COVID-19 in the Age of Bolsonaro

written by Camila Valle, Aldo Cordeiro Sauda | April 16, 2020



As of April 14, 2020, Brazil has had 23,955 cases of COVID-19, including 1,361 deaths and rising daily mortality rates.[1] And that is with only around 11 percent of total cases diagnosed, estimates the Center for Mathematical Modeling of Infectious Diseases of the London School of Tropical Medicine.[2] Going further than even Donald Trump in the United States, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro has downplayed the threat of the virus and the scale of the global pandemic, flippantly calling it a "little flu" and saying that "we're all going to die one day." With an added dose of sexism, he went so far as to tell supporters to confront the virus "like a man, not a boy."[3] Even Twitter, followed the next day by Facebook and Instagram, took down two of Bolsonaro's posts in which he questioned quarantine measures. In a statement, Twitter explained that it had broadened its definition of *harm* in its global rules in order to "address content that goes directly against guidance from authoritative sources of global and local public health information."[4]

In one of the deleted tweets—a video showing Bolsonaro proudly flouting his own government's social distancing guidelines by mixing with supporters in an open market in Brasília—a street vendor tells the president that people are worried that if they "don't die of the disease, [they] will die of hunger." Most people's reality is clearly encapsulated in this sentiment: people can't stay safe if they have to go to work, but they can't survive if they don't. The only government response that makes sense is to guarantee every person the conditions under which they can feasibly stay home: access to food, clean water, shelter, and healthcare. Essential workers like healthcare and food industry workers should be given everything possible to ensure their health, such as adequate protective equipment, like masks; a clean work space; free, accessible, and quick testing; paid sick leave; hazard pay; and more. Bolsonaro's takeaway, however, was the complete opposite: "What I have been hearing from people is that they want to work."

While the senate, against Bolsonaro's wishes, has approved a monthly emergency R$600 for low-income people for three months, this will do little to alleviate people's needs, especially given that eligibility for the money has various stipulations, including not being formally employed and not receiving social security, assistance benefits, unemployment insurance, or federal income transfer payments.[5] In a victory for the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) and the Democratic Labor Party (PDT) during the negotiation of the emergency payment in the Chamber of Deputies, single working mothers will be able to receive a monthly payment of R$1200 for each of the three months.[6]

Under the slogan *Brazil Cannot Stop*, Bolsonaro has prioritized the increasingly anthropomorphized "economy" over workers' lives, often in contradiction to the statements of other Brazilian officials, whom Bolsonaro has attacked accordingly. For example, his government's own health minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta has emphasized the importance of containment as a means of mitigating the

virus. The governors of the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, former Boslonaro supporters in the country's virus hotspots, have banned public gatherings, closed schools and businesses, and called for strict social distancing. Twenty-five of the country's twenty-seven governors signed a joint letter demanding Bolsonaro support the safety measures.[7] At a time in which the usual forms of protests such as rallies and demonstrations are impossible, self-isolating Brazilians in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro nevertheless drew on the great Latin American tradition of the *cacerolazo*, or *panelaço* in Portuguese, and banged on pots and pans from their windows on many nights to protest Bolsonaro's handling of the pandemic.

While Bolsonaro's direct response to the COVID-19 crisis has been critical, even putting his government at risk of impeachment, so have the structural conditions he helped set in place that have rendered the Brazilian healthcare system—the largest government-run public healthcare system in the world—less rather than more equipped to deal with the current pandemic, as well as any future ones. In 2019 alone, for example, Bolsonaro took away almost R$10 billion meant for the country's healthcare system.[8] That same year, he also vetoed a bill that guaranteed all patients the availability of blood, medicines, and other necessary resources for the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of their illnesses.[9] In another attack on the healthcare system, Bolsonaro gutted the Mais Médicos program established in 2013 that sent doctors to work in small villages, indigenous lands, maroon communities, and the poorest, most under-resourced neighborhoods of Brazil. Around half of the Mais Médicos doctors came from Cuba and were sent back to the island after Bolsonaro became president. As a consequence, twenty-eight million people in Brazil have seen their right to medical attention waived.[10]

