



Daily Brief on Brazilian Politics

April 1, 2020

Isolated, Bolsonaro lowers tone

The president's closest allies have expressed their clear support for Health Minister Mandetta, demanding that Bolsonaro change his discourse to promote a more coherent front to curb the spread of COVID-19. In a televised speech on Tuesday, Bolsonaro seemed more disposed to fall in line, although he did not completely abandon his “vertical isolation” strategy (isolate the old, let the rest return to work).

- 201 people have died from COVID-19, an increase of 42 deaths in one day — the majority in São Paulo. 5.717 cases of infection have been confirmed.
- Bolsonaro's closest allies have made increasingly clear their support for the Ministry of Health's recommendations, both in public and in private. The president seems to have felt the pressure, but the discord with Justice Minister Sergio Moro continues.
- The stock market has lost 36.25% of its value during the year's first quarter — its worst three months ever.



President Bolsonaro making a nationally televised speech on Tuesday.

Photo: [Isac Nóbrega/PR \(CC BY 2.0\)](#).

Bolsonaro stands alone

As of Tuesday, a total of 201 deaths have been caused by the coronavirus. Since yesterday's count, 42 deaths have occurred. 5,717 cases of infection have been confirmed so far. In the state of São Paulo alone, 113 of the deaths have occurred. Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta affirmed that it is because of social isolation measures, decreed by state governments, that Brazil has managed to avoid the high number of casualties seen, for example, in New York.

President Bolsonaro has repeatedly criticized measures taken by state governments, preferring that people return to work so as to avoid reduced business and consequent layoffs. The president's view is that in a bad economy, people will die for other reasons, such as a lack of food resulting from lost income. He hopes that the economy will recover if people are allowed to return to normal life.

The constitutional amendment that has come to be known as the "war budget" – intended to allow more government spending and centralize decision-making during the coronavirus crisis – has been altered in favor of the president, according to the newspaper *O Globo*. The amendment's original intent was to establish a Crisis Management Committee headed by the health minister, with members from the three branches of government, to coordinate

actions. According to the newspaper, it has been altered to put the president in charge of the committee, potentially giving Bolsonaro more leeway to pursue his own strategy: limit social isolation to risk groups and let people return to normalcy.

This strategy, however, has little support in Bolsonaro's government. *Folha de S.Paulo* reported on Tuesday that Finance Minister Paulo Guedes and Justice Minister Sergio Moro united in private to express support for Health Minister Mandetta's technical approach. Together with the military, they have formed a "bloc" opposed to Bolsonaro's "vertical isolation" strategy.

Allies of the justice minister told the newspaper that Moro has said that he is "indignant" with Bolsonaro for having broken an agreement made last Saturday, with the highest echelon of government officials, where it was understood that the president would attempt a more fine-tuned discourse. At the meeting, Bolsonaro also agreed to not make any televised speeches that weekend.

Sergio Moro was, supposedly, also upset that he had not been invited to a meeting with Gilmar Mendes, of the Supreme Court, and other officials to discuss judicial matters. To not invite the justice minister to such discussions appeared odd. The assessment that Moro expressed to allies, according to *Folha de S.Paulo*, is that the president is out of control.

Yesterday, Moro said that "the moment is of union" and that "there is only one government," wanting to remove the impression that the government is split in its message and show support for the president's leadership. Nevertheless, Moro made clear that he favors a technical approach, based on the best science, to contain the coronavirus.

To Moro's and other officials' disappointment, Bolsonaro continued to contradict the Ministry of Health's recommendations and insist that people should go back to work. Yesterday, Bolsonaro used an excerpt from a March 30 press conference with the World Health Organization's (WHO) director-general, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, to claim that the WHO supports Bolsonaro's "vertical isolation."

In the press conference, the director-general said: "We have to also see what it means to the individual in the street and maybe I have said it many times; I come from a poor family and I know what it means to always worry about your daily bread and that has to be taken into account."

Bolsonaro used these words to assert his view that people have to return to work, especially the poor who live in precarious conditions. Critics and the media were quick to point out that what the director-general actually had meant,

expressed in another part of the press conference, was that governments have to consider the social welfare of the poor that cannot work because of the coronavirus, especially countries that do not have a strong welfare system.

“Governments need to ensure the welfare of people who have lost their income and are in desperate need of food, sanitation and other essential services,” the director-general said in the press conference when talking about containment measures. *Globo* journalists reached out to Dr. Ghebreyesus for clarification and received a confirmation that he did not mean to support a return to normal life. The WHO stood firm in its previous recommendations.

Bolsonaro takes to television

On Tuesday night, 20:30 Brasília time, Bolsonaro made a nationally televised speech, just as he had done one week before. The president seemed to have felt his isolation – not only from the political establishment and media, but from the core of his own government – as he employed a more conciliatory tone. While he continued to emphasize the importance of the economy, he did not attack containment measures taken by state governments or outright contradict his health minister. Instead of calling COVID-19 a “small flu,” he labeled it “the greatest challenge of our generation.”

Nevertheless, Bolsonaro did bring up what the WHO’s director-general had said in the press conference on Monday and continued to claim that these words represented support for his “vertical isolation” strategy.

The president added, however, that he did not bring this up “to deny the importance of prevention and control measures, but to show how, in the same manner, we need to think about the most vulnerable.”

The president of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower chamber of Congress), Rodrigo Maia, took the opportunity to express the need for haste in implementing the so-called “corona vouchers,” a financial support package for informal workers and head-of-household mothers.

The package – which will provide R\$600 (\$117) to informal workers and R\$1,200 (\$235) to single mothers with families – will enter into action on April 16, according to Maia, who had spoken with a government official. Maia found this time period too long, insisting on the importance of the measure being implemented as soon as possible. The measure has not yet been sanctioned by the president.

Son of the president and mastermind behind digital strategy moves into the highest echelon

One of Jair Bolsonaro’s sons, Carlos Bolsonaro, has installed himself in a

workroom next to the presidential office. Carlos has been responsible for unofficial digital campaigns in favor of his father, often employing dubious information or claims that not seldom are described as “fake news” by fact-checkers.

While President Bolsonaro does not explicitly express his support for those activities – some critics call it “digital militancy” – he neither condemns them. The “digital militancy” often follows a theme that is present in the president’s discourse. The digital campaign “Brazil cannot stop,” which was recently prohibited by the courts for contradicting the Ministry of Health’s guidelines, had Carlos’s fingerprints on it.

The “Brazil cannot stop” campaign was prohibited by the Federal Court of Rio de Janeiro on Saturday. On Tuesday, the decision was reinforced by a judge of the Supreme Federal Court.

Officials close to the president are unsettled by the younger Bolsonaro’s presence, according to *Folha de S.Paulo*, not only because he supports and enables the president’s conflictual discourse that, at this moment of crisis, the president’s advisers want to avoid, but also because he has not reached the stature to be included in the higher echelons of decision-making – Carlos is a mere councilman of Rio de Janeiro.

And the economy?

The Brazilian stock market suffered its worse quarter ever, according to the financial consultancy firm *Economática*, with a loss of 36.86% during its first three months. Until now, the worst quarterly downturn had been in 1986 when São Paulo’s stock exchange fell with 36.25%.

The fall follows a disastrous day at US stock markets, where the Dow Jones industrial average plummeted 1.9 percent, the worst first quarter in its history.

With this bad news, we end the Daily Brief which will now turn into a weekly summary of Brazilian politics. Every Sunday you will continue to be able to follow the development of political and economic events in Brazil. If you desire quick day-to-day updates, follow us on Twitter!



mailer lite