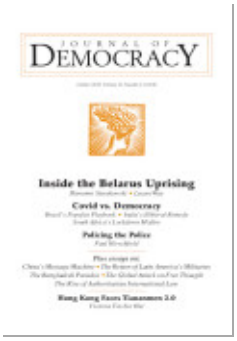
Covid vs. Democracy: Brazil's Populist Playbook

Amy Erica Smith



Journal of Democracy, Volume 31, Number 4, October 2020, pp. 76-90 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0057*

BRAZIL'S POPULIST PLAYBOOK

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An imagined scene captures something of Brazil's present moment. In a political cartoon from early June 2020, Alberto Benett depicts President Jair Bolsonaro standing in front of a crucified Jesus.[1] The hand-drawn president proclaims to the dying Jesus, "I'm sorry, but it's destiny. . . ." The cartoon refers to a real-life scene from two days earlier. A religiously devout supporter had asked Bolsonaro what he would say "to the countless grieving" who had lost loved ones to covid-19. Bolsonaro had replied, "I'm sorry about all the deaths, but it is the destiny of each of us."

The human impact of covid-19 in Brazil is overwhelming. As of early September, the country has had more than four-million confirmed cases and in excess of 125,000 deaths from the virus—third and second in the world, respectively, on these metrics, and sixth in deaths per million. Since late June, Brazil has led the world in new cases per capita. By the time municipal elections are held in November 2020, it is possible that Brazil's democracy will have lost about one in every thousand voters to the disease.

The Amazon region has been hardest hit. In April and May, the public-health infrastructure of Manaus (population 2.7 million), the region's largest city, began to collapse. Intensive-care units were overwhelmed and cemeteries filled with fresh graves. The virus has also severely affected indigenous reservations, where health services are scant and local "invaders" engaged in illegal deforestation or mining spread disease. Moreover, economists project that GDP will contract by close to a tenth in 2020, while the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics reported in June that fewer than half of working-age adults were employed.[2]

Executive inaction is widely blamed for the severity of the crisis.

Journal of Democracy Volume 31, Number 4 October 2020

Journalists have compiled ever-growing lists of quotes evincing Bolsonaro's lack of concern for the virus and its victims, as well as his refusal to assume responsibility for action. In late April, Bolsonaro greeted news of rising deaths by asking, "And so what? I'm sorry. What do you want me to do? . . . I can't perform miracles."[3] In late July, he told a group of supporters, "I think almost all of you are going to get it one day. What are you afraid of? Face it!" In early August, as Brazil approached the milestone of a hundred-thousand deaths, Bolsonaro mused on television, "We'll get on with our lives and escape our problems."

Despite covid-19's immeasurably tragic human consequences in Brazil, the disease is having a more ambiguous impact on the country's democratic health. Brazilian democracy was ailing before it contracted covid-19. Evaluating the impact of the novel coronavirus requires imagining a counterfactual, covid-free trend line against which to compare Brazil's current status and prognosis. Both reality and the counterfactual feature President Bolsonaro, a right-wing, authoritarian populist who is vocally enthusiastic about military interventions in democratic politics. In both, Brazilian democracy is at risk, yet its prospects for survival could ultimately be better under covid-19. If the pandemic is a crucible, Brazilian democracy is likely to emerge brittle but intact.

By spotlighting Bolsonaro's governance weaknesses, the pandemic appears to have encouraged public officials to resist him. Amid growing fears of military intervention in politics, the pandemic may have inhibited the military's most ardently pro-Bolsonaro factions. But the point is not simply that Bolsonaro's inability to contain the coronavirus fortifies checks and balances. The events of recent months seem to have exposed some of Bolsonaro's threats as hollow: Opportunities to stage a coup or some other form of military intervention have passed without incident. In light of such nonhappenings, Bolsonaro's *golpismo*—that is, his vocal, ideological support for military intervention—looks increasingly performative, a threat that he pantomimes to appeal to a portion of his base and intimidate the opposition.