As public health was under assault, agribusiness—one of the main sectors responsible for the election of Bolsonaro in the first place—boomed. One of the world's largest producers and exporters of coffee, sugar, orange juice, soybean, corn, ethanol, pork, beef, and poultry, Brazil has been wiping out small family farms to make room for highly capitalized, export-oriented, large-scale commodity growers, which occupy 75.7 percent of the nation's agricultural land and make up 62 percent of total agricultural output. To put it in starker terms, the top 1.5 percent of rural landowners take up 53 percent of all agricultural land.[11] As Rob Wallace, Alex Liebman, Luis Fernando Chaves, and Rodrick Wallace explain:

> However unintended, the entirety of the production line is organized around practices that accelerate the evolution of pathogen virulence and subsequent transmission. Growing genetic monocultures—food animals and plants with nearly identical genomes—removes immune firebreaks that in more diverse populations slow down transmission. Pathogens now can just quickly evolve around the commonplace host immune genotypes. Meanwhile, crowded conditions depress immune response. Larger farm animal population sizes and densities of factory farms facilitate greater transmission and recurrent infection. High throughput, a part of any industrial production, provides a continually renewed supply of susceptibles at barn, farm, and regional levels, removing the cap on the evolution of pathogen deadliness. Housing a lot of animals together rewards those strains that can burn through them best. Decreasing the age of slaughter—to six weeks in chickens—is likely to select for pathogens able to survive more robust immune systems. Lengthening the geographic extent of live animal trade and export has increased the diversity of genomic segments that their associated pathogens exchange, increasing the rate at which disease agents explore their evolutionary possibilities.[12]

As he dismantled environmental protections and advanced the destruction of the Amazon, Bolsonaro

exceedingly catered to the industrial agribusiness model, where monoculture and profits dominate. The world market, imperialism, ecology, indigenous land, workers' rights, and the legacy of slavery and land reform have thus come together to render Brazil particularly vulnerable to the spread of disease. As Wallace et al. so succinctly put it: "Agribusiness is at war with public health. And public health is losing."[13]

~

Like all capitalist crises, the repercussions of Bolsonaro's approach to the pandemic (or lack thereof) will not be felt equally among all Brazilians. A research study by Central Única das Favelas and Instituto Locomotiva has shown that *favelas*, where 13.6 million Brazilians, the majority indigenous and/or Afro-Brazilian, currently live, will be particularly hit hard.

The study shows that COVID-19 has hurt the jobs of 86 percent of workers in the periphery, the ability to acquire food and other basic necessities of 86 percent, and the family income of 84 percent. On top of the lack of food, the pandemic has worsened the quality of food for almost 60 percent of residents and, of these, 80 percent of parents say they are very scared about not having food to give their kids. Despite this, 71 percent disagree with the president, who is insisting that informal workers would like to go back to work, about ending their quarantines. As Renato Meirelles, president of Instituto Locomotiva, described:

> We have heard the narrative that the epidemic is democratic, that it affects the rich and the poor equally. But the research makes it clear that this is not the case, that there is a section of society that doesn't have savings, that doesn't have the resources to maintain their way of life if they can't work. It's much easier to be quarantined with a full fridge in a comfortable house than it is when you live in a favela where the fridge is empty, there is no water, and five people live in a space of 20 square meters.[14]

In an attempt to prevent and address the effects of the crisis on favelas and the periphery, the left-wing PSOL has come out with an emergency plan. The plan includes proposals for a basic emergency income to families, supply of necessary items, distribution of hygiene products such as hand sanitizer and soap, provision of water, and use of hotel and inn rooms for sheltering people in isolation.[15]

Indigenous communities are also preparing themselves in the face of the government's carelessness toward human life. "Coronavirus could wipe us out," explained Ianucula Kaiabi, an indigenous leader in Brazil's Xingu national park on the southern edges of the Amazon, home to about six thousand people from sixteen different tribes, and head of the Xingu Indigenous Land Association. From influenza to smallpox, highly infectious diseases, almost always brought by white, well-to-do travelers, have a long history of devastating indigenous communities and are a particular threat to Brazil's more than one hundred isolated groups.

