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Could Bolsonaro profit from Covid-19?

Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro looks severely weakened. Yet the corona crisis could actually end up working in his favour

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There can be no doubt about it: the events of recent weeks in Brazil will have a lasting effect on the country. As the coronavirus spreads ever more quickly, hospitals are now full to overflowing and the Amazon city of Manaus has had to get its gravediggers working night shifts to make sure the dead are buried. At the same time, South America's largest country finds itself in the middle of a political crisis caused by its president, Jair Bolsonaro.

There was already a storm brewing when, in late April, Bolsonaro sacked the head of the federal police, Mauricio Valeixo; soon after, the Minister of Justice Sergio Moro stepped down. Bolsonaro had already fired his health minister the week before, but the resignation of Moro – one of the country's best known and most popular politicians – had a far greater effect.

Having, in his previous role as a federal judge, driven forward investigations into the Lava Jato scandal and pushed for prosecution, Moro is considered the state's figurehead in the fight against corruption in Brazil. While reports on the investigative journalism platform *The Intercept* suggest that the resulting conviction of former president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva was politically motivated, damage to his reputation is limited to the country's political left; for moderate right-wingers, Moro is nothing short of a star.

In his resignation speech, Sergio Moro levelled some hefty accusations against Bolsonaro, accusing him of having fired the head of the federal police for personal reasons; the bureau is conducting investigations into the activities of Bolsonaro's sons, including a network spreading fake news and media hoaxes which is said to be run by his second son, Carlos. The President also stands accused of forging signatures and of trying to exert undue political influence to have a family friend installed as the new

head of the federal police – a move which was blocked by the country's supreme court (*Supremo Tribunal Federal*, STF), which has now opened an investigation into his conduct that could potentially result in him being impeached.

Bolsonaro's popularity

Calls for Bolsonaro's impeachment have been growing louder recently in any case as left-wing opposition politicians are now being joined by some of the president's former supporters. Yet there is no guarantee that proceedings will be opened: 342 of 513 deputies would have to initiate impeachment, yet with 30 parties represented, their chamber is not only fragmented, but highly unpredictable in view of the loose ideological positioning of various factions. More often than not, parties vote in accordance with deals rather than on political convictions. As such, Bolsonaro is currently making advances towards various parties and is now in talks with *Centrão*, an ill-defined grouping of conservative outfits who together represent around 200 deputies in the chamber. The 'arguments in favour' of Bolsonaro are, of course, veiled promises of official positions and mean that the President is now practicing precisely the kind of horse-trading politics based on personal loyalties and favours which he so criticised in previous administrations.

Moreover, impeachment proceedings are grindingly slow and would take several months. While previous impeachments in Brazil were carried by powerful waves of public pressure – and although a current survey shows that 56 per cent of respondents would be in favour of impeaching Bolsonaro – the rapid rise in Covid-19 cases has made public demonstrations impossible, meaning that there seems little prospect of these opinion polls being translated into genuine political necessity. What is more, Bolsonaro still enjoys the support of around one third of the population and while surveys may be of limited use due to quarantine limitations, what they tend to show is that the President can count on a hard core of ideologically like-minded supporters. Overall, Bolsonaro seems to have lost backing among higher-earners and the better-qualified while poorer cohorts are increasingly well disposed towards him.

Yet Bolsonaro's vehement demands for a revival of economic activity could, combined with the direct help made available for poorer Brazilians, increase

What is certainly the case is that, eighteen months into his term, little remains of the image on which Bolsonaro rode to power – that of a political heavy-hitter who would be tough on corruption, merciless with criminals and in favour of no-holds-barred economic expansion. The reality of his administration has been very different and where power lies was

his popularity.

demonstrated recently by the military types in his government who, in presenting a programme of investment without so much as a representative from the Ministry of the Economy present, mounted nothing short of a calculated affront to the neoliberal Economics Minister Paulo Guedes. This kind of initiative is symptomatic of Bolsonaro's increasingly blatant agenda to subvert democratic structures and accountable institutions.

The corona effects

Furthermore, Bolsonaro has radicalised public discourse as, in the manner familiar from some of the other populist leaders he emulates, he lays into the press, the courts and elected politicians and glorifies that country's past military dictatorship with a streak of openly autocratic rhetoric that is attractive to certain sections of the population. At a recent rally, Bolsonaro appeared in front of a crowd of supporters frenetically braying for an anti-constitutional military intervention in government affairs and shouted 'Constitution? I am the constitution!' – an appearance which now also forms the subject of an investigation.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus continues to spread across the country and, as elsewhere, is proving in Brazil to be a merciless indicator of social inequality: while, when compared with other countries in the region, Brazil's health system is relatively well-equipped despite the cuts of recent years, it is by no means equally available or accessible to everyone in the population. Just under a half of the country's intensive-care beds, for instance, are in private clinics open only to one quarter of the population; moreover, there are strong regional disparities in healthcare provision – and this is one of the reasons why the Amazonas region around Manaus has been particularly badly hit. Even in São Paulo, however, almost 90 per cent of intensive-care capacity is now occupied; although better resourced, the metropolis has become the hotspot of the virus.

