

Covid-19 pandemic: Brazil Undone – “History will not absolve Bolsonaro”

Saturday 28 March 2020, by [HYLTON Forrest](#) (Date first published: 27 March 2020).

The Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, is the only world leader widely believed not only to have Covid-19 and to have lied about it, but to have knowingly spread it to untold numbers of his followers. *Time* (or *Veja*, the country’s leading news magazine) will tell, but at the very least, the circumstantial evidence is curious. Bolsonaro called on his largely evangelical base to hit the streets on 15 March to shut down Congress and the Supreme Court. Under quarantine after his return from the US - 25 members of his entourage have been infected with coronavirus, making Bolsonaro the centre of the largest initial cluster in Brazil - the president broke out of his motorcade to shake hands and high five those calling for the government buildings to be burnt to the ground.

According to Fox News, citing the president’s son Eduardo as a source, Bolsonaro tested positive for coronavirus on 13 March; but as soon as the story aired, Eduardo denied it, accusing Fox of fabricating the whole thing. The president has since had two more tests, both allegedly negative, but unlike the governor of São Paulo, João Doria, tasked with confronting the outbreak at its epicentre, Bolsonaro refuses to make his test results public, claiming they are a state secret. The military hospital where Bolsonaro was tested turned over a list of those who had tested positive to the district government in Brasilia, but redacted two names. The minister of the Supreme Federal Court, Alexandre de Moraes, struck down Bolsonaro’s measure restricting access to information, so the truth should emerge sooner rather than later.

Bolsonaro’s approach to Trump is monkey see, monkey do, so the day after Trump floated the idea of an early return to work, against the advice of leading military figures, Bolsonaro went on national television to announce that (in his experience?) coronavirus was just ‘a little flu’, and that since old people rather than children were dying in other countries, Brazilian children should return to school and young people should return to work. Businesses were to reopen, since the politics of quarantine was ‘a thing for cowards’. According to the speaker of the lower house, Rodrigo Maia, Bolsonaro was under pressure from investors after the market in São Paulo crashed, losing 52 per cent of its total value between 17 January 17 and 20 March - the biggest drop in the world, according to Goldman Sachs.

In addition to the number of coronavirus cases and deaths (as of 26 March, 2915 and 77 respectively [[1](#)]), Brazil is also leading Latin America in capital flight: Mexico has lost \$2 billion in foreign investment; Brazil has lost \$12 billion. The real, meanwhile, has dropped to a new low of \$5.02 to the dollar. The economy minister, Paulo Guedes, who studied under Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago and at the University of Chile under Pinochet, warned Bolsonaro that Brazil could not afford to quarantine beyond 7 April; the country was already in recession before Covid-19 arrived. To informal workers, who make up four-fifths of the economically active population in urban settlements (favelas), where at least 13.6 million people live, Guedes is offering 200 reais in vouchers, which will not be enough to keep them from having to work to survive. He is asking business owners to cut wages and hours by half rather than lay workers off. The lower house of

Congress approved an increase from 200 to 600 reais – still not enough to live on – along with 36 billion reais in small business loans so that bars and restaurants can pay three months' salary to employees. Both require Senate approval.

In São Paulo, Governor Doria implemented the tightest quarantine, banning the entry of people from outside the state. With the support of business leaders, Doria plans to maintain the quarantine and test 2000 people per day; 677,000 received flu shots in two days. Doria has received death threats and his house is now surrounded by military guard. The governor of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel, has taken a similar approach, and plans to hand out one million food baskets. He has warned there will be 'chaos' if help from the federal government does not materialise by Monday, 30 March. For now, the drug gangs that rule many of the city's hillside favelas are enforcing the restrictions.

