



# Brazil: Democratic Challenges Amid the COVID-19 Crisis

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## Introduction

Alongside the COVID-19 crisis straining resources all over the country, Brazil is facing a political crisis with connections to the crisis management of the virus. COVID-19 unveils both the federal government's inability to deal with public policies of any kind and an ideological dark side combining ultraconservative strands with alt-right techniques emulated from American media executive and former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon's playbook.

The greatest challenge in overcoming the political crisis is to heal an already polarized society guided by a federal government whose authoritarianism further burns bridges.

## Context

The 2018 presidential campaign of Jair Bolsonaro enrolled ultraright extremists, neo-Pentecostal churches, and a vast array of middle-class and upper-class people under the anti-Lula, anti-Workers' Party (PT), and anti-Dilma umbrella. For Bolsonaro and his supporters, PT represented the erosion of "family values" because of its defense of minority rights, such as LGBT+ rights, same-sex marriage, and the affirmative policies toward African-Brazilian descendants. The fragility of the traditional right-wing parties, as well as the fragmentation of the progressive forces, allowed Bolsonaro's campaign to take off and triumph.

Since January 2019, Bolsonaro and his intimate circle of advisers have tried to push a "revolutionary" program that would "redeem" the country. The president has sworn his loyalty to Donald Trump

and to the United States while seeking to implement a highly ideologized foreign policy, as well as public policies inspired by a vague "anticommunist" rhetoric.

The social and political groups that helped elect Bolsonaro may seem united, but their intrinsic diversity creates spaces for current and future splits. The liberal economic elite sees the Bolsonaro administration as a means to deconstruct the Brazilian social security network in order to maximize profit. The military has recovered its historical position as national savior summoned to overcome political turmoil.

The influence of Olavo de Carvalho—a Brazilian intellectual self-exiled in the United States whose work evokes the defense of "Western Civilization" against "communism"—stands out in academia and among state bureaucracy. Olavo's ideas are close to the "traditionalism" championed by Bannon and Russian President Vladimir Putin's guru, Alexander Dugin. Finally, the Bolsonaro coalition includes neo-Pentecostal leaders who stand up for a crusade against progressive values, defending the domination of social, economic, and political spheres in order to replace science and legislation with biblical morals, saving Brazil from evil forces.

However, this heterogenic group is pervaded by paradoxes. Nowadays, the main disagreement between the group formed by the liberal elites, the military, and the neo-Pentecostals and Olavo's followers (known as Olavistas) has to do with republicanism, which is currently associated with those supporting the anticorruption initiative called Operation Car Wash.



## Identifying Support for Issues of Bolsonaro's Administration Among Groups within Brazil

		Actors			
		The Liberal Economic Elite	The Military	The Olavistas	The Brazilian Neo-Pentecostals
Issues	Pro Operation Car Wash	X	X		X
	Automatic Alignment with Trump's USA		X	X	X
	Good Relations with China	X	X		X
	Precarization of Labor	X			X
	Traditional Family Values		X	X	X
	Dominionism			X	X
	Distribution of the Means of Violence	X		X	X

Bolsonaro's attempts to pass radical changes in social security and in economic affairs has been consistently blocked by the National Congress of Brazil. In September 2019, Bolsonaro, his sons, and a small part of his political allies were expelled from their own party. Since then, the country's poor economic performance, the release of former Brazilian president and union leader Lula da Silva from prison, the persistent opposition from traditional and alternative media, the criminal investigations regarding Bolsonaro's sons, and the increasing international isolation started to weaken the Bolsonaro administration's foundations. The situation worsened with the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil.

### COVID-19 in Brazil: Public Health Calamity and Democracy Crisis

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro promptly aligned with a limited group of world leaders who underestimated the global reach of the disease, including Presidents Donald Trump (United States), Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua), López Obrador (Mexico), Aleksandr Lukashenko (Belarus), and Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov (Turkmenistan). Bolsonaro himself is suspected of having been infected when members of his staff fell ill after an official visit to Trump in Florida. His behavior hindered any efficient risk-communication and community engagement strategy in spite of regional and local attempts to mitigate the disaster.

Bolsonaro regards COVID-19 as a "weak flu" and goes out into the streets without the use of safeguards such as masks and social distancing to greet his supporters, including neo-Pentecostal leaders and some businessmen who oppose social isolation measures. When fatalities started to increase to 400-plus per day in April, regional and local authorities explicitly criticized Bolsonaro's contemptuous regard for the COVID-19 pandemic. In

an unexpected move, governors from a diverse political spectrum started their own forum. This was meant, in part, to bypass diplomatic tensions with China created by Bolsonaro's son Eduardo Bolsonaro, a congressman, and the Brazil Foreign Affairs Office (Itamaraty). Brazilian cities and states activated paradiplomacy channels in order to get Chinese medical equipment, while establishing regional and local regulations determining lockdowns and the operation of essential activities.

