



## **FLOUNDERING POWER BRAZIL'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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Every country on the planet is facing not only the unprecedented challenges of the novel coronavirus pandemic, but also the magnified consequences of policy decisions made by its leaderships during the preceding years. Brazil—a country of continental proportions that, not long ago, was widely considered to be a rising power on the global stage—is clearly floundering in its response to the spread of the virus. This results from an accumulation of errors—some of them dating back decades, but most accelerated under the right-wing government of Jair Bolsonaro. Over the past year sixteen months, Brazil has seen the relentless dismantling of institutions (including the universal health care system, called SUS) meant to protect the most vulnerable populations and the environment; repeated and frontal attacks on democracy; and the pursuit of a bewilderingly directionless foreign policy that disdains international cooperation, human rights, and climate action. All of these mistakes set the stage for a bumbling, incoherent, and—ultimately—deadly lack of effica-

cy in responding to the coronavirus crisis.

Not all is bleak. A government document released by the Ministry of Economy lists a series of measures adopted in light of the pandemic (Ministério da Economia, 2020). Those measures include: a constitutional amendment that allows detaching expenses incurred to combat Covid-19 from the federal government budget; a R\$2 billion credit line offered by the Brazilian National Development Bank (BNDES) to increase emergency capacity; expansion of the availability of medical equipment, ICU beds and telemedicine services; trade facilitation for imported goods such as personal protective equipment (PPE); and temporary social benefits to informal workers and unemployed members of low-income families. Read out of context, the list reads like a “best practices” roster of emergency responses. Indeed, many of them have been designed by well-intentioned and competent technical teams. However, standing in the way of the ultimate impact of these measures is





a bewildering array of political firestorms, most of them fed by the president himself.

On the domestic front, Brazil has attained the dubious distinction of becoming one the handful of countries in the world whose health ministers were fired precisely as the spread of the virus began spiraling out of control—for the express reason that he was doing his job. Ousted Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta, who had defended isolation measures before being fired on April 16, offered a reasonably technical leadership for the country's public health response (Lopes, 2020). Just two months into the crisis, he was replaced by Bolsonaro with a lackluster successor, oncologist Nelson Teich, who—upon taking office as Health Minister—called for a “people-focused” approach yet quickly showed to be aligned with extreme-right president Jair Bolsonaro's views on the pandemic: an insistence that Covid-19 is nothing more than another “little flu”, and the belief that isolation policies are economic suicide. Far from an outlier, the swift replacement of the minister mid-pandemic is emblematic of a government whose empathy-challenged president, when asked to comment on the fact that Brazil had surpassed China in number of Covid-19 deaths, shot back: “So what?”.

Indeed, the country's changing medical leadership is only the latest epi-

sode in the political minefield into which the coronavirus erupted. Since the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in Brazilian territory, on February 26, the virus has contaminated over 62,000 people and killed 7,367 people in Brazil (according to official figures from May 5th, Google, 2020). This makes Brazil the sixth country with the highest number of total deaths attributed to Covid-19 (Financial Times, 2020). Yet these statistics fail to convey the true extent of the crisis. Brazil's unusually low rate of testing—the lowest among the ten countries with the highest number of cases—suggests that the total cases in the country may be as much as ten times higher. Some of the emerging evidence for this gap comes from health statistics: in many parts of the country, the number of deaths due to mystery respiratory problems is skyrocketing due to delays in diagnosis and false-negative tests (Saraiva, 2020). The trend is corroborated by gravediggers in the Amazon city of Manaus, the first state capital to succumb to a collapse of the public health system; the cemetery workers report a sharp increase in burials (some of which are now being carried out in collective graves) far beyond the statistics provided by government authorities.

This chaotic scenario, and the growing knowledge that there is far more going on under the surface than the official statistics reveal, begs the question of whether there is a “Bra-



zilian approach” to the epidemic. In fact, there are multiple Brazilian approaches being promoted by authorities —either at different levels of government or even within the same echelons— and they often clash, confusing citizens or allowing them to cherry-pick which political leader to follow in their public health recommendations.

First, there has been a gap between what the president says and the messages coming out of the health ministry. While Mandetta was minister, he promoted self-isolation even as Bolsonaro continued to dismiss the gravity of the virus —sometimes during the same press conference. It quickly became clear that their messages appeal to different groups. Mandetta was shown to enjoy not only the backing of the scientific community, but also widespread popular support for his technocratic approach to the pandemic (in fact, this popularity has been cited as a key reason behind his firing) (Ceriono, 2020). Survey data indicates that most Brazilians (76%) agree with the need for isolation policies and would support the imposition of penalties for breaching quarantine (a measure that has not yet been applied) (Congresso em Foco, 2020).