This is not to say that Bolsonaro's approach to the pandemic is free of risks to democracy. Instead of an authoritarian crackdown, Bolsonaro has chosen a mediated strategy that heightens political polarization and social-media "culture wars." His goals are to manage information and to promote an alternative narrative of the pandemic. His vehement defense of the drug hydroxychloroquine (HCQ)—an antimalarial initially thought to show some promise in fighting the symptoms of covid-19, but later scientifically linked to null or adverse outcomes—epitomizes his approach.[4] The administration's purpose in promoting the drug appears to be not actually to improve public-health outcomes, but to encourage citizens to link their affective loyalties and political identities to information processing, turning judgments of facts into questions of subjective wishes and intuitions. Although this strategy long pre-dates

covid-19, Bolsonaro's ability to shape some voters' views even of a life-or-death matter deepens polarization. Over the long term, this trend might not harm democratic elections, but it will corrode citizens' ability to monitor and constrain their democratic leaders.

The Before Time: Setting the Stage for Covid-19

Jair Bolsonaro's early years provide insight into the story to come. Nine years old during the 1964 coup, he came of age during the military regime's most repressive years. As a teenager in the early 1970s, he claims to have helped soldiers hunting the communist insurgent Carlos Lamarca in the woods surrounding his small town in the state of São Paulo.[5] He became a junior cadet at the age of 17, and in 1977 graduated from Agulhas Negras, Brazil's national military academy.

Over the next decade he would advance to the rank of captain, serving in the artillery and the airborne. His career was not a quiet one. In 1983, his superiors wrote him up as "aggressive," "immature," and "excessively ambitious."[6] Following Brazil's 1985 transition to democracy, his military troubles intensified. In September 1986, Bolsonaro published in the newsmagazine *Veja* a letter in which he defended officers convicted of insubordination, and complained about low military salaries. Reprimanded, he spent fifteen days in a military jail.

Eleven months later, he again made headlines when a journalist from the same magazine reported a plan by Bolsonaro and a colleague to detonate bombs in bathrooms on a military base—just to frighten the Army minister during salary negotiations, they said, not to hurt anyone. At his trial before a military court, Bolsonaro claimed that the bomb plans were not in his handwriting; *Veja*'s reporter, he said, had lied. Hundreds of Bolsonaro's fellow service members sent telegrams and letters supporting him. The Supreme Military Tribunal overturned his convictions on both counts of insubordination, tacitly requiring that he leave active duty. Decades later, journalists concluded that the court had invented evidence from a handwriting analysis to absolve him.[7] Retiring as a captain in good standing, Bolsonaro in November 1988 won election to Rio de Janeiro's city council.

A number of themes emerge from these early stories. Most obvious is Bolsonaro's lifelong loyalty to the military, complicated by his impulsivity and insubordination. He was loyal to the idea of the institution and to the men he wanted to lead, but disobedient to hierarchy and authority. Intriguingly, however, his rebellion was performative: He never consummated it, and it became known only through things that he and others wrote. Did he actually intend to set off a bomb? Almost certainly, no one will ever know. Nonetheless, his perhaps-symbolic rebellion helped him to build a political base, and thereby to skirt the consequences of his actions. In the process, judgments of facts became tests of loyalty

requiring what psychologists term "motivated reasoning." Events more than three decades later echo these themes.

An evaluation of covid-19's impact on Brazilian democracy also requires understanding the prolonged crisis that immediately preceded Bolsonaro's presidency. From 2013 to 2016, President Dilma Rousseff faced an ever-intensifying series of challenges. These included nationwide protests against transit-fare hikes and public-works spending in advance of the 2014 World Cup tournament, as well as the far-reaching "Lava Jato" (Car Wash) corruption scandal. The difficulties culminated in Rousseff's August 2016 impeachment, ostensibly for fiscal mismanagement. The impeachable charges, however, were widely understood to cover for masses' and elites' real grievances.[8] The discontents involved generalized corruption, a severe recession, and growing opposition to Rousseff's center-left Workers' Party (PT). Some elites may also have acted against Rousseff in the belief that impeaching her would forestall investigations of their own misdeeds.

Taking Rousseff's place was her vice-president, Michel Temer. He led a party that had once been a PT coalition partner but which had since become a rival, and indeed an orchestrator of impeachment. In Temer's first year, recordings emerged implicating him in a large corruption scheme. To engineer a vote to shut down the criminal trial, he opened the fiscal spigots, handing control over massive patronage spending to his former congressional colleagues. The maneuver saved his presidency but made him extremely unpopular; by 2018, his approval was in the low single digits.