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, Bolsonaro's approval ratings have plummeted. In January 2020, around 47 percent of those surveyed considered the administration excellent, while 47 percent evaluated it as horrible; these numbers illustrate just how polarized Brazilian society is. New surveys from June 2020 show that just 28 percent approve of the administration, while 48 percent consider it disastrous.

Meanwhile, Bolsonaro frequently declares the WHO's recommendations exaggerated, firing the health minister who intended to follow them. The substitute minister remained in office for less than a month and was replaced by an army general with no medical background.

The political instability in Brasilia coincided with the rapid escalation of the COVID-19 pandemics across the country. In mid-June, official numbers of infected people reached more than 874,000, with more than 45,000 dead. Because Brazil does not test systematically, unofficial rates indicate the figures are likely double these official numbers. Additionally, foreigners, such as Venezuelan refugees, have not been tested for COVID-19.

The president's lack of empathy for the lives lost, those sick, and their families, combined with his clear inability to manage the pandemic crisis, has led to public displays of anti-Bolsonarism. Since March 2020, there have been demonstrations in all major



Brazilian cities against and for Bolsonaro's presidency, with an intensification of public displays of unrest among "antifa" and pro-democracy protestors. The National Congress and state governors have publicly confronted Bolsonaro's declarations on the pandemic. By the end of May, the president had started attacking the Supreme Court, which has galvanized public opinion against the administration.

The division between Bolsonaro and his administration grew when former federal judge Sergio Moro, his minister of justice and public security and the anti-corruption hero of Operation Car Wash, resigned, denouncing Bolsonaro's attempts to obstruct justice in cases where his sons and relatives are under investigation. Those cases deal with the Bolsonaro family's connections to organized crime and militias, and include the investigation of the assassination in 2018 of Marielle Franco, a leftist LGBTQ+ African-Brazilian city councilwoman who overtly opposed organized crime's interests in poor areas of Rio de Janeiro.

The split between Bolsonaro and Moro is the first crack in conservative ranks since at least former Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 and Lula's questionable conviction when he led the presidential race in 2018. The xenophobic, homophobic, antiscience, misogynistic alt-right still supports the president, while those who are less radical but still conservative have progressively shifted after Moro's withdrawal and Bolsonaro's clumsy self-defense.

Some political parties and social movements are still pushing for the impeachment of Jair Bolsonaro, an uncertain possibility. If Bolsonaro falls, his successor would be a former army general, Hamilton Mourão, who also represents conservative reforms in terms of public security, social security, and a traditionalist agenda on human and environmental rights. Mourão's allegiance to alt-right standpoints is not clear. Meanwhile, the Brazilian public and private health systems are collapsing under the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic. The intensive care units in the Amazon and the northeastern regions have already collapsed, and the hospital network in the richer southeast region is an inch away from the same fate.

## Recommendations

1. Promote the development of a New Pact for Brazil ("Novo pacto para o Brasil") to be informed by a series of dialogues that bring together representatives from academia, civil society, the press, alternative media, religious denominations, state bureaucracy, and political parties, in order to establish a common denominator for a constructive compromise on national issues.
2. Make Karl Popper's "paradox of tolerance" the main principle for participation in the New Pact for Brazil project. Popper's argument is that in a given society, the only intolerable attitude is intolerance itself. This would be the golden rule for a selection of stakeholders in a heterogeneous forum, since the most radical Bolsonaroism and Christian neo-Pentecostalism are rooted in a fascist-like position that overtly denies any kind of dialogue, proposing the physical and ideological extermination of any alterity, or otherness.
3. Promote a massive diffusion of values via social media and alternative media, including concepts such as tolerance, dialogue, peaceful mediation of conflicts, national conciliation, and democracy.
4. Facilitate international funding for independent research on issues such as public health, urbanism, public security, and innovative pedagogies since public funding for these fields has been cut.
5. Facilitate MS and PhD scholarships in social sciences and health sciences for ethnic minorities and less-privileged young women and men, especially those of African descent, both in Brazilian and in foreign universities.
6. Create a website for the project that would be a haven for people interested in engaging with the initiative, as well as a portal for the policy briefs, reports, texts, graphics, and other materials resulting from the project.



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