifth, Brazil had to defend the ‘equality between men and women’ (no longer ‘gender equality’) and the commitment to ‘combating violence against women and girls’ (no longer ‘gender-based violence’) (Araújo 2019a: 311-315). This position was maintained after Minister Araújo’s departure from Itamaraty in April 2021, and his replacement by Chancellor Carlos França.

The new Brazilian position on gender rights coincided wholly with the Vatican’s, which in the last quarter of a century has led the international crusade against gender rights (Fillod 2014; Miskolci and Campana 2017; Corrêa 2018; Biroli, Machado and Vaggione 2020), or, to use the term or counter-framing coined by this coalition or ‘counter-movement’ (Corredor 2019), against ‘gender ideology.’ Like Brazil under Bolsonaro, the Vatican combines a staunch opposition to any progress towards the decriminalisation of abortion and the defence of the traditional heteronormative family with the supposed

fight against violence against women and LGBTQIA+. That is hardly credible, since the Vatican does not recognise, much less oppose, the gender roles and hierarchies which are the structural causes of gender violence.

Falling into the category of ‘with position totally or partially coinciding with the Vatican’ – that is, against gender rights –, are Poland, Hungary, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iraq, Guatemala, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, or Gambia. All of them belong to the ‘Geneva Consensus,’ an alliance of approximately thirty governments opposed to decriminalising abortion. The coalition was founded by the US government in November 2020 (at the end of the Trump administration), and Bolsonaro’s Brazil was a founding member. The Geneva Consensus claims ‘protecting human life, strengthening the family as the basic unit of society, and defending the sovereignty of nations in creating their life protection policies,’ which makes it, to quote human rights NGO Conectas’s words, an ‘international alliance against women’s rights’ (Conectas 2020). Biden’s election in 2020 shifted the US to the progressive bloc on gender rights, leaving the role of leadership of this group to Brazil (Corrêa and Huppés 2022).<sup>13</sup>

At the domestic level, the Catholic and Evangelical fronts and the Mixed Parliamentary Front against Abortion and in Defence of Life (an all-party group mainly composed of members of the other two fronts and acting at both chambers) supported President Bolsonaro’s positions on gender rights. Initially, Catholics and Evangelicals had different issues they focused on in their respective efforts to stop gender rights progress or to push back against them. Catholics focused on the fight against sexual and reproductive rights (especially against the decriminalisation of abortion) and Evangelicals were more concerned with setting back the rights of LGBTQIA+ families. However, the two parliamentary fronts have gradually converged and transformed the fight against gender ideology into an umbrella movement (Biroli, Machado and Vaggione 2020). Bolsonaro himself took the lead on this shared agenda from 2012 onwards in the National Congress (Corrêa and Kalil 2020).

During Worker’s Party governments, Itamaraty, state feminists from the Secretariat of Policies for Women, and the feminist movement had a ‘feminist strategic partnership,’ working together in the promotion of gender rights in foreign policy (Salomón 2020). With Bolsonaro, an ‘anti-feminist strategic partnership’ began to operate, in which the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights and the National Secretariat of Policies for Women, both controlled by conservative and religiously oriented forces present in Congress, built, together with the Ministry of Foreign Relations, the new Brazilian position on gender rights.<sup>14</sup>

Although the religious foundations of Bolsonarist Brazil’s position are quite evident, those responsible for foreign policy, following the same strategy as the Vatican (Miguel 2021), tried to minimise this connection. Thus, Minister Araújo argued that Brazil’s position on gender rights was not based solely on religion:

The fact that the Christian faith is pro-life as it is, that it protects and values life since conception, does not mean that this is an issue that cannot be publicly discussed; and it does not mean that those

who defend the right to life hold a purely religious perspective. (Araújo 2020b: 568)

However, advocating for ‘natural law’ as a standard of conduct, as opposed to positive law (which, according to Araújo, could potentially destroy family ties), makes clear the alignment of Bolsonaroist diplomatic positions with Christian-conservative conceptions regarding family relationships and gender rights; that is, with the religious conservative actors encouraging Brazil to act in foreign policy as a ‘defender of the faith’: ‘The imposition of certain standards that break, for example, family bonds, needs this desensitisation of people and this forgetfulness of the natural law idea. It is very dangerous when a society starts to believe only in positive law’ (Araújo 2020b: 570).