Although early scholarship on Latin America's "third wave" democracies lamented the lack of horizontal (that is, interelite) accountability,[9] impeachment has now become a normalized tool fortifying not only horizontal but vertical accountability (the accountability of elected officials to voters).[10] Elsewhere, I have argued that possible legislative overreach in impeaching Rousseff would constitute a "Type I" or "false-positive" impeachment; such "errors" pose relatively minor risks to democracy.[11] By contrast, failure to conduct a criminal investigation and trial of Temer may have constituted a "false negative." Such "Type II" errors imperil democracy because they inhibit accountability, empowering presidents over legislatures. What is more, the occurrence of these two errors in a row may have hurt democratic accountability in a way that made them collectively worse than the sum of their parts. Hence, by the time of Brazil's 2018 election, democracy was at risk.

Against that background, Bolsonaro's October 2018 victory in a free and fair presidential election helped to renew the democratic system's legitimacy. There is evidence that Bolsonaro's win boosted the commitment to democracy of his supporters and opponents alike.[12] His election represented a rightist victory in Brazil's culture wars, which have played out in churches, streets, and social media since the mid-2000s.[13] Many

social groups contributed to Bolsonaro's victory, including wealthy, white, and conservative voters.[14] Two venues, however, were particularly important: churches and social media. If a letter to the editor had raised Bolsonaro to national prominence in 1986, YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook were the media through which he reached voters in 2018. Evangelical churches were also a cornerstone of Bolsonaro's coalition.[15] José Eustáquio Diniz Alves estimates that without evangelicals, Bolsonaro would have narrowly lost the election.[16]

Despite the election's stimulus to democratic legitimacy, Bolsonaro's win was widely seen as threatening democracy. The Portuguese-language edition of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die* rocketed to the top of Brazil's bestseller list during the campaign.[17] Commentators, including Levitsky himself in interviews, applied its framework to Bolsonaro. Like Donald Trump two years previously, the candidate Jair Bolsonaro easily checked all four of Levitsky and Ziblatt's boxes for identifying a potential authoritarian leader: weak commitment to democratic rules; denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; encouragement or toleration of violence; and readiness to stifle the civil liberties of opponents. Bolsonaro's long career furnished many examples of his nostalgia for the military dictatorship, his endorsement of torture, his intolerance of left-leaning opponents, and his retrograde views on gender and race. Research indicates that Bolsonaro's *golpismo* attracted Brazilians who expressed weak and contingent support for democracy, and further polarized voters' attitudes.[18]

When a potential authoritarian wins an election, Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, democracy's survival depends on the reactions of others in the polity, from ordinary citizens, civil society, and clergy to legislators and the judiciary.[19] If a critical mass coddles or abets the authoritarian, the potential for autocratization—that is, movement away from democracy and toward authoritarianism—is high. If, instead, the critical mass blocks antidemocratic maneuvers, they can tug the regime back to a democratic status quo. In such a tug-of-war, other actors must anticipate that the authoritarian leader will keep yanking his end of the rope occasionally. As a result, potential authoritarians threaten democracy even when the polity effectively resists them; stasis requires vigilance and resistance.

Taking up residency in the presidential palace on 1 January 2019 did little to temper Bolsonaro's authoritarian impulses, but he turned out to be a weak president by traditional standards. Within his first months, a corruption scandal engulfed his Social Liberal Party, which he and his three politician sons had joined only to contest the 2018 election. When the family failed in its attempt to take over party leadership, the president and his son Flávio Bolsonaro left the party. Jair Bolsonaro initially planned to create his own new party, but as of this writing in September 2020, he remains partyless. The new president also failed to muster a

legislative coalition behind his agenda. It was a stroke of good luck for Bolsonaro that a key agenda item, pension reform, was enacted anyway thanks to the highly effective Rodrigo Maia, a center-right politician who since 2016 has served as president of the Chamber of Deputies. Bolsonaro provided little support to Maia's efforts.

In contrast to his seeming lack of interest in traditional politics, Bolsonaro has invested considerable energy in maintaining a loose populist coalition incorporating military officers, far-right YouTube pundits, Pentecostal clergy, and weakly organized groups of citizens—some of whom like to camp near the presidential palace in Brasília. Initially, Bolsonaro balanced his cabinet appointments across his various constituencies, yet over time he has come to depend increasingly on appointees from the military (some retired and some on active duty). In Bolsonaro's culture wars, terms such as "democracy," "coup," and "fascism" have become a Rorschach test, signifiers that absorb meaning from the beholder. Under the PT (2002–16), visions of democracy had expanded to include economic justice and popular participation; under Bolsonaro, they have incorporated the military's involvement in politics.