Bolsonaro’s anti-isolation messages, on the other hand, have appealed to groups that were essential to his election: businesspeople and key evangelical leaders (the senior military

officials with which Bolsonaro has populated top posts in his government, including the vice-presidency, are reluctant to contradict him directly, but the Armed Forces have quietly adopted social distancing) (Exame, 2020). The president’s support base has shrunk considerably since the dramatic exit of Justice Minister Sergio Moro, an ex-judge who left his post leading the “Car Wash” anti-corruption investigation to join the far-right government (Zafalon, 2020). Moro resigned abruptly, accusing the president of misdeeds during a carefully orchestrated press conference; among his allegations are the claim that the president attempted to politically interfere with the Federal Police, and of prioritizing personal interests over institutional ones.

As a result, Brazilians have found themselves whiplashed by a series of political explosions, even as the virus rages across much of the country. Instead of harnessing his considerable powers as president of a highly centralized republic to flatten the Covid-19 curve, the president adds fuel to the fire on the political front, actively supporting and even taking part in protests that mingle demands for lifting social distancing policies with open calls for military intervention and closing down Congress and the Supreme Court. In a number of major cities, Bolsonaro’s supporters have organized right-wing motorcades. The frenzied protesters, some

wrapped in the national flag or wearing the national football jersey, drive their cars, trucks and motorcycles through central streets, honking their horns (sometimes, outside hospitals treating Covid-19 patients).

Although the number of people taking part in these protests is small, they tend to attract attention in the media due to displays of radicalism, including, occasionally, acts of violence (Veja, 2020). Their visibility is also bolstered in social media by the vast “army of hate” —the tens of thousands of profiles (some of them bots) that carry out orchestrated vicious attacks against those who detract from the president’s extreme-right views. Moro followed up on his resignation by giving a deposition against Bolsonaro at the Federal Police, on May 2<sup>nd</sup> (BBC, 2020). Since then, his supporters have appeared among groups targeted by protesters, potentially signaling a schism between the hardliners *bolsonaristas* and the *lavajatis-tas*, as Moro’s supporters are often called. As in so many moments during this presidency, Brazilians find themselves waiting with baited breath to see if the top brass will speak out decisively so as to curb the president’s increasingly frantic authoritarianism (it won’t).

In attacking social distancing measures, Bolsonaro wavers between different arguments. At times, he argues that isolation measures will

end up causing catastrophic harm, even more than the pandemic itself. In posing a stark false dichotomy between economic growth and public health —a simplistic view widely rebutted by both health specialists and economists— Bolsonaro whips up support not only among businesspeople, but also among many of those who are losing their jobs. On a number of occasions, Bolsonaro has called for “vertical isolation” (UOL, 2020), despite growing evidence that such a strategy would lead to rapid contagion and overwhelmed public health systems. At other times, he has —much like Donald Trump— promoted the unerring belief in the efficacy of hydroxychloroquine as a silver bullet for treating Covid-19. Across these positions, Bolsonaro has eschewed scientific evidence and disdained expertise, clinging to the hopes of an easy fix that will cast him as the savior of the economy (and thus boost his chances of reelection).

The mixed messages being issued by Brazilian authorities are not restricted to the federal government. Bolsonaro continues to face defiance and open opposition from several governors and mayors, some of whom had bandwagoned with him during the campaign and even after he assumed the presidency. The governors of the two states with the highest numbers of cases and deaths so far —João Doria, the governor of São Paulo state, and Winston Witzel, of Rio de

Janeiro state— implemented social distancing policies, including school system closures, and imposed relatively stringent restrictions on non-essential workers and businesses. Bolsonaro has repeatedly attacked these and other governors (such as those of the Federal District and Goiás) for their pro-isolation stances. He has threatened to reverse their policies and reopen businesses with a “flick of the pen” (*canetada*), although his ability to do so has been called into question by legal experts and political scientists (Shalders, 2020).

At the same time, some governors have circumvented the federal government by directly importing ventilators and PPE; the Northeastern state of Maranhão, for example, managed to purchase 107 ventilators and 200 thousand medical masks by routing the material via Ethiopia and submitting it to customs only once the shipment arrived in Maranhão, as opposed to the port of entry (Correio, 2020). That a state government should import humanitarian material hidden from the federal government attests confirms that the presidency has become, more often than not, a hurdle rather than a helper in combating the coronavirus.

