

Brazilian ruling class backs growing military control as COVID-19 pandemic grips country

By Miguel Andrade
10 April 2020

The Brazilian political establishment, from business circles to bourgeois editorial boards and the whole spectrum of political parties, is treating as an accomplished fact that President Jair Bolsonaro's Chief of Staff Gen. Walter Braga Netto has been designated by the military brass to rein in the government's criminally negligent response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic is rapidly gripping the entire country, with authorities projecting as an "optimistic" scenario of 100,000 deaths in the state of São Paulo alone and admitting to having lost control of even how many tests have been carried out throughout Brazil.

The gross negligence and incompetence of the Bolsonaro administration has called into question the legitimacy of the entire bourgeois setup in Brazil.

With the coronavirus death toll approaching 1,000, the fascistic Brazilian president delivered a prime time speech to the nation in which he again condemned state shutdowns of business to promote social distancing, declaring that "the cure cannot be more bitter than the disease," while sadistically warning that "unemployment also leads to poverty, hunger, misery and finally death itself." He also used the address to promote, like US President Donald Trump, the treatment of COVID-19 patients with hydroxychloroquine, even though there is no data proving the efficacy of the drug.

Under these conditions, the increasing military intervention has as its primary goal not aiding the fight against the coronavirus, but rather preventing a social explosion and, if necessary, repressing it.

The decisive turn came with the near firing of Bolsonaro's health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, on Monday, because of his refusal to endorse the president's thesis of "vertical" isolation, i.e., sending every adult below the age of 60 back to work.

Major newspapers reported that Bolsonaro had decided to replace Mandetta and was dissuaded chiefly by General Braga Netto and others who feared that his dismissal would strengthen the president's former right-wing allies and now opponents, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro Governors João Doria and Wilson Witzel. The decisive support for the military was summed up in the Tuesday editorial of *O Estado de S. Paulo*, which stated, "The role of the military in the cabinet, such as

Gen. Braga Netto, has been to protect the president from himself."

Later, Braga Netto was also praised by Vice President Gen. Hamilton Mourão, who declared he was "doing what we (the military) know, putting the house in order." Mourão's statement comes less than a week after he celebrated the 1964 US-backed military coup that inaugurated a 21-year dictatorship by tweeting, "56 years ago, the Armed Forces intervened to face the disorder, subversion and corruption that ravaged institutions and scared the population."

Similarly, Army Commander Gen. Edson Leal Pujol issued a March 24 statement regarding the military and the coronavirus crisis, in which he said, "The Strong Arm will act if necessary, and the Friendly Hand will be more extended than ever to our Brazilian brothers," while concluding, "WE WILL FIGHT WITHOUT FEAR!"

There have been reports from within Brazilian far-right circles, no doubt expressing the president's own nervousness over the situation, that Braga Netto has staged a "golpe branco," or soft coup, and kept Bolsonaro on only as a frontman.

The feverish mood within the ruling circles is fed by daily reports of the catastrophic spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, which is rapidly eroding the legitimacy of the government, with its cruel "back-to-work" campaign and transparent loss of control over the disease in recent weeks.

While authorities have recorded 941 deaths and more than 17,857 total cases as of Thursday, these figures have no credibility. States have no uniform testing methods, and virtually every one of them tests only hospitalized cases, leading the former president of the national medicine oversight organization Anvisa, Claudio Maierovitch, to claim that the real number of cases is up to 15 times higher than the official count. Even considering official numbers, Brazilian deaths were rising a week ago at six times the pace of those in Wuhan, China during the same phase of the outbreak.

Press reports have provided glimpses of the grim reality. Last week, a *Washington Post* front-page photograph portrayed the Vila Formosa cemetery in the working class eastern sector of São Paulo with dozens of freshly dug graves awaiting incoming corpses that have not even been autopsied. The cemetery has

recorded a 50 percent jump in burials.

The country's largest and richest state, São Paulo, is now preparing its own "back-to-work" order, using statistical manipulations to claim it has "flattened the curve." This has been accomplished by ceasing to report less severe cases and counting only those resulting in hospitalization. Even with extremely limited testing, São Paulo has 5,682 confirmed cases, 371 deaths and 17,000 unprocessed exams, including those for hundreds of dead patients. The local government now claims it has "succeeded" in lowering the expected deaths to 100,000 over six months for a population of 45 million—that is 10 times more deaths per capita than those recorded in Spain.

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's capital and second largest city, until 1960, Federal University researchers have found that up to 25 percent of healthcare workers in hospitals treating COVID-19 patients are already infected due to lack of personal protective equipment. This compares to 15 percent in Italy, despite official figures stating that the whole of Rio de Janeiro state has only 1,500 cases and 75 deaths.

Cases and deaths have also been reported in the *favelas*, the shantytowns of Rio and Sao Paulo, where residents lack secure access to water and sanitation, as well as among the Yanomami people, an Amazon indigenous people known for its remoteness and lack of immune defenses to foreign diseases.

The turn to the blood-soaked and discredited Brazilian military in the midst of this catastrophe is the act of a ruling class that will let no amount of corpses stand in the way of its profits. The near universal criticism of Bolsonaro in Congress and the press is solely due to his unsettling bluntness in stating the goals of big business, which his political adversaries fear will stir anger in the working class.

Mired in an almost six-year economic slump, which led to a seven percent drop in the GDP after the end of the commodity boom and caught in the crossfire of the US trade war against China, the Brazilian ruling class is desperate to return to profitability. After the Brazilian Central Bank announced it would inject the equivalent of 17 percent of the Brazilian GDP into the financial markets, Congress approved another 700 billion reais (US\$ 140 billion) corporate bailout package, designating only 93 billion reais to pay little more than US\$100 a month to 50 million "informal" and "autonomous" workers, left without income by the statewide retail shutdowns. Last Friday, the Brazilian House passed by 504-2 a constitutional amendment allowing the Central Bank for the first time to directly buy junk bonds from companies, the so-called "war budget" amendment, freeing the government from its fiscal targets.

Among the most vocal defenders of such policies—and of the military as the "adults in the room" and natural caretakers of the Bolsonaro government—has been the so-called political opposition led by the Workers Party and seconded by the pseudoleft Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) and the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB).

All of them voted with the government in the almost unanimous "war budget" amendment, while mouthing "left" rhetoric to defend themselves from the torrent of criticism over the massive handout to the banks. Both PCdoB leader Orlando Silva and PT leader Rogério Correia declared that the approval of the measure was necessary "in order not to give Bolsonaro excuses" for not paying the minimal US\$100 benefits. For its part, the PSOL called the amendment "very important" for "breaking the parameters of neoliberalism." The hypocrisy was even more staggering with PT analysts themselves calling the buyout of junk bonds by the Central Bank "the greatest transfer of public funds" in the country's history.

The opposition's unshakable dedication to the interests of the ruling elite was summed up by the joint calls by São Paulo's finance secretary under ultraright Governor João Doria and former PT President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva for the government to "print money" during the crisis, using the Trump administration's massive quantitative easing as a model.

In the name of such unity, the opposition is calling for Bolsonaro's resignation. It spelled out its policy in a manifesto entitled, "Brazil can't be destroyed by Bolsonaro," signed by PT, PCdoB and PSOL leaders. It affirmed that Bolsonaro "is the greatest obstacle to the urgent decision-making needed to reduce the contagion," that his resignation would be "the least costly gesture to allow a democratic way out" and that he "must be urgently contained."

This amounts to nothing but an effort to legitimize Bolsonaro's military allies and right-wing politicians in their preparation for containing social opposition.

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