Governing with the "Little Flu"

Brazil's Health Ministry first confirmed a covid-19 case on 25 February 2020. At the time, one might have expected the health system to respond with unusually high competence. Brazil's democratic constitution of 1988 had established a universal right to health, and in the ensuing decades Brazil had constructed a universal healthcare system. Brazil's public-health and social-services systems had won international renown for their effective responses to wide-ranging public-health crises such as AIDS, dengue fever, and childhood malnutrition. Indeed, in the early days of the pandemic, the Health Ministry appeared to be springing into action once again.

Bolsonaro's leadership, however, has precipitated a peculiar kind of governance crisis. In what David Pozen and Kim Lane Scheppele term "executive underreach" (in contrast to "executive overreach," when presidents exceed the legal limits of their own roles), Bolsonaro has refused to call for lockdowns or the use of face masks.[20] Further, he has taken an openly hostile public stance toward state governors who have implemented lockdowns, calling on his supporters to engage in protests and disobedience.

Bolsonaro has treated the pandemic as less a public-health crisis than a public-relations challenge. Javier Corrales and Phillip Corbo classify the administration's approach as "fantasist," since its "response has been impeded and distorted by partial or full denial of the facts . . . and engagement in conspiracy theories."[21] In early June, Bolsonaro ordered his Health Ministry to stop releasing data on total cases and to reclassify

deaths involving comorbidities—a decision that Congress reversed two days later, when it announced that a congressional committee would take over management of covid-19 statistics. At the same time, Bolsonaro has promoted unproven remedies such as HCQ. Analyzing Donald Trump's coronavirus briefings, Sarah Parkinson calls this tactic the "politics of 'as if'": Focusing citizens' attention on fake facts that must be disputed or embraced is an act of political dominance that disrupts other agendas.[22]

Bolsonaro's controversial stances extend to his personal choices. In late March, he mused that, "Because of my athletic history, if I got the virus . . . I wouldn't feel anything, or at most, a little cold or a little flu." Despite his bravado, in mid-May, reporters revealed that Bolsonaro had been taking tests at the military hospital under pseudonyms. Bolsonaro regularly went around Brasília without a mask—mocking mask-wearers with a homophobic slur—until a judge ruled that he could be fined under the Federal District's public-health provisions.[23] Still, Bolsonaro continued to defy social-distancing rules. It was not wholly unexpected, then, when he was diagnosed with covid-19 in mid-July, while his wife Michelle Bolsonaro caught the virus in early August. President Bolsonaro attributed the mild course of his illness to his practice of taking HCQ.

Over the course of the pandemic, Bolsonaro has experienced friction with Congress, the courts, and the bureaucracies of the executive branch, all of which have checked his decisions. In early April, the political scientist Fernando Limongi observed in an interview that Bolsonaro was behaving like "a member of the opposition to his own government."[24] Emblematic of the internal turmoil within the administration has been the turnover at the top of the Health Ministry. In the first months of the pandemic, Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta, a technocratic Bolsonaro appointee, became a popular television guest for his willingness to endorse mainstream public-health guidance in open opposition to Bolsonaro. In mid-March, as Bolsonaro railed in public that the virus was an exaggerated threat, Mandetta and Justice Minister Sérgio Moro issued a decree allowing police to arrest people who violated public-health measures. On April 16, Bolsonaro replaced Mandetta with the oncologist Nelson Teich, but he resigned after four weeks due to disagreements with the president. Since late May, the position has been held by an interim appointee, Eduardo Pazuello. A general in the Brazilian Army, he has proven more willing to go along with Bolsonaro. Among Pazuello's first acts was rescinding Mandetta and Moro's decree.

Congress and the courts have also met Bolsonaro with opposition, as exemplified by Congress's decision to manage the disputed covid-19 data. In mid-April, the Supreme Federal Tribunal (STF) ruled that states had autonomy to impose their own public-health requirements. In first a temporary and then an *en banc* ruling, the STF has also ordered Bolso-

naro to improve health protections for indigenous territories—though, at least as of this writing, he has not complied with court orders.