This confusing panorama means that responses to the pandemic vary widely across the country. Some major cities have adopted stricter self-isolation measures and are scram-

bling to expand the number of Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds available. Rio de Janeiro, which has the second-highest absolute number of Covid-19 cases in the country after São Paulo, opened its first field hospital in late April just as its public health system became saturated. In Manaus, the capital of the Amazonas state, the already strained health care system has already collapsed, as has the funerary system (Correio Braziliense, 2020). The remainder of the entire state of Amazonas —the largest by territory in the Union— has no ICU beds at all. In a sad rerun of scenes that have played out in Europe and New York, in Rio de Janeiro and Belém (the capital of Pará), bodies have been shown stacked in mortuary chambers and even hospital hallways as funeral parlors, cemeteries and crematoria become overloaded (Lemos, 2020).

The muddled messages sent by government authorities have had a concrete impact on the behavior of the population. Statistics indicate a relaxation in the adherence to isolation policies in April and May, with a larger number of people in the streets of major and medium cities — including those most affected by the pandemic. In São Paulo state, for instance, whose government has established 70% isolation among citizens as the ideal threshold in order to “flatten the curve”, the rate dipped to 58% during a sunny weekend in late April (Santiago, 2020).

City and state leaders bent on implementing social isolation have also faced considerable challenges stemming from the country's widespread poverty and inequality, and from the limited reach of emergency measures—some of which are marked by bureaucratic hurdles. Brazil, it bears repeating, is one of the world's most unequal countries. The country's six richest men possess the same wealth as the poorest 50% of the population—some 100 million people (Oxfam, 2019). Brazil's richest 5% have the same income as the remaining 95%. Socioeconomic inequalities also have deep racial, gender, ethnic, and regional cleavages, and widespread crime and violations by state forces generate abnormally high homicide rates compared to states of equivalent development levels. Brazil's social abysses mean that confronting the pandemic entails considerable challenges related to access to resources, institutions and services.

Social distancing has proven especially difficult to implement in the *favelas*, the densely packed urban communities that often lack adequate infrastructure, including basic sanitation, and whose residents are disproportionately employed in the informal sector (and increasingly, unemployed). For large numbers of low-income Brazilians, economic survival was a short term concern even before the pandemic. Many millions earned so little that they have been

unable to save any money or buy food stocks. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), Brazil's most deprived families spend two-thirds of their income on basic necessities: food, housing, and clothing. The economic precariousness of this low-income population—staggering even before the novel coronavirus reached Brazil—has been magnified by the pandemic. The results are only beginning to emerge. According to one study, approximately 91 million Brazilians (around 58% of the country's adult population) defaulted on their bills in April (Ribeiro, 2020). The pandemic may yet push more millions below the poverty line and into the hunger zone.

Although not all low-income Brazilians live in urban communities, these areas pose the twin challenges of dense population (which makes social distancing all but impossible in some places) and economic precariousness. Favelas and other informal settlements historically have lacked significant state presence except for repressive police force incursions. Public health services are hard to come by, and public education is severely deficient. In the absence of adequate state responses local networks of citizens have attempted to fill in the shoes of the state, for example by distributing food packets and hygiene products with donations from businesses and individuals. There have also been commendable

innovations. In Paraisópolis, a large favela in Sao Paulo, the local residents' association organized to hire doctors, emergency workers and ambulances to treat those within the community suspected of having contracted Covid-19 (Paiva Paulo, 2020). In Rio de Janeiro, the newly founded Marielle Franco Institute — a private foundation launched in 2019 in honor and memory of the late city councilor and activist assassinated in March 2018 by Rio militia— has created an interactive online map to track local initiatives to protect the favelas from the pandemic<sup>1</sup>. Despite being the tremendous organizing power and solidarity such initiatives reflect, they also cast light on the state's failure in (and political unwillingness to) reach the most vulnerable populations —a failure that has only been augmented by Bolsonaro's anti-poor, anti-human rights policies.

Concern is also growing for other vulnerable groups in Brazil. Indigenous peoples have already suffered violence and loss of livelihood resulting from the dismantling of institutions promoted by the Bolsonaro government. Communities in the Amazon, who had already been under attack from massive invasions of illegal miners, land grabbers, and others who have been encouraged by the president's discourse to invade protected lands in the region, are

facing new threats. Given Brazil's long and tragic history of genocide against its indigenous populations, the advance of the pandemic among the country's indigenous villages — including several confirmed deaths— have prompted new prevention efforts by networks of indigenous communities (Quadros and Anjos, 2020). The Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil (APIB), despite facing scarce resources, little government support, and rapidly increasing food insecurity, has tried to mobilize different groups to monitor symptoms, identify cases, and facilitate access to health care for affected citizens. Yet they, too, face the considerable constraints generated through budget cuts and political persecution of civil society entities since Bolsonaro took office.