As well as antagonising Congress and the Supreme Court both before and after the outbreak of Covid-19, then, Bolsonaro has also antagonised Brazil's regional governors on the right, including former allies such as Ronaldo Caiado, the governor of Goiás, who is also a doctor. On 26 March, 26 of Brazil's 27 governors signed a letter to Congress. They requested talks with Bolsonaro's vice-president, General Hamilton Mourão, who claimed that Bolsonaro 'did not express himself in the best way', and suggested that social distancing would indeed be maintained. Yet the final government decree on the quarantine included churches as 'essential services', sanctioning the refusal of evangelical pastors to shut their doors. Bolsonaro today launched a propaganda campaign called 'Brazil can't stop.' The official in charge of administering it has Covid-19.

In the impoverished northeast, governors led by Rui Costa from Bahia have solicited direct support in the forms of masks, medical uniforms, gloves and respirators from the Chinese government, which agreed to help. The Chinese ambassador, Yang Wanming, recently suggested that Eduardo Bolsonaro had perhaps contracted a mental virus on his recent trip to the US that had infected his ability to think, as evidenced by a tweet repeating Trump's description of Covid-19 as 'the Chinese virus'. Eduardo apologised, but the damage was done, especially as the foreign minister, Ernesto Araujo, had hastily backed him before he made the retraction. When President Bolsonaro spoke of Sino-Brazilian 'friendship' and asked for a meeting, Yang, who described the Bolsonaro family as the 'great poison of Brazil', ignored him. Bolsonaro's digital followers repeated the 'Chinese virus' trope on social media; Eduardo took to Twitter, again accusing China of creating the global crisis. A top official from the Attorney General's Office accused the WHO of crimes against humanity, of being commandeered by the 'Chinese communist dictatorship', and of influencing Brazilian mayors and governors. China is Brazil's largest trading partner, and determines the fortunes of Brazilian agro-industry, soy in particular, anchored in Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul.

Bolsonaro is isolated and desperate. He has offended the Chinese government and former right-wing allies. The fragile coalition he assembled has fractured. Urban middle-class support has evaporated, as nine consecutive days of pot-banging protests against the government have unfolded in chic neighbourhoods, as well as some favelas, across the country. The corporate media, principally Globo and Folha de São Paulo, instrumental in the parliamentary coup against Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the election of Bolsonaro in 2018, have finally turned on him, after he has been antagonising them openly for months. In an interview with Globo, the head of Itaú, Brazil's leading bank, said he perceived a general lack of administrative leadership and co-ordination in the crisis. This may explain the sudden about-face of the middle class.

Talk of impeachment has gathered steam, with hundreds of famous public figures endorsing it, but the onset of a deadly pandemic is a less than ideal time to begin proceedings. And it is unlikely that Congress, splintered as it is by party and faction, can break the logjam between governors and the executive, much less bring Bolsonaro to heel. One credible news report claims that leading figures in business, law and government are rapidly coalescing around the idea of forcing the president's

resignation, and all that remains to be negotiated is amnesty for the crimes of Bolsonaro's sons. Several hours before Bolsonaro's TV address, the head of the army labelled the campaign against Covid-19 'perhaps the most important fight of our generation'.

Ultimately, divisions within the Brazilian military, or lack of them, are likely to seal Bolsonaro's fate. His close ties – or his sons' close ties – to Trump operatives in Washington and Miami may not be able to save him if his top security adviser General Eduardo Villas Boas, who opened the way for the coup against Dilma as well as the election of Bolsonaro, decides to show him the door. His survival instincts are notable, but he is in deeper waters than he is used to navigating. Should he continue on his current course, he may find his political days numbered. For Brazilians, and indeed people of good will around the world, the time cannot come soon enough. Meanwhile, as the Brazilian health care system is overwhelmed in the coming weeks, the number of unnecessary deaths due to Covid-19 seems set to skyrocket. History will not absolve Bolsonaro.

Forrest Hylton

P.S.

- LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS. 27 MARCH 2020 :
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2020/march/brazil-undone?referrer=>
 - *Articles of Forrest Hylton in the London Review of Books:*
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/author/forrest-hylton>
-

Footnotes

- [1] <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>