This institutional resistance must be understood within a broader context unrelated to the pandemic. The administration has faced other, coincidental crises since March. Several long-running police investigations of Bolsonaro, his sons, and his wife appear to have progressed substantially in recent months. Investigators seem to be focusing on at least three separate alleged schemes: an arrangement to skim funds from staff salaries at the Rio de Janeiro city council (a *rachadinha*); a supposed deal to finance illegal mass distributions of campaign messages via WhatsApp in 2018; and a shadow "cabinet of hate" that allegedly supports Bolsonaro by attacking his opponents online. In late April, Justice Minister Moro resigned live on CNN Brazil after giving a speech denouncing Bolsonaro's interference in police investigations. Then, in early June, Bolsonaro's education minister, Abraham Weintraub, had to resign after footage was released of a cabinet meeting in which he called for imprisoning the STF. All these crises have weakened Bolsonaro relative to the other branches.

The tangled knot of crises facing Bolsonaro has led to serious fears of coups returning, after a long period during which scholars thought that that Brazil's civilian governments had secured full control over the military.

Juan Linz famously argued that the interbranch conflict endemic to presidentialism imperils democracy.[25] Longstanding questions over Bolsonaro's commitment to democracy have come to a head in recent months, as Bolsonaro has repeatedly encouraged and even joined protests calling for the closure of Congress and the STF. In late May and June, Bolsonaro and several Army generals in his administration began to advocate more forcefully the closure of the STF. Concerned about constitutional justifications, the generals have focused on Article 142. Like the rest of Brazil's basic law, it dates from just three years after the end of the 21-year military dictatorship. This article declares that the purposes of Brazil's armed forces are "the defense of the homeland, the guarantee of the constitutional branches of government, and, at the initiative of any of these, the defense of law and order." According to an interpretation circulating among reserve officers, this text gives the military "moderating power" to intervene in interbranch disputes. The senior active-duty ranks of all three services (Army, Navy, and Air Force) reject that interpretation, however, as do the STF and the courts generally.

Thus, the tangled knot of crises facing Bolsonaro has led to serious fears of coups returning, after a long period during which schol-

ars thought that Brazil's civilian governments had secured full control over the military.[26] The generals in Bolsonaro's cabinet seem convinced that intervention may be necessary. In the August edition of the news monthly *piauí,* Monica Gugliano recounts Bolsonaro's 22 May 2020 decision to send his generals to the STF building to cashier and replace its eleven judges.[27] In Gugliano's reporting, generals Luiz Eduardo Ramos and Walter Braga Netto supported the plan. Retired general Augusto Heleno, however, had a different idea. He convinced Bolsonaro to back down. The general (who is the president's national-security advisor) instead issued a note warning of "unforeseeable consequences for national stability" if the STF granted an attorney's petition for a warrant to inspect Bolsonaro's cellphone (the warrant was ultimately denied, but not without an oblique judicial warning about the consequences of ignoring a warrant).

Still, it remains unclear how serious the threats are. Gugliano points out that the active-duty military appears uninterested in fighting Bolsonaro's battles. While Bolsonaro doubled down on misinformation about covid-19, the military leaders "with troops and power" moved aggressively to fight the pandemic, avoiding "culture wars" politics.[28] Generals carrying firearms would probably have been able to remove sitting judges temporarily, but it remains an open question whether the generals in Bolsonaro's cabinet would have been able to permanently remove STF justices, at least without risking severe punishment themselves. One interpretation of General Heleno's hesitation is that he feared the plan would ultimately fail and discredit the officers involved. It may be safer to rattle sabers than to use them. Once again, the *golpismo* may be performative.

Bolsonaro's interactions with Congress have been less dramatic. Rodrigo Maia was never a Bolsonaro ally, yet Maia had remained in the governing coalition during Bolsonaro's first fifteen months. Following recent crises, Maia has now left the coalition, forming a large parliamentary bloc of center-right parties that identifies itself as belonging neither to the government nor to the opposition. Nonetheless, Maia continues to resist calls to impeach Bolsonaro, and a number of observers criticize him for being too soft on the president.[29] In addition, there are worries that Congress's focus on the administration's covid policies may be coming at the expense of legislative oversight in other areas, such as protection of the Amazon. For instance, footage from an April cabinet meeting revealed Environment Minister Ricardo Salles suggesting that the health emergency provided a good opportunity for pushing through changes that watered down environmental regulations.

