



## Daily Brief on Brazilian Politics

March 26, 2020

# Bolsonaro insists on limiting isolation

**President Bolsonaro refuses to back down, continuing to defend an immediate return to normalcy, while governors and congressional leaders are coordinating their own response. The government's strategy to combat COVID-19 is fractured at best: far from all members of government agree with the president, and some contradict him. The health minister appeared to continue on the path of health experts, while showing pragmatism in regards to the president's combative approach.**

- Bolsonaro continued to defy governors and health authorities, saying that only risk categories should stay in isolation.
- Deaths from the coronavirus have risen by 20 since yesterday, reaching 77 today.
- Congress and governors make a concerted effort to curb the spread of the virus, ignoring the president.



President Bolsonaro making a televised speech last Tuesday. Photo: [Isac Nóbrega/PR](#) (CC BY 2.0).

Bolsonaro repeated his view yesterday that the so-called “vertical isolation” strategy is the best one for Brazil, and now constitutes the federal government’s guidelines for dealing with the COVID-19 crisis: only older people and people with aggravating diseases should be held in isolation.

“If we shy away, go for the easy talk, everybody at home, it will be chaos, no one will produce anything anymore,” he said to reporters in front of the Palácio da Alvorada, the president’s workplace.

On a separate occasion yesterday, Vice-President Hamilton Mourão seemed to contradict Bolsonaro in saying that the president “might have expressed himself badly” but that the position of the government, “for now,” is isolation and social distancing.

The health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, in his turn said that the adoption of quarantine measures might have been “precipitated” in some states. His statement was seen by many as an acknowledgment of Bolsonaro’s stance on the issue and an attempt to appease him.

Mandetta, with his background in orthopedics, had so far appeared more of a technocrat that preferred following the advice of health experts. Different from Bolsonaro, his handling of the crisis has been commended across the political spectrum. A man of composure, in speaking yesterday he also appeared

equipped with pragmatism.

“We have to improve this quarantine affair. It was precipitated. It was early. It became a situation of the kind: ‘We got in, now how do we get out?’,” Mandetta told reporters.

He elaborated by saying that quarantine is a “bitter pill” that Brazil can make use of, but that such a decision needs to be taken in a centralized manner with dialogue between federal and regional governments. In a nod to the president’s speech, he affirmed that “the economic questions are important.”

The minister said that he would only leave his post if he was fired or fell ill.

### **The president of Congress’s lower chamber gives his view**

The president of the Chamber of Deputies, Rodrigo Maia, gave his view of why the president had taken a contrary stance, against the advice of health professionals and experts.

“We have to get out of this confrontation between open up or not open up [companies], get out or not get out of isolation, because this is nothing more than pressure from thousands of people who invested their resources in the stockmarket,” the leader of the center-right Democratas party (DEM) explained.

The pressure on the president began about five days ago, according to Maia, when the federal government started to change its tune regarding the WHO’s coronavirus recommendations. (It is doubtful if Bolsonaro ever agreed with them.)

“We saw part of the market going for this. They are like that, they live by statistics. But all of us that are making politics, we live by lives. So it is this we have to know how to balance, the lives and the jobs.”

Maia made the comments in a video conference with governors of all 26 Brazilian states, urging them to be “objective” and guarantee jobs and incomes of the poorest segment of the population.

### **The state of Rio de Janeiro is in trouble**

Rio governor Wilson Witzel, in an interview with the morning show Bom Dia Brasil, warned that if the state does not receive financial help from the federal government soon, “financial chaos” awaits. If aid is not received, the state will not be able to maintain its containment measures to halt the spread of COVID-19.

Witzel’s estimate is that the aid must arrive before Tuesday. If it does not, he said, “the responsibility is with them,” referring to the federal government.

Witzel and São Paulo's governor, João Doria, are frequently criticized by Bolsonaro for having followed the WHO's recommendations in their attempt to contain the coronavirus, which Bolsonaro considers too severe.

Both Witzel and Doria were elected on the same wave of dissatisfaction that brought Bolsonaro to power. While Doria was already known as the mayor of São Paulo, Witzel appeared from complete anonymity to win the election for governor only shortly before election day. They both appealed to socially conservative voters and promoted a more aggressive public security agenda. Both have also taken aim at the 2022 presidential election.

### **Bolsonaro (federal), Witzel (state), Crivella (city) – who decides the fate of Rio de Janeiro?**

The City of Rio de Janeiro entered quarantine on Tuesday, closing commercial establishments not deemed essential. Its mayor, Marcelo Crivella, said yesterday that he would let stores reopen already on Friday.

Governor Wilson Witzel countered that he would decree that Rio de Janeiro stay in quarantine, but later desisted and left the decision with the mayor. Bolsonaro, in his turn, has tried to block Witzel's measures to contain the coronavirus.

The carioca newspaper *O Globo* tried to answer the question: who is really in charge? The Brazilian constitution is not completely clear on whose role it is to decide over businesses' opening hours.

One of its articles says that it is the municipality that "legislates over topics of local interest." Another article says that states have "the competencies that are not prohibited by the Constitution." And a third says that the federal government can "plan and promote the permanent defense against public calamities, especially droughts and flooding."

Precedent, however, seems to be on the side of municipalities. In most cases, it is them that have been given the right to decide over the opening hours of local businesses. It seems, then, as if Crivella would have been able to reopen commerce on Friday in any case, and that Witzel did the correct thing (legally) in not decreeing that Rio stay closed.

### **More viral news**

The number of deaths caused by COVID-19 reached 77 today. In yesterday's brief we reported 48 deaths. Last night the number had reached 57. Today's number is a 19% increase. There are 2915 confirmed cases of infection (but the real number is likely higher).

The Bolsonaro administration is drawing on a constitutional amendment

intended to reduce the salaries of public servants, as well as their working hours, with 25% over four years. The money saved is planned to be used to cover health costs. Those with a low income will be spared the reduction.

Starting Friday, the Ministry of Health will release chloroquine medication — 3.4 million of them — to hospitals in order to test their effect on COVID-19. It is unclear how effective the medicine is against the disease.

### **Voices in the media**

Míriam Leitão, one of the news giant Globo's foremost voices on the economy, said this in today's column:

“This crisis is the largest and most complex that the country has faced in many decades and it has in charge the most foolish of presidents. The conflict yesterday between Bolsonaro and the governors of the Southeast was predictable. Throughout the 15 months that he has governed Brazil, Bolsonaro has never wanted to lead a federation. He sees the states' decisions as a usurpation of his powers. He treated the Northeast with prejudice because he had a lower vote percentage there.”

She affirmed that “all the country's good economists are saying the same thing. First, protect human life. And raise public spending to finance healthcare, to help the other federal units [the states and Brasília, the capital], to create a wide and efficient social protection network, and to sustain companies.”

*On this note, we end today's brief. Back tomorrow.*

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