

Sick With Covid, Brazil's Bolsonaro Defends His Virus Approach



BRASILIA, BRAZIL - JUNE 23: Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro looks on during ceremony to inaugurate the Main Spacial Operations Center (COPE-P) amidst the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic at the Comando de Operações Aeroespaciais on June 23, 2020 in Brasilia. Brazil has over 1.145,000 confirmed positive cases of Coronavirus and 52,645 deaths. (Photo by Andressa Anholete/Getty Images) Photographer: Andressa Anholete/Getty Images South America , Photographer: Andressa Anholete/Getty Images South America

(Bloomberg) — Now infected with the virus he has shrugged off as a “little flu,” President Jair Bolsonaro is insisting that his approach to the coronavirus, a pandemic that has killed tens of thousands of fellow Brazilians, was correct all along. After months of clashing with doctors, governors, and mayors who clamored for strict quarantine measures, Bolsonaro announced Tuesday on live television he had tested positive for Covid-19. He told reporters through a mask that he felt “perfectly well,” after taking two doses of hydroxychloroquine, an unproven anti-malarial he has touted as a successful remedy. “We know there are other remedies that can help fight the coronavirus,” he said hours later in a video he posted to Facebook after swallowing a third dose of the drug. “None are scientifically proven, but there’s one that’s working.”

Medical experts say otherwise, but Bolsonaro’s supporters are coalescing around the stricken president as proof that Brazilians should get back to work and not hide from the illness tearing through Latin American’s largest economy. “The president took the right approach,” lawmaker Jose Medeiros, the government’s deputy leader in the lower house, said in an interview. “He will be proven right that there was no way we would stay hiding in our homes.”

Critics blame Bolsonaro for creating a public health disaster as the country's politics have grown increasingly polarized and toxic. Brazil's largest daily, *Folha de S. Paulo*, published an op-ed late Tuesday titled "Why I am Cheering for Bolsonaro to Die."

Second Worst

Brazil trails only the U.S. with more than 65,000 confirmed deaths and over 1.62 million total cases. Its response has been erratic partly because of Bolsonaro's insistence that shutting down the economy would be more dangerous than the virus. Governors have rejected his advice and imposed various lockdowns in recent months but his refusal to back those steps has made enforcement harder.

His argument has been that the virus can't be escaped or beaten and the country has to learn to accept it. As he said on Tuesday, "This virus is like the rain. It's going to get you."

Bolsonaro has had recent health troubles that could complicate his condition. In September 2018 while campaigning for president, he was stabbed in the abdomen, leading to multiple surgeries. For months, he relied on a feeding tube and colostomy bag.

Thomaz Favaro, a Sao Paulo-based analyst for the consultancy Control Risks, says Bolsonaro's illness could help shift the conversation to the state of his health rather than what he's doing to control the pandemic. "It's a lot easier for him to answer questions about how he is feeling and whether he was able to exercise, rather than what your government is doing to address the latest 1000 deaths," he said.

Keeping Up Normality

Bolsonaro, 65, is already making a point of keeping up a sense of normality. So far, the only adjustments to his agenda has been canceling two trips to Brazil's interior and turning face-to-face meetings into virtual ones, according to two officials speaking on condition of anonymity. They said his symptoms remained mild. Marcio Coimbra, a political scientist with Interlegis, a Brasilia-based think tank, says that barring severe illness Bolsonaro will now feel vindicated in prioritizing opening the economy at all costs. But the health of his cabinet remains in question after his frequent meetings with ministers without a mask. "Many of them are potential high-risk patients and could develop strong

symptoms — something that may end up harming Bolsonaro’s narrative if he recovers fast and easy,” Coimbra said. Bolsonaro generally refused to use a mask in public and even battled a court over an order forcing him to, insisted on maintaining close-quarter meetings with his advisers and inner circle. According to data collected by Bloomberg of Bolsonaro’s recent agenda, the president has met with more than two dozen senior government officials in the past week.

U.S. Ambassador

On Saturday, he attended a lunch in honor of July 4, the U.S. Independence Day, at the residence of U.S. Ambassador Todd Chapman. Chapman and his wife tested negative but would remain in quarantine, the embassy said on Tuesday.

Key advisers, such as the chief of staff and general secretary, have also tested negative for Covid-19. His minister of defense was tested Tuesday morning and was awaiting the result.

Investors are carefully following the next steps and health of Economy Minister Paulo Guedes, who has promised a rash of reforms as Brazil faces a looming recession. The minister, who is 70 years old, tested negative last week and will be tested again in the coming days, his office said.

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