How does the coronavirus-infected timeline stand vis-à-vis the counterfactual—a world without covid-19 but with a President Bolsonaro under criminal investigation? I suspect that in the alternative timeline, democracy would be at greater risk. By exposing Bolsonaro's weakness-

es in governance and forcing officials to oppose his stances on public health, the crucible of the pandemic may have strengthened democracy against some of Bolsonaro's attacks.

Impacts on Civil Society and the Electorate

The challenge of the pandemic may also be making parts of Brazilian civil society stronger. With no effective government support, local groups in poor communities have had to piece together mutual-aid networks and informal rules regarding masks and lockdowns. The media have documented a flowering of such activity by neighborhood associations, social movements, churches, and even gangs.[30] While it would be a mistake to romanticize community institutions that have evolved out of necessity amid official neglect, such movements may bolster a form of local, participatory, off-the-grid democracy.[31] Beyond self-help, organized civil society won an unexpected and large victory early in the pandemic. A coalition of 163 organizations successfully lobbied to establish an Emergency Assistance program paying R$600 (about US$113) monthly to low-income informal workers and the unemployed. This fragile gain was set to expire after August, but has now been extended through the end of December at half the original value. The same coalition has now pivoted to lobby for a Permanent Basic Income.

Within "uncivil" society, Bolsonaro's supporters have come to imitate their president in treating the virus as a public-relations problem. Taking HCQ has become a marker of in-group status and political identity,[32] while online and offline vitriol greets journalists, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens who criticize Bolsonaro or publicize information that he disputes. In June, a Bolsonaro supporter desecrated a civil society group's Rio de Janeiro beachside memorial to forty-thousand covid victims. When on July 15 the YouTuber Felipe Neto published on the *New York Times* website a video essay calling Bolsonaro the "worst covid president," Neto became the target of a Bolsonarista defamation campaign faking pedophilic tweets that he had supposedly sent.[33] And the pro-Bolsonaro YouTube pundit Olavo de Carvalho taunted as "communists" and "Satanists" the Catholic bishops who denounced the "genocide" of the indigenous.[34]

What covid-19 will mean for elections remains to be seen. On the one hand, Rodrigo Maia seems to be betting that Bolsonaro's failures have created space for a centrist "third way"—a stance echoed by a large group of Catholic bishops who recently issued an anti-Bolsonaro "Letter to the People of God." Bolsonaro's evangelical base could also be vulnerable. Bolsonaro attracted evangelicals largely through his conservative stances on LGBT+ politics, yet these voters have long been lukewarm about Bolsonaro's stances on issues such as the right to bear

arms.[35] Bolsonaro's seeming indifference to covid-19's human costs risks alienating both Catholics and evangelicals.

Nonetheless, other signs from the electorate are more encouraging for Bolsonaro. Unexpectedly, the pandemic has not substantially eroded public support for the president, and his approval rating has even risen recently. Recent polls suggest that he might well win the 2022 election, although this is still far off. There appear to be two main causes for Bolsonaro's surprising resilience in public opinion. First, as the political scientist and politician Tabata Amaral argues, Bolsonaro's polarized and buffoonish approach to public health has served the president by distracting citizens from his concurrent scandals.[36] Indeed, the comments of Environment Minister Salles suggest that the pandemic has provided an opportunity to enact other policies that might be even less popular than Bolsonaro's stance on the coronavirus. Media and elite focus on covid-19 over other scandals may particularly benefit Bolsonaro because recent polls indicate that citizens are increasingly convinced by Bolsonaro's insistence that he was powerless to prevent the death toll.

Second and perhaps even more important, the emergency basic income that the government has been distributing in response to the covid crisis appears to be boosting Bolsonaro's standing with low-income voters. Seeing an opportunity to build a lasting base of support among these voters, Bolsonaro is now focused on making permanent the social programs that were initially meant to address a temporary emergency. Ironically, these programs represent a page from the playbook of Bolsonaro's predecessor (whom he hates), Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who was president from 2003 to 2010.[37] Yet Bolsonaro will face reluctance from the business community and his economy minister, Paulo Guedes.

