

## **Brazil's Bolsonaro Is Trump's Biggest Orphan**

Politics by tantrum may ring hollow absent the hemisphere's alpha provocateur.

Entrevista com Marcos Jank  
09/11/2020, Bloomberg

Donald Trump may have lost the U.S. election, but a squadron of populists and authoritarians who found inspiration in his pugnacity still has his back. Perhaps none so enthusiastically as Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who as of Monday morning had yet to join the world leaders congratulating president-elect Joe Biden.

From his debut visit to the White House in early 2019 — “I love you,” he gushed — to his devotional Facebook live in which he filmed himself watching Trump deliver a speech, Bolsonaro never wavered.

The feeling was never quite reciprocal; unlike every U.S. president since Harry Truman, Trump never visited Brazil. But for Bolsonaro, the illusion was what counted. Photo ops and the odd Trump tweet were enough to reassure Bolsonaro that he had Washington's blessings. “Hope is the last to die,” Bolsonaro told his fretful supporters in Brasilia even as the U.S. incumbent's reelection prospects bled away.

So what now? Brazil's foreign service graybeards had long warned of the folly of going all in with the U.S. — or any other international ally, for that matter. Bolsonaro paid no mind, instead allowing his fawning foreign minister, to whom Trump was the “savior of the West,” to remand the country's top diplomats to second tier posts.

Copying the caudillo in the White House, he vowed to quit the Paris Agreement on climate change and ridiculed multilateralism. All those scolds in Europe fretting over the world's largest rainforest? Just Amazon envy, he quipped, and then blew off Norway's multimillion dollar rainforest fund, asserting Brazil couldn't be bought.

So faithful was Bolsonaro to the borrowed script, he regularly bashed China — Brazil's most important trade partner — and reprimanded his health minister for announcing an order of Chinese-made vaccines. His youngest son, Eduardo Bolsonaro, a member of Brazil's lower house who flaunts his MAGA cap on social media, spent the week replicating Trumpist confabulations about voter fraud in the U.S. and charged that even Brazil's efficient electronic voting system — which gave Bolsonaro a swift and uncontested victory in 2018 — is likewise corruptible.

This was U.S. soft power gone sour. “Trump helped normalize Bolsonaro,” said Oliver Stuenkel, a professor of International Relations at the Getulio Vargas Foundation in Sao Paulo. “It was the idea that if they can do it in America, it can happen in Brazil, too.” From 2018 to 2020, the percentage of Brazilian right-wingers who had confidence in Trump rose by more than 60%.

Can that trend reverse itself? Bolsonaro is now Trump's most prominent orphan in the Americas, and his politics by tantrum may ring hollow absent the hemisphere's alpha provocateur. “I'm not the most important person in Brazil, just as Trump isn't the most important person in the world,” he

told graduating police cadets last Friday, hitting an unrecognizably humble note. “No one is more important than God.”

Perhaps this is political mortality calling. If Trump failed to deliver on Bolsonaro’s expectations of a special relationship, Biden has taken notice. He singled out Brazil as an environmental scofflaw during the presidential campaign, issuing an unmistakable warning: Either Brazil accept U.S. aid to contain destruction in the Amazon or face sanctions for failing to do so. “Brazil has come to be seen abroad like the Philippines,” said Carlos Gustavo Poggio, a professor of international relations at the Armando Alvares Penteado Foundation in Sao Paulo, in an allusion to the brutal authoritarian leadership of Rodrigo Duterte. “The image is of a nation that doesn’t respect its forests or human rights. Ordinary Brazilians already draw wary looks abroad.”

Trump’s defeat is Bolsonaro’s cue to rejoin the global conversation and go pragmatic, just as decades of national leaders and the best diplomats have long counseled.

Indeed, Brazil has little to show from the fights Trump picked with international allies and competitors. While soybean growers grabbed extra Chinese market share as Washington feuded over trade with Beijing, Trump’s rhetorical assaults on multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization threaten the instruments upon which Brazilian diplomacy and commerce have always relied. “It’s insanity to think that imploding the rules-based system that Brazil helped shape, like the WTO, the United Nations, the G-20 and the Paris Agreement will help,” said Marcos Jank, professor of global agribusiness at Insper, a Sao Paulo business school.

Brazil has plenty to gain under Biden, starting with a chance to flip the narrative on the environment. Instead of taking umbrage at international demands to protect the rainforest, Brazil would do itself a favor by embracing them.

With global consumers insisting on greener goods, opportunities abound. Brazilian agribusiness knows the stakes. Marfrig Global Foods SA, one of the biggest Brazilian meat packers, has launched a “carbon neutral” label, pledging to avoid trading in cattle reared on deforested land and to plant trees to offset methane from grazing. Driven by rising deforestation by ranchers and slash-and-burn farmers, carbon emissions have spiked in Brazil even as they fall globally due to the pandemic-induced economic slumps.

Other big brands in agribusiness need to step up where policymakers have faltered or equivocated, or else face global pushback. “We forget that agriculture is also a victim of disruptive climate change. If we fail to contain it, we will see more burnings, more droughts and more extreme weather, with a big impact on output,” said Jank. “One of Brazil’s most dynamic sectors runs the risk of becoming one of the biggest victims of climate inaction.”

Brazil also has some environmental showpieces that a less tendentious team of policymakers could market. It boasts one of the world’s most sophisticated satellite forest monitoring systems, calibrated to track even fractional changes in felling. Efficient farmers increased grain output more than six-fold from 1975 to 2017 while only doubling acreage, an environmental bonus. Yet the Bolsonaro government has encouraged deforestation by slashing budgets for forest rangers and winking at bootleg loggers and wildcat miners. In fact, Bolsonaro fired the forest monitoring service’s director.

A Biden presidency will inevitably raise scrutiny on Brazil, but it is also likely to increase dialogue and intensify diplomatic engagement. A more pragmatic, level-headed diplomacy in Brasilia can leverage that interest to national advantage. Granted, Bolsonaro doesn't do moderation. But even he should recognize that it's time to move on from a special relationship that was never much more than a Trump l'oeil.

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Esse artigo foi publicado originalmente em: <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-11-09/brazil-s-bolsonaro-is-trump-s-biggest-orphan>.