Given indigenous groups' communal ways of life, the effects of the virus would be nothing short of genocide. For now, indigenous communities' main objective is to prevent COVID-19 from reaching them in the first place. In Brazil as well as across Latin America, indigenous people are sealing off roads into and out of the reserves, blockading their lands, and urging people to leave only in cases of emergencies.[16] Despite this, there have been at least seven reported COVID-19 cases among the country's indigenous population, including one death—that of Yanomami teenager Alvanei Xirixan. In response, the Hutukara Yanomami Association is asking the federal police, the army, and the National Indian Foundation to immediately withdraw mineral prospectors from indigenous land in

order to prevent new transmissions of the virus.[17]

Kaiabi noted that Brazil's specialized indigenous health system has faced dramatic cuts under Bolsonaro and that he feared it was "totally unequipped" to deal with the looming catastrophe. Questions of how to quarantine on reserves, as well as regarding the distribution of food, medicine, protective equipment, hygiene products, and more remain unanswered.[18]

Similarly bearing the brunt of the current crisis, *quilombolas*, or maroons, descendants of African slaves who formed their own communities away from slavery, are being devastated during this period. In a federal resolution published on March 27, in the midst of the pandemic, the government announced that it would forcibly (and illegally) remove quilombola communities of Alcântara, in the state of Maranhão, from their lands in order to expand the Alcântara Launch Center, a satellite launching facility of the Brazilian Space Agency, per an agreement between Bolsonaro and the United States. According to the National Coordinating Committee of the Black Rural Quilombola Communities, the removal will harm approximately eight hundred families, communities who have occupied that land since the seventeenth century. The Landless Workers' Movement, the Alcântara Association of Quilombola Territory, the Movement of Women Workers of Alcântara, among others, have condemned the move.[19]

As in all over the world, violence against women has also been drastically exarcerbated by the pandemic in Brazil. According to São Paulo state's office of the prosecution, restraining orders against male aggressors have gone up by 30 percent.[20] This comes following cuts to the government program promoting women's autonomy and against violence (Políticas para as Mulheres: Promoção da Autonomia e Enfrentamento à Violência). In 2019, the amount invested in the program was the lowest it has ever been since its establishment in 2012. At its peak in 2015, the program received R$290.6 million, compared to 2019's R$48.2 million—a slashing by almost 84 percent.[21]

~

Unsurprisingly, Bolsonaro's appalling treatment of the pandemic has united political figures and activists across parties and tendencies, spanning from the center-left to the revolutionaries. On the morning of Monday, March 30, along with other prominent opponents of Bolsonaro, Fernando Haddad (Workers' Party), Ciro Gomes (Democratic Labor Party), Guilherme Boulos (PSOL), and Manuela Davila (Communist Party of Brazil)—who all ran against Bolsonaro in 2018—published a manifesto entitled "Brazil Cannot Be Destroyed by Bolsonaro," calling for the president to step down due to his handling of the COVID-19 crisis:

> In our country, the emergency is exacerbated by an irresponsible president.… Even before the arrival of the virus, public services and the Brazilian economy were already dramatically weakened by the neoliberal agenda that has been imposed on the country. In this moment, we need to mobilize, without restraint, all the public resources necessary to save lives.
>
> Bolsonaro is in no position to keep governing Brazil and to face this crisis, which compromises public health and the economy.… He should resign.… He needs to be urgently contained and must answer for the crimes he is committing against our people.[22]

The demand for Bolsonaro's resignation has become a galvanizing force, with calls for impeachment picking up steam. The latter included three PSOL congresspeople, Fernanda Melchionna, Sâmia

Bomfim, and David Miranda, filing an impeachment request against Bolsonaro in the Chamber of Deputies on March 18. The request was signed by various members of civil society and a petition of support has accrued over one million signatures. Like all political decisions taken by the left, however, the impeachment filing has opened up an important debate about strategy in this moment, with some, including within PSOL, saying that a political and juridical process such as impeachment should not be the main priority.[23]