A *Mano Dura* Bolsonaro?

A photograph taken in a different Latin American country in late April gives another view of Bolsonaro's "underreach": The picture shows shaven-headed, shackled prisoners in El Salvador stacked close together and folded around one another in configurations reminiscent of sixteenth-century slave markets. In early April, right-wing populist president Nayib Bukele's tweets about his crackdown on prison gangs shocked the world. Bukele responded to covid-19 in predictably authoritarian ways. The military patrolled streets to enforce strict lockdowns, throwing violators into "containment centers" that appeared designed to punish dissent, but which likely spread contagion. Although his campaign against prisoners was on the surface only tangentially related to the pandemic, Bukele took advantage of a moment of unusual latitude and limited civil society mobilization to assert dominance.

It is worth pointing out that Bolsonaro did not do the same. The early weeks of the pandemic provided unusual space for leaders to keep

citizens home, and even nonauthoritarians won praise for limiting associative freedoms in ways that would have drawn condemnation in ordinary times. At that early point of maximum uncertainty, Bolsonaro might well have convinced senior active-duty generals to militarize the response to covid-19. Moreover, although Brazil's homicide rate is less than half El Salvador's, the countries face similar security challenges. Bolsonaro could have attempted to take advantage of the crisis to crack down on gangs in much the way Bukele did.

Instead, Bolsonaro insisted on *not* forcing citizens to stay home, fearing the impact of a shutdown-induced economic downturn on his electoral prospects. Rather than clamoring for soldiers to patrol the streets, online culture warriors claimed that the coronavirus was nothing but a hoax meant to hurt the president. Rather than imprison protesters violating quarantines, Bolsonaro praised them and mingled with them. Although military and police repression of low-income neighborhoods persisted, it did not intensify. In short, Bolsonaro managed perceptions of the coronavirus for what appeared to be electoral ends rather than the goal of asserting control over people.

When news came near the start of August 2020 that Brazil had lost a hundred-thousand people to the novel coronavirus, the president said nothing, neither expressing grief nor taking responsibility. In comparative perspective, however, it seems clear that some of these deaths are owing to his lax and conflict-seeking approach to public health. Yet despite this tragic human impact, the consequences of the covid emergency for democracy in Brazil are ambiguous. As governance failure has encouraged other elites to distance themselves from Bolsonaro, his calls for military intervention have repeatedly stirred no action. In this context, Bolsonaro's coup talk appears increasingly to be a matter of "show" rather than "go." The Brazilian case hints that the pandemic may be more hazardous to democracy when authoritarian populists engage in executive overreach or take a *mano dura* approach such as those seen in India, Hungary, and El Salvador.

None of this is to say that covid-19 has somehow "cured" Brazilian democracy—far from it. Brazil's democracy remains at serious risk. One set of threats relates to democratic mechanisms for constraining and monitoring the executive. In treating the coronavirus as a public-relations problem, Bolsonaro has encouraged societal polarization, biased information processing, and motivated reasoning even as regards matters of life and death. Ultimately, these biased processes could inhibit horizontal accountability. Moreover, the history of the last decade suggests that impeachment is far from a straightforward mechanism for ensuring vertical accountability. In sum, although coups appear increasingly unlikely and the pandemic has not hurt the electoral process, covid-19 may erode democratic quality.

It also bears mentioning that an absence of military intervention until

now does not signal that the military will *never* intervene. Bolsonaro's evident openness to such intervention will be a constant threat. Although signs point toward a diminishing likelihood that the military will act to unseat justices or legislators, Bolsonaro's cabinet generals will continue to rattle their sabers—and they might decide to use them someday. This uncertainty will be a wellspring of anxiety for the remainder of Bolsonaro's presidency, a source of doubt that has corroded and will continue to corrode accountability.

NOTES

1. See Alberto Benett's cartoon in *Folha de São Paulo,* 4 June 2020, *https://fotografia.folha.uol.com.br/galerias/1668249644026185-charges-junho-2020*.

2. Paula Bezerra, "Pela primeira vez, mais da metade dos brasileiros não têm trabalho, diz Ibge," CNN Brasil, 30 June 2020, *www.cnnbrasil.com.br/business/2020/06/30/pela-primeira-vez-mais-da-metade-dos-brasileiros-nao-tem-trabalho-diz-ibge*.

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