Other populations in Brazil particularly susceptible to the pandemic are migrants, including refugees. Around 264.000 Venezuelans have crossed the border into Brazil and remain in the country (Cruz, 2020), and in 2018 the government set up military-led Operação Acolhida, with the support of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international organizations and non-governmental organizations, to improve logistics. The operation also coordinates the process of voluntary relocation of migrants from the state of Roraima, which borders Venezuela, to other parts of Brazil. Invoking the pandemic, Brazil closed its bor-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.institutomariellefranco.org/>.

der with Venezuela, although there have been reports that some refugees are crossing back into Venezuela due to the precarious situation in Brazil —especially in Roraima, where thousands of migrants still live in temporary shelters and in the streets of Pacaraima and Boa Vista. As of late April, there were 10 confirmed cases of Covid-19 among the refugees, and Operação Acolhida, the UN agencies, local government, and NGOs began working to expand migrant shelters. There is nonetheless growing concern about the potential impact of the pandemic among this population and its host communities.

Brazil's embattled civil society has worked to boost protection of these vulnerable populations, while also working to shape pandemic responses at the national level. After Bolsonaro announced measures to support businesses, a coalition of 35 civil society groups and activists successfully pressed the government for an emergency universal income program<sup>2</sup>. The funds, however, have not been implemented in an agile manner; they only began to be disbursed in mid-April, and many people are finding their access blocked due to the excess of red tape. While the program accounts for female heads of household working in the informal economy by providing double that amount, policy specialists have expressed concern that the emergency

relief will fail to reach certain categories of autonomous workers, including those in transportation, as well as the homeless and other categories. In addition, the program's three-month duration has been criticized as being inadequate given the scope of the economic and health crisis.

Although Brazil is considered to be an agricultural powerhouse, largely due to export-oriented monoculture—the sector accounted for 25% of the GDP during the past twenty years—the government's patchwork approach to the pandemic, rife with mixed messages, may contribute towards food insecurity. In addition to the challenge of feeding low-income populations who have no money with which to purchase food, there may be challenges ahead in terms of distribution. Because Brazil lacks an adequate railway system, food distribution depends heavily on the class of politically powerful (but, from a public health perspective, highly exposed) truck drivers. The Public Ministry has also sounded alarm bells that the government is allocating insufficient funds to the Food Acquisition Program, which purchases food from family farmers and encourages diversification (DiarioAM, 2020). As a result, some experts have begun ringing alarm bells about the ability of low-income populations to access adequate food, and there are already reports of residents in the favelas of São Paulo —he

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rendabasica.org.br/>.

country's richest state in GDP per capita— going hungry (Canzian, 2020).

Even as the spread of the virus accelerates, the Bolsonaro government continues to take measures that erode Brazilian institutions, including those related to basic research. As in public health and environmental protection, Bolsonaro has worked to weaken public education systems, especially at the higher level, and to cut research funding. In mid-April, Bolsonaro fired the head of the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), which was subjected to repeated budget cuts even before the pandemic (Saldaña, 2020). The government's disdain for research and education has even affected the work of researchers working on Covid-10, whose projects lost funding. Such moves reflect the deep distrust of knowledge and research that is not only the hallmark of the president and his supporters, but indeed their object of pride—even when faced with its fatal consequences.

On the foreign policy front, Bolsonaro offers a *sui generis* mix of subservience and squabbles. Here we find some breaks with Brazil's past. While its foreign policy has waxed and waned over the years, there has been remarkable continuity in some of the core principles of Brazil's diplomatic tradition. After Brazil's return to democracy in the 1980s and

90s, its foreign policy elites placed a heavy emphasis on multilateralism, universalism, and autonomy. Multilateralism was viewed as a way to amplify Brazil's reach abroad, as well as the most effective, pacific and just channel through which to influence international affairs. When Brazilian political elites encountered what they considered to be a flaw or inadequacy in the global governance system, the strategy was to try to mend or strengthen it—not undermine the system altogether.