~

While other far-right governments around the world, like India's Narendra Modi and Hungary's Viktor Orban, have used quarantine measures as an opportunity to restrict civil liberties, Bolsonaro's approach, based on denying the seriousness of the pandemic and sabotaging social distancing measures, is tied to the legitimacy crisis that has marked his government since taking office in January 2019. Elected on an anticorruption platform, Bolsonaro has permanently clashed with Congress and the Senate as part of a rejection of "old politics"—what he claims was a method of building consensus among different political elites that led Brazil to the moral crisis it was in before he took over.

While Bolsonaro riled up many of his supporters on the ground, an important part of his right-wing base, especially in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, defected. According to recent polls by the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics, one of the country's biggest polling agencies, Bolsonaro's support in São Paulo has collapsed. Having won the second round of the 2018 presidential elections in the city with 60 percent of the vote, those who now describe his government as good or excellent amount to a mere 25 percent, with 8 percent describing his government as bad and 40 percent as terrible.[24] Even before the impeachment initiative by PSOL representatives, former government supporters like conservative parliamentarians Alexandre Frota and Janaina Pascoal have been openly calling for the president's impeachment.[25] They were joined on March 15 by the governor of Goiás state, Ronaldo Caiado, a physician and one of Bolsonaro's earliest supporters, who now claims that the federal government has lost authority in his state.

Isolated from the political establishment and within his own government by continued declarations undermining COVID-19, Bolsonaro has narrowed his support to a core base of Christian fundamentalists and far-right militants. Important sectors of capital also seem to be abandoning him, siding with the governors and Congress. Both of the country's main newspapers, *Folha de São Paulo* and *Globo*, for example, have put forward editorials calling on him to resign.[26]

The spiraling crisis between Bolsonaro and the Supreme Court, Congress, and most of the country's governors over federal government attempts to sabotage curfew initiatives, has led to increased power of the country's military. There is even growing talk of an army takeover, led by the vice president, retired army general Hamilton Mourão, who would have the support of the unprecedented number of generals named by Bolsonaro as government ministers.[27] It is improbable, however, that Bolsonaro will be toppled by maneuvers from above without substantial pressure from below. While there might be little excitement for the president, himself a former army captain, among the top hierarchy of the military, it was he who returned the military to the forefront of Brazilian politics.

As the left seeks the best strategies to unite against Bolsonaro and prevent mass loss of life, the president's treatment of the pandemic seems to be fracturing the alliance between Brazil's traditional conservative elite, responsible for toppling Dilma Rousseff's Workers' Party government in 2016, and Bolsonaro's eclectic political coalition, made up of rebellious noncommissioned military officers, fanatical evangelicals, agribusiness, and businesspeople from the service industry, particularly the retail sector.[28] While the political, economic, and public health future of Brazil is

uncertain, one thing is clear: Bolsonaro and the system that spawned him have blood on their hands.

1 https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/brazil/

2 Renato Santino, "Estatísticas oficiais estariam distorcidas por um número muito maior de pessoas assintomáticas ou com sintomas leves," *Olhar Digital*, March 23, 2020.

3 Associated Press, "Brazil's Bolsonaro Downplays Coronavirus Risks: 'We're All Going to Die One Day,'" *MarketWatch*, March 29, 2020.

4 Vijaya Gadde and Matt Derella, "An Update on Our Continuity Strategy During COVID-19," Twitter blog, March 16, 2020, updated March 27, 2020.

5 Simone Kafruni, "Senado aprova auxílio emergencial de R$ 600 a pessoas de baixa renda," *Correio Braziliense* March 30, 2020.

6 Giulliana Bianconi, "Mães solo têm lugar central na inédita renda emergencial," *Azmina*, March 28, 2020.

7 David Biller, "Brazil's Bolsonaro Makes Life-or-Death Coronavirus Gamble," *AP News*, March 28, 2020.

8 "'Bolsonaro retirou R$ 10 bilhões do SUS e deixou o Brasil vulnerável ao coronavírus,' diz Humberto Costa," *Brasil 247*, March 12, 2020.

