

Brazil Needs Intensive Care

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Like other authoritarian leaders around the world, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has deployed the tools of the digital age to undermine his country's democratic institutions and sow social division. Now that COVID-19 has brought Brazil to the brink of a new disaster, the costs of corrupt populism are becoming clear.

NEW YORK – Following the recent ouster of Brazil's popular justice minister, Sergio Moro, the world's fourth-largest democracy is on the brink of plunging into even deeper instability. In his resignation speech, Moro criticized the president, Jair Bolsonaro, for interfering in the nomination of federal police and their investigations. For many Brazilians, such meddling is all the more galling given that two of Bolsonaro's sons are under investigation for multiple crimes.

In a rambling, defiant rebuttal on live television, Bolsonaro denied any wrongdoing, then singled me out by name. Labeling me a pro-abortion, pro-gay, gun-regulation advocate, his toxic mix of misogyny, homophobia, and contempt for democracy was on full display for Brazil's 210 million citizens. The country's health system is collapsing and its economy is in free fall as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but its president thinks his most important task is to attack his critics.

There is a backstory here. The last time Bolsonaro publicly attacked me was in early 2019, just after a meeting between me and Moro, who had previously established a strong reputation as a corruption-fighting judge. Moro had invited me to join a voluntary council on criminal justice, and I warily accepted. My hope was to convince the new justice minister that, in a country with more than 6,000 police-related killings per year, the Bolsonaro administration's controversial proposal to expand police discretion was ill advised.

Moro began our meeting by apologizing: he would need to cut it short, because the president had just sent an urgent message asking to speak. I couldn't help but wonder if my nomination to the council would be among the topics of their conversation. During the 2018 presidential election campaign, Bolsonaro had made it clear that he intended to crack down on Brazilian civil society, including independent think tanks like mine. Throughout his three decades in politics, Bolsonaro has consistently gone out of his way to attack human-rights advocates, independent media, intellectuals, indigenous and environment organizations, and women. Those who had previously crossed paths with him knew exactly what was coming when he was elected in 2018.

My nomination to the council had been announced that morning, and within hours, Brazil's leading gun lobbyist and an obscure right-wing blogger had launched a campaign to have me removed. By the time Moro and I sat down to talk, the hashtag #ilonanao ("Ilona no") was the top trending topic on Twitter in Brazil. A swarm of bots and trolls, including one of Bolsonaro's sons, quickly piled on, arguing that my widely publicized views on gun control and criminal-justice reform were unwelcome, even dangerous.

I was dismissed from the council the following day, on Bolsonaro's orders. In his letter rescinding my nomination, Moro praised my think tank's work, and lamented the influence of "some elements" of Brazilian society.

This episode is emblematic of the tragedy that has befallen Brazilian democracy under Bolsonaro. At the time, the Brazilian media correctly described my spiked nomination as merely the opening act of a long, lurid show. It was clear that Bolsonaro and his children would govern in the same spirit of intolerance that had animated their election campaign.

I am not alone in becoming the target of waves of online attacks and threats. Bolsonaro and his followers rely heavily on online intimidation, harassment, and defamation in their war against freedom of expression, civil liberties, and climate action. What has come to be known as the president's "hate cabinet" – a group of hardline advisers (including his sons) who orchestrate the administration's coordinated attacks on its critics – has real-life consequences.

Bolsonaro is hardly the only populist leader using social media to wage war on his political opponents and evade democratic rules and norms. From the United States, India, and the Philippines to Hungary and Russia, authoritarian leaders are deploying the tools of the digital age to commandeer civic space and crush civil society. By flooding the online zone with misinformation and divisive rhetoric, they are undermining government accountability, subverting freedom of speech and the press, and stoking violence.

Shuttering the space for civic participation and coherent deliberation is ruinous for public policymaking and the collective good. In the context of COVID-19, authoritarian assaults on independent media, science, and opposition voices are literally deadly, because they directly undermine public health and foment social unrest. Under Bolsonaro, Brazil is becoming the new epicenter of the global pandemic, and cities that voted for the president are reporting significantly higher levels of infection.

In Brazil and other democracies in distress, civil-society groups and ordinary citizens must reclaim civic space before it has been completely closed off. That starts by raising awareness of what authoritarian leaders and their followers are doing, particularly now, when all governments are waging a "war on COVID-19." Far from justifying a suspension of democratic rules and processes, emergencies are when we need these institutions the most.

But re-opening civic space also will require political leadership, which nowadays is in woefully short supply. Having utterly failed to unite Brazilians in the face of the current crisis, Bolsonaro and his government could be the first to be toppled by the coronavirus. There are at least three ways he could potentially be ousted before the 2022 election: impeachment by Congress, conviction by the Supreme Court for common crimes, or ejection by the national electoral tribunal for alleged misconduct during the 2018 campaign.

Thousands of Brazilians are dying needlessly from COVID-19, the country is heading for a severe recession, and deforestation in the Amazon is reaching levels not seen since 2015. Making matters worse for the president, the Supreme Court has now opened a criminal investigation into Moro's allegations of political interference in the federal police.

Despite all this, Bolsonaro's only response has been to double down on bullying and bombast. With neither the will nor the ability to support democracy, he is instead flirting with a return to dictatorship. Crises such as this one demand focused, competent leadership. Bolsonaro and his fellow populist demagogues around the world are incapable of that, and the longer they remain in power, the more people will die.

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