Through universalism, on the other hand, Brazil built and maintained dialogue channels with all possible partner states, even when there were vast differences in interests, values, and aspirations. Universalism never meant homogeneity across foreign relations; Brazil always has, to some extent, played favorites, namely through the establishment of strategic partnerships, such as those with Argentina, the United States, Japan, China, India, South Africa, and the European Union. But adherence to universalism meant that Brazil could mobilize a wide array of support in multilateral fora, and that it could more easily diversify bilateral relations when the need arose.

Combined, these elements (multilateralism and universalism) allowed Brazil to punch at its weight on the world scene, and sometimes even above it. The mix also allowed Brazil to pursue a degree of autonomy, that

is, the political space needed to make its own decisions regarding its path to development and its role on the global stage.

Not anymore. Under Bolsonaro, Brazil has mimicked Trump's impulsive disdain for the United Nations (but without the accompanying leverage) and has attacked the very notion of multilateralism—even as his government maintains the aspiration of joining the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD). The ideal of universalism was thrown out the window as Brazil began rooting for practices it has historically rejected on principle, such as the imposition of sanctions that were not approved by the United Nations (Bolsonaro has threatened to impose sanctions on Venezuela, following the example of the United States). Early in the presidency, Bolsonaro's foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo, sided with American foreign policy "hawks" who defended using the Brazilian Amazon as a corridor for American troops to invade Venezuela. This type of blind follow-the-leader stance has not been seen in Brazil since the military dictatorship years, and it represents a direct contradiction of the principle (enshrined within the Brazilian Constitution<sup>3</sup>) of peaceful resolution of conflicts. Even the Armed Forces, who have invigorated on their nationalist rhetoric

and sovereignty discourse, rejected the proposal as an unwise adventure. Ultimately, Bolsonaro's Chief of Staff shot down the idea publicly (Brígido, 2020).

The contrast with Brazil as an international actor ten years ago could not be starker. From the (sometimes-overblown) "rising power" bravado of the Lula years, when Brazil openly aspired to a permanent seat at the UN Security Council and wielded its South-South cooperation ties to deep ties to countries around the Global South, Brazil has hitched its wagon to the lopsided trio pushing for a global conservative agenda: the United States, Poland and Hungary. The country's otherwise highly professional and capable diplomatic corps, who helped lead the expansion of Brazil's embassy network to nearly every country on Earth, has been relegated to humdrum bureaucratic tasks or, at most, near-hidden attempts to provide some continuity in areas that have not been shrunk into oblivion.

It is not surprising, then, that—faced with a pandemic of historic proportions—Brazil's foreign policy has not been of much help at a time when countries compete for scarce essential supplies, such as masks and respirators. Far from it. After picking fights and hurling insults at heads of state of major partners, such as France's Emmanuel Macron, Germany's Angela Merkel and Argenti-

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/constituicao/constituicao.htm](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/constituicao/constituicao.htm).

na's Alberto Fernández, Bolsonaro has placed almost all of Brazil's political eggs in one basket, groveling to his would-be kindred spirit, Donald Trump. But the relationship —by definition, highly asymmetrical— has failed to deliver the promised results (namely, a resounding endorsement by the US government for Brazil's entry into the OECD) even before the pandemic. By slamming the door in the face of established partners and neighboring states, Bolsonaro's foreign policy has preempted cooperation paths that could already have been put in place had some degree of universalism been maintained, even in these cutthroat days. Rather than spend the political capital accumulated on the global stage when the country needs it most; Bolsonaro has poured Brazil's soft power down the drain.

Another case in point: China, which is not only Brazil's top trade partner, but also a fellow member of the once-promising BRICS (Brasil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) grouping. Political relations with Beijing were painstakingly mended by advisors and ministers after a series of destructive comments by Bolsonaro nearly detailed those ties. Political relations have been shaken yet again during the pandemic —this time, by Bolsonaro's third son, deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, who has (unsurprisingly, following in the footsteps of his American idols) needled Beijing with the phrase “the Chinese

virus”. In response, the Chinese ambassador to Brazil has issued a series of strongly worded messages, in an almost unheard-of display of disapproval regarding Brazilian politics (Embaixada da China no Brasil, 2020).

Although the economic aspect of the bilateral relations continues —for all purposes, Agriculture Minister Teresa Cristina lead the economic dimension of those ties— some private sector actors and government authorities fear that the offending comments may lead China to further react by exacting concessions in trade, or by diverting commerce to other sources of soybeans and other commodities (Jiménez, 2020). The offenses take place precisely when China —one of the world's main sources of masks, gloves, ventilators and other medical equipment being used in the pandemic— having overcome its first wave of coronavirus, embarks on a broad “mask diplomacy” offensive, offering Covid-19 assistance (primarily surgical masks, N95 respirators, protective suits, nucleic acid test kits, and ventilators) to 120 countries around the world (Mulakala, 2020).