9 Augusto Fernandes, "Bolsonaro veta pacientes do SUS a acessarem medicamentos," *Correio Braziliense*, December 27, 2019.

10 Shasta Darlington and Leticia Casado, "Veintiocho millones de pacientes afectados: Bolsonaro fracasa en el remplazo de médicos cubanos," *New York Times*, June 11, 2019.

11 Anna Sophie Gross, "As Brazilian Agribusiness Booms, Family Farms Feed the Nation," *Mongabay*, January 17, 2019.

12 Rob Wallace, Alex Liebman, Luis Fernando Chaves, and Rodrick Wallace, "COVID-19 and the Circuits of Capital," *Monthly Review*, April 1, 2020.

13 Wallace, Liebman, Chaves, and Wallace, "COVID-19 and the Circuits of Capital."

14 Felipe Betim, "Sem ações específicas, 86% dos moradores de favelas vão passar fome por causa do coronavírus," *El País*, March 28, 2020; Nicole Froio, "Brazil's Vulnerable Left Behind in the Pandemic," *NACLA*, March 31, 2020; Fernando Canzian, "Com comida no fim, moradores de favela contestam Bolsonaro," *Folha de São Paulo*, April 8, 2020.

15 "PSOL quer obrigar governo a fornecer água, sabão e álcool em gel para favelas e comunidades," PSOL, March 24, 2020.

16 Dan Collyns, Sam Cowie, Joe Parkin Daniels, Tom Phillips, "'Coronavirus Could Wipe Us Out': Indigenous South Americans Blockade Villages," *Guardian*, March 30, 2020.

17 Conrad Duncan, "Coronavirus: Remote Amazon Tribe Records First Covid-19 Death as Experts Fear Indigenous People Could Be 'Wiped Out' by Virus," *Independent*, April 10, 2020; Carlos Madeiro, "Após morte, indígenas apelam que PF, Funai e Exército expulsem garimpeiros," *UOL*, April 11, 2020.

18 Collyns, Cowie, Parkin Daniels, Phillips, "'Coronavirus Could Wipe Us Out': Indigenous South Americans Blockade Villages."

19 Igor Carvalho, "Em meio à pandemia da covid-19, governo anuncia remoção de quilombolas no Maranhão," *Brasil de Fato*, March 28, 2020.

20"Violência contra mulher aumenta na pandemia, diz nota do CAOCrim e Núcleo de Gênero," Ministério Público de São Paulo, April 13, 2020.

21 Mariana Ribeiro and Marlla Sabino, "Orçamento do programa de proteção à mulher em 2019 é o menor da série," *Poder 360*, March 8, 2019.

22 Mônica Bergamo, "Ciro Gomes, Haddad, Boulos e Dino pedem renúnica de Bolsonaro em manifesto," *Folha de São Paulo*, March 30, 2020.

23 Vladimir Safatle, "A única saída é o impeachment," *El País*, March 20, 2020; "Tirar Bolsonaro para salvar o país! Impeachment já!," Sâmia Bomfim, March 2020; "Nota do PSOL sobre pedido de impeachment de Jair Bolsonaro," PSOL, March 18, 2020.

24 "Resultados para Presidente em São Paulo em São Paulo (SP)," *Gazeta do Povo*, October 7, 2018; "Governo Bolsonaro tem aprovação de 25% e reprovação de 48% na cidade de São Paulo, diz Ibope," *G1*, March 23, 2020.

25 Carolina Freitas and Marcelo Ribeiro, "Ex-aliados agora pedem impeachment," *Valor Econômico*, March 17, 2020.

26 Editorial "Presidente, retire-se" Folha de São Paulo, March 26, 2020. Editorial "Bolsonaro atenta contra a constituição," O Globo, March, 26,2020.

27Demian Mello, "A tutela militar ao governo Bolsonaro," Esquerda Online,April 3, 2020.

28 The rift with agribusiness is becoming particularly pronounced as China is one of the main importers of Brazilian agricultural products.