## Conclusion

Role theory has proven to be a useful conceptual tool to describe and explain foreign policies, including Brazilian foreign policy. In this article, we have been dealing with a role (NRC) relatively neglected by analysts. The role of ‘defender of the faith’ was, in fact, very present in Bolsonaro’s foreign policy discourse and very prominent in his government’s political agenda. In Bolsonaro’s foreign policy, this role referred to an ultra-conservative interpretation of the Christian faith and Judeo-Christian or ‘Western’ values. At the same time, it complemented and connected other roles already identified as characteristic of the new ultra-conservative identity of Brazil and of other governments aligned with the current ultra-conservative wave. Through the ‘defender of the faith’ role, ultra-conservative governments present themselves as divinely ordained, thus strengthening the anti-liberal (anti-globalist), extreme nationalist (sovereigntist) discourse and justifying the treatment of ‘enemies’ (anti-foe) given to their political opponents.

Despite Brazil being a secular state in which secularity has been growing, the increasing strength of conservative Christian forces (Evangelical and Catholic) in politics, with a significant and growing capacity for articulation in the National Congress, explains the emphasis given by Bolsonaro’s government to the defence of the Christian-conservative values and its related agenda. The government was focused exclusively in the satisfaction of the demands of its own base (internal sources) and its behaviour was reinforced by the increasingly dense network of international interactions with other governments that share these values (external sources).

Two sets of Bolsonaroist foreign policy initiatives that entail a clear shift in the Brazilian foreign policy performance in the previous decades can be explained as a role enactment of the ‘defender of the faith’ NRC. The drastic change in the Brazilian voting pattern in the UN General Assembly – specifically in resolutions condemning the occupation of the Palestinian territories by Israel, and the violations of the Palestinian population’s human rights –, accompanied by multiple manifestations of political support for Israel, responded, fundamentally, to the demands of Pentecostal leaders in Congress. As the excerpts of the official speeches by Bolsonaro and his Minister of Foreign Affairs made clear, the change was warranted on religious-civilising values shared by those

responsible for foreign policy. The change regarding international gender rights was no less drastic. Brazil went from promoting women's and LGBTQIA+ rights in multilateral venues to leading, with Bolsonaro, the anti-sexual and reproductive rights alliance based on positions identical to those of the Vatican, which are defined by the domestic political-religious leaderships and end up subordinating positive law to natural law. Both sets of initiatives confirm the link between identity and behaviour posited by role theory.

## Notes

- 1 See Kowert (2018) for a review and categorization of state identity theories as a) internal conditions of agents; b) social interactions among agents; and c) 'ecological encounters with a broader environment'.
- 2 Breuning defines identity in modern role theory as 'the ego [vs. alter] aspect of role conception' (Breuning 2011: 26), or, in other words, the actor's ideas on their position in society. In the same vein (and in the same edited volume), Nabers (2011: 82-83), develops a thorough discussion on the theoretical nexus between role and identity (in social science as a whole and in FPA role theory) highlighting the co-constitutionality of the two concepts: 'On the one hand, actors have to formulate plans and perform certain activities within the boundaries of their role that in turn reinforce, support, and confirm their identities [...]. On the other hand, an identity provides an actor within standpoint or frame of reference for interpretation of the social position the role supplies the actor with.'
- 3 Although, as Thies (2017) points out, some role theory analysts have used secondary sources, combined or not with primary sources.
- 4 Holsti (1970: 306) argued that the methodological decision to explain roles uncomplicates foreign policy analysis, hitherto excessively focused on explaining individual decisions.
- 5 Guimarães and Silva (2021) categorised these governments both as ultra-conservative and 'populists' due to their tendency to proclaim themselves as allies and representatives of 'the people', and enemies of the corrupt 'elites' that betray those they claim to represent (strategies identified by the literature as typical of populism (Laclau 2005; Ostiguy 2017)). Without denying the presence of these rhetorical strategies in the discourse of the ultra-right, here we prefer not to dive into the debate about the pertinence of including both left-wing and ultra-right governments in the same category ('populist'), a conflation questioned by authors such as Soares de Lima (2021). Anyhow, this does not affect our argument.
- 6 Casarões and Farias (2021), who also investigated Bolsonaro's government international identity (not based on role theory, but on a constructivist model that is, in its essence, compatible with role theory's assumptions), proposed 'religious sovereignty' as one of the pillars of the Bolsonaroist foreign policy identity. Here, we prefer to distinguish the 'defender of the faith' role from the 'affirmation of sovereignty' one. Although the two roles or identity markers overlap in the Brazilian case, this is not necessarily so. For example, Margaret Thatcher's championing sovereignty, exalting the nation-state and national culture (Gray 1998), had no religious or civilisational connotation.
- 7 Although Bolsonaro had two Foreign Affairs Ministers during his government – Ernesto Araújo and Carlos França – here we only use Ernesto Araújo's statements. Our choice is based on a perceived limitation in França's contribution to the discursive construction of the new Brazilian identity. Brazil's previously constructed roles continued to be enacted until the end of Bolsonaro's administration, although not always with the same intensity.
- 8 In fact, in September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (in Portuguese Conferência Nacional de Bispos do Brasil – CNBB) met with catholic legislators in the 'First Summit of Catholic Lawmakers for the Brazilian People.'
- 9 According to Dispensational Theology, Christians should support Israel in order to warrant Christ's second coming to earth. For Alliance Theology, supporting Israel brings blessings for those to do so. See Lewis [2021].
- 10 In 2011, Brazil voted in favour of the pioneering resolution on sexual orientation and gender identity approved by the UN Human Rights Council (Resolution 17/19). Previously, in 2004, Brazil had presented