And the curve of infections is now skyrocketing, with over 100,000 officially confirmed cases in the country and 7,000 deaths; what is more due to the low number of tests being carried out, the actual figures are likely to be even higher. A study carried out by Imperial College suggests that Brazil has the highest rate of infection of any of the 48 countries examined by researchers.

Despite this sharp rise in cases, however, many Brazilians are not respecting quarantine measures: in São Paulo, only around half of the

population are complying. At the same time, the over 13 million inhabitants of the slum districts are the least able to practice social distancing and suffer from the poorest access to healthcare. They and other disadvantaged groups are also set to be hardest hit by the economic crisis ahead, with output set to shrink by 5.2 per cent according to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL). One study puts the proportion of workers in the Brazilian economy facing lower salaries or unemployment at 81 per cent, and while the country's roughly 40 million casual workers can access state support of just under €100 for an initial period of three months, this policy instrument will not reach all those in need as many are not even registered yet.

The military's key role

To date, Bolsonaro has always prioritised economic growth over fighting the virus, putting him at odds with the governors of the country's constituent 26 federal states and its governmental district, who have applied measures to contain its spread – and have increasingly had to work against Bolsonaro to do so. Among their ranks, many former Bolsonaro allies have now positioned themselves against the President, with João Doria, Governor of São Paulo, as one of his most prominent critics. Smart money is riding on him as a future presidential candidate.

Yet Bolsonaro's vehement demands for a revival of economic activity could, combined with the direct help made available for poorer Brazilians, increase his popularity. What is more, his positioning will allow him to portray those who demanded stricter quarantining and curfew regulations as the 'bad guys' behind the approaching economic crisis. Wedded to his ideological support base and those sceptical of democracy, writes André Singer, Bolsonaro could now find himself in possession of the elements of a new political coalition in the Brazilian electorate.

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Seen from Bolsonaro's point of view, thousands of deaths from Covid-19 pale against the imperative to ensure his own political survival – and there is even the danger of a twisted logic arising in which the worse the situation, the greater the benefit to the embattled incumbent. For one, a continuing escalation of the corona crisis will delay any impeachment proceedings as there is almost no way of justifying expending political energy on impeaching a president rather than combatting Covid-19; indeed, it

would give Bolsonaro every opportunity to continue his criticisms of the 'establishment'. In addition, a serious escalation of the crisis would make it far easier to enact the kind of authoritarian measures which would fit Bolsonaro's concept of political leadership.

In no small part, how far Bolsonaro would be able to go depends on his support in the army. Periodically, rumours do the rounds suggesting that the government depends on the goodwill of the armed forces; but while the military certainly does see itself as the final guarantor of order in Brazil, there are few grounds to expect anything like an open putsch at this point. Nevertheless, there is a clearly observable increase in military influence in the current administration (albeit democratically legitimated): not even during the military dictatorship were so many posts in public office occupied by people who hold or have held military office.

The Messiah

If impeachment proceedings were to go ahead, Vice-President Hamilton Mourão – a former general – would take over from Bolsonaro. Already far-reaching, the overall influence of the military has grown even more during the corona crisis; yet Bolsonaro is by no means a puppet president at the beck and call of the top brass. While his first attempt to rid himself of Minister for Health Mandetta was thwarted by the generals, for instance, he soon managed to have his way – as he did with the head of the federal police little later. Indeed, there has even been speculation that the military will soon withdraw from government positions; and as this would mean the end of his government in its current form, it represents an effective threat.

Yet this does little to resolve the dilemma in which the military members of the Bolsonaro administration now find themselves: they can remain in post as accomplices to Bolsonaro while he plunges the country into chaos or they can withdraw from the government and support efforts to remove the president, which would run counter to their constitutional duty. Then again, there is an argument to be made that they have already broken with their constitutional role by entering into government. In any case, either option in this Catch 22 would have a notable effect on the democratic structure of the country.

As such, what happens over the coming weeks will be crucial in determining Brazil's course forward: the country's multiple simultaneous crises are asking increasingly pressing questions about the resilience of

Brazilian democracy – and the answers are by no means clear. What is worryingly clear, however, is the progression of the corona crisis. On 29 April, the official death toll surpassed that of China on its steep climb skywards. Asked for his response to this tragic statistic, the President – whose full name is Jair Messias Bolsonaro – replied flippantly: 'So what? Messiah might be my middle name, but I'm not a miracle-worker!'



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