The missed opportunities —not only to receive assistance at a time of growing need, but also to contribute with the country's accumulated experience in public health— are particularly glaring in Latin America and the Caribbean. Brazil was once a

leader in public health cooperation across the Global South, through an extensive South-South cooperation program (coordinated by the Brazilian Cooperation Agency of the Foreign Ministry) that covered not only bilateral projects, but also regional engagements and initiatives with multilateral organizations such as the Organization of Portuguese-Language Countries, CPLP. In great part through these efforts, Brazil developed a tradition of “health diplomacy” that draws on historic ties to public health institutes around the world (Marchiori, 2018), as well as on the idea of health as a human rights —and which, over time, became a central component of Brazil’s technical cooperation programs abroad. By 2017, when the program all but ground to a halt, Brazil had more than 350 completed and ongoing health projects covering a wide variety of objectives, countries, and participating institutions. Cooperation projects garnering praise in Brazil and abroad included the Human Milk Bank Program, which helped reduce mortality in the first year of life in Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. Such initiatives lost momentum when Bolsonaro’s foreign policy —even more than that of his predecessor, Michel Temer— cast aside South-South cooperation, and many of those projects have since been suspended.

Within Latin America and the Caribbean, Brazil became highly proactive

in the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which is part of the WHO system (and which has been hit by the recent US funding freeze to the WHO announced by Trump on April 14 (Mckenzie, 2020). Until Bolsonaro helped to torpedo the Union of South American States (UNASUR), which was widely associated with his left-leaning predecessors, Brazil also provided the main momentum for the South American Institute in Health Governance (ISAGS), which drove Unasur’s highly progressive and human rights-based Strategic Five-year Health Plan.

These institutional roles and cooperation ties, built up painstakingly over decades, have been frayed by Bolsonaro’s foreign policy, as well as by the dismantling of domestic institutions in charge of public health, such as Fiocruz. Other regional organizations have not provided much respite from the pandemic despite some collaborative efforts. While Mercosur, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the newly-minted and conservative-bending Prosul have announced joint efforts, these initiatives pale in comparison to the cooperation ties that could have been activated had Brazil maintained its once-robust technical cooperation program and its political role within the region. Instead, Brazil continues to scramble to implement ad hoc measures, including (ironically) hiring more than a thousand Cuban doc-

tors a year after Bolsonaro belittled the “More Doctors” (Mais Médicos) program that brought them to Brazil in the first place—a program founded by President Dilma Rousseff to provide doctors in the interior communities of Brazil.

Bolsonaro has not bothered to hide his disdain for the United Nations, of which Brazil is a founding member. He has declared, for example, that “UN decisions don’t matter for us” and vetoed the inclusion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the country’s multi-year plan (Gullino, 2020). Araújo has gone further, referring to the United Nations as a conspiracy drawing on “Marxist” and “globalist” ideologies. As the pandemic worsens, Araújo (like his boss) has doubled down on the bunker mentality, saying that the World Health Organization (WHO) is an instrument to propagate a communist plan, which he has dubbed the “comunavirus” (Putti, 2020). Brazil’s zealous alignment with the positions of the Trump government also prompted it to decline to support a UN resolution on access to medications and treatments (Chade, 2020), despite Brazil’s long history of defending these causes abroad—not only at UN headquarters, but also via the TRIPS agreement. Under attack from Brasilia, the United Nations agencies, funds and programs have maintained a low profile in the country but continue to provide valuable support to the most vulnerable popu-

lations, including refugees on the border with Venezuela.

No government on the planet has proven fully ready to tackle the immense challenge of Covid-19, but most have been willing to take on the challenge. That Brazil happens to have such an inward-looking, mixed-message-giving, ignorance-promoting, Trump-idolizing, UN-bashing, human-rights disdaining government in place as the pandemic strikes helps to explain the spiraling catastrophe unfolding in the country. It is now up to a motley crew of stakeholders to boost emergency measures and launch an evidence-based discussion of recovery efforts. Technical ranks within government; Brazilian subnational governments, civil society entities; private sector actors; and cautious yet persistent foreign partners—all of these will be needed to mitigate the damage underway and to work towards a more just, democratic, dignified, and healthier Brazil in the post-pandemic world.

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