

Bolsonaro Is Bizarre. But He Knows What He's Doing.

Brazil's president doesn't need to centralize power to get his way.

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RIO DE JANEIRO — More than 30,000 deaths. Widespread social devastation. Overwhelmed hospitals. An economy on the precipice of disaster. In Brazil — the worst-hit country in South America, a new epicenter of the coronavirus — the situation is dire.

And yet its president, Jair Bolsonaro, lives in another reality.

The virus is “a little flu,” about whose spread he can do nothing other than to recommend chloroquine as a miracle cure. Now on his third health minister, Mr. Bolsonaro seems to actively oppose the measures of his own government. He has appeared at anti-lockdown protests and fulminated against state governors who adopted quarantine measures. Far from taking control, Mr. Bolsonaro has reveled in chaos.

His behavior, even viewed from President Trump's United States, is bizarre. A military man with a long history of praising the dictatorship that held the country in its grip for over 20 years, Mr. Bolsonaro could have used the epidemic to seize more power — following in the footsteps of Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary, for whom the crisis was the perfect opportunity to secure greatly expanded powers.

But he hasn't. Instead, Mr. Bolsonaro has screamed from the sidelines of a country he nominally rules. It's tempting to dismiss his behavior as so much weirdness. But the truth is more disturbing: Mr. Bolsonaro knows what he's doing.

In Brazil, the president's authority is limited in a number of ways. First, there's the Supreme Court, ready to check any overweening moves. Then the composition of Congress, fractured into a host of small parties, forces heads of state into intricate arrangements and concessions. Mr. Bolsonaro, who is currently without an official party, has many allies in Congress — but not a solid majority.

What's more, state governments are almost entirely free to set and carry out their own public policies, especially on health care and public security. In its regional and parliamentary complexity, Brazil's political system makes it difficult to wield outright executive power.

But not impossible. The country's sheer size — 27 states spread across a land mass bigger than Australia — and relatively young democracy, emerging from dictatorship in 1985, have led to a dispersed, uneven political system with many centers of authority. This allows for subversion: Rogue individuals within institutions can abuse their influence and official roles, often for ideological ends. These are the individuals Mr. Bolsonaro speaks to directly, fanning his agenda across the country while sidestepping the constraints on his power.

The results speak for themselves. A pro-Bolsonaro district attorney sued a doctor for conducting a disappointing trial study on the use of chloroquine. Military police officers in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, who officially answer to their respective states, protected pro-Bolsonaro protesters who actively

broke the governors' social distancing orders. And an employee of a government ministry assaulted and spat at nurses protesting for better working conditions.

Mr. Bolsonaro has allies in positions of power within civil society, too. Evangelical pastors, who routinely speak about the president in messianic terms, have refused to close their doors to the public. Illegal loggers have invaded Indigenous land in the Amazon, claiming that the president will legitimize the land grab sooner or later. And the country's truck drivers, who are thought to have held meetings with Mr. Bolsonaro, have threatened to stop working if quarantine policies are not lifted by state governors, raising the terrifying prospect of empty supermarket shelves.

In all of these cases, individuals in institutions or networks took action autonomously, without answering to higher authority. Part of the digitally driven movement that elected Mr. Bolsonaro, they listen to his frequent dog-whistles — or, in many instances, direct exhortations — and then take matters in their own hands.

Some of what they consume is available to public scrutiny, on open platforms like Twitter or YouTube. But some of it is shared only privately through WhatsApp. And it appears to come from high places: Content can often be traced back to the president's inner circle — or even to Mr. Bolsonaro himself. In February, he shared a particularly dramatic video urging his supporters to protest against Congress.

That episode underlined something important: Mr. Bolsonaro relies on the country's institutions to defy him. Without their defiance, he can't fire up his supporters. And the coronavirus crisis has supercharged his tendency toward antagonism. Seeing a situation from which no good could come, Mr. Bolsonaro seems to have decided the path to political safety lies in refusing responsibility for the pandemic's toll — and keeping his base in a state of frenzied anger. So he calls for protests, attends public barbecues and turns a blind eye as his followers openly harass journalists.

For all his bombast, Mr. Bolsonaro doesn't want to be seen to be in charge. He prefers to tell an underdog story of a lone wolf fighting against the powerful establishment, relying on an energetic base of support to maintain his position. He is perhaps the world's only strongman who likes to project an image of weakness, not strength.

None of this is inconsistent with Mr. Bolsonaro's own history. As a young soldier, he was accused of rebellion and almost kicked out of the Army. And he has often praised individuals who acted outside official chains of command. His biggest hero, by his own account, is someone who took that approach to an unspeakable extreme: Col. Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, the only person ever held officially responsible for torture under the dictatorship.

The hideous practice, though widespread in the 1960s and '70s, was not officially recognized by the generals that presided over the country. But Colonel Ustra pursued it vigorously. Mr. Bolsonaro, who never misses a chance to pay his respects to Colonel Ustra and his family, took note. His entire presidency is based on the premise that there are many Ustras hidden within powerful institutions and spread out across society, ready to turn his suggestions into practice.

Many expect the world after the pandemic to follow one of two paths: either increased authoritarianism, with top-down control and centralized surveillance, or more distributed power, based on solidarity and

serving local needs. But Mr. Bolsonaro proves that authoritarianism can exist even when power is dispersed.

It is unclear whether his approach will be sustainable. Outwardly, his position seems to have been weakened. But so far, he has been able to govern without taking responsibility for governing — his every comment finding an eager listener, his utterances as powerful as policy.

Mr. Bolsonaro doesn't need centralized surveillance: His followers are his eyes, ears and teeth. And they're biting.

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