a draft resolution on Human Rights and Sexual Orientation at the 60th session of the UN Human Rights Commission but ended up withdrawing it. Brazil was also the proponent, along with five other Latin American countries, of a Human Rights Council resolution approved in June 2016 (Resolution 32/2) which created the position of Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity (United Nations, 2003).

- 11 The Vatican coined the term 'gender ideology' in the mid-1990s with the purpose of demonising the transnational feminist movement and attacking the progress it was able to promote. Some of the movement's achievements were recorded in the final documents of the intergovernmental conferences on social issues promoted by the Un in the 1990s: The Vienna Declaration on Human Rights; the Cairo Action Plan approved at the International Conference on Population and Development; and, especially, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action issued at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Miskolci and Campana 2017; Corrêa 2018).
- 12 During the Bolsonaro administration, the Brazilian government refrained from using 'gender' in all its official documents. Brazilian diplomats received instructions to ask for the replacement of 'gender' with 'equality between men and women' in UN resolutions (Chade 2019).
- 13 In January 2023, the incoming Lula administration announced Brazil's withdrawal from the Geneva consensus (Agência Brasil 2023).
- 14 Minister Damares Alves, Bolsonaro's Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights, is a prominent Evangelical and pro-life leader who has actively participated in and occasionally headed Brazilian delegations in UN conferences. The same goes for Angela Gandra Martins, a member of the pro-life Catholic movement and, during the Bolsonaro administration, head of the National Secretary of Policies for Women. Both are prominent examples of the numerous politicians promoting conservative-religious agendas who came to occupy the top echelons of the Executive Branch.

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## 'O Brasil é um país cristão e conservador que tem a família como base': o papel de defensor da fé na política externa de Bolsonaro

**Resumo:** Os analistas de política externa têm usado a teoria dos papéis (*role theory*) há décadas. Vários estudos recentes recorreram a ela para descrever e explicar a política externa brasileira. Ao complementar os esforços atuais que buscam explicar a reestruturação da identidade internacional do Brasil empreendida pelo governo Bolsonaro, este artigo se concentra em um papel relativamente negligenciado pela literatura, ou seja, aquele que Holsti chamou de 'defensor da fé'. No caso da política externa de Bolsonaro, a fé a ser defendida é a dos valores da 'civilização judaico-cristã' em sua interpretação mais conservadora. Depois de identificar o papel em declarações de representantes oficiais da política externa brasileira, examinamos tanto suas fontes internas primárias (os atores políticos identificados com agências religiosas-conservadoras no Congresso Nacional) quanto suas fontes externas (o 'conservadorismo transnacional' de governos próximos ao de Bolsonaro), para então ilustrar sua atuação por meio de dois conjuntos de iniciativas que representam mudanças drásticas nas posições diplomáticas brasileiras: o apoio a Israel na votação das resoluções da ONU sobre o conflito israelo-palestino e a mudança de posições progressistas para conservadoras nas discussões sobre direitos de gênero em espaços multilaterais.

**Palavras-chave:** teoria dos papéis; política externa brasileira; ultraconservadorismo; conflito israelense-palestino; direitos de gênero.

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