

# **Has Brazil Lost its International Relevance?**

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## **Introduction**

From the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2019, Jair Messias Bolsonaro is the President of Brazil. Bolsonaro, a former military official, won the 2018 general elections in the second round with 55,13 per cent of the total vote. He is a former army captain who has been a member of the parliament for 28 years. He is a very controversial figure inside and outside Brazil. His years on power have already damage Brazil as international middle power.

This article offers some ideas about the Bolsonaro administration impact on Brazil worldwide role, its economy and Covid 19. Likewise, it also proposes some ideas about the consequences of recent accusations that could make Bolsonaro to face the International Criminal Court at The Hague.

## **Brazil as an International Middle Power**

During the 2000s Brazil increased its soft power and was considered an international, and regional, middle power. It did not last for long. The election of Jair Bolsonaro modified the traditional pillars of Brazilian foreign policy and its aspirations as a middle power.

Historically, Brazil's foreign policy attempted to maximize its worldwide influence. In general terms, it was pragmatic, multilateralist and supported international regimes (Costa Vaz, 2020). Different governments, from Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) to Lula da Silva (2003-2010), maintained this approach. Main principles were observed by both presidents who were ideologically different. Those principles were: non-intervention, non-automatic alignment with the United States, emphasis on multilateralism and the regional level.

After Dilma Rousseff's impeachment, foreign policy begun to change. When Bolsonaro took power, the emphasis was in achieving a closer relationship with the Trump administration in the US, deepening bilateralism and abandoning multilateralism. The new administration also ignored global issues such as the defense of human rights, climate change and social and economic inequalities (Costa Vaz, 2020).

The new allies were the United States, Israel, and countries under right-wing governments such as Hungary. At the regional level, from 2019 Brazil left UNASUR (Union of South American Nations) which was mainly a defense organization and CELAC, an economic institution (Community of Latin American and Caribbean states).

Presidential diplomacy is crucial in Latin America, but Bolsonaro ignored this role from the very beginning of his government. There was some understanding with Donald Trump but, in general, Brazil under Bolsonaro ignored its role as a relevant international actor.

## **Political Changes under Bolsonaro**

One of the most important changes in Bolsonaro's government have been the inclusion of military officials. Members of the Armed Forces, most of them retired, have been

appointed in 10 Ministries and around 6000 posts in different areas of the national public administration (Estrada, 2021).

The military became very relevant in two fronts: the “protection” of the Amazon and the Covid pandemic.

Indeed, from the beginning of his government, Bolsonaro undermined the role of the experts and privileged the military in the fight against deforestation. The first time that soldiers travelled to the Amazon was in 2019 after Bolsonaro’s government was highly criticized because of the number of fires in the Amazon. Bolsonaro threatened to pull Brazil out of the Paris Agreement, in which the country pledged to zero deforestation by 2030.

Deforestation in 2019, the first year of Bolsonaro's government, reached the highest figure from 2008. On top of that, in the first five months of 2020, deforestation increased by another 34 percent, according to data from the government space research agency INPE (Sedano, 2021). Moreover, from May 2020 to July of 2021, some 4,300 square kilometers of forest were lost, this means 9.5percent more than in the same period of the previous year, always according to official data (Sedano, 2021).

Soldiers have gone to the region three time since Bolsonaro is in power to fight deforestation (Alvarez, 2021). The president changed his approach when investments funds and British and European supermarkets announced that Brazilian bonds would be sold immediately to show their disagreement about deforestation (Alvarez 2021).

However, Bolsonaro’s change could not avoid that the Brazilian Amazon has suffered its worst deforestation since 2008. Between August 2019 and July 2020, forest loss was 9.5% higher compared to the same previous year-on-year period, according to data from the National Institute of Space Research (INPE) (Sedano, 2021). The total loss of vegetation cover amounted to 11,088 square kilometers (Sedano 2021).

The network of environmental groups Climate Observatory emphasized that these numbers “show that Jair Bolsonaro's plan has been successful”. They reflect the result of a very successful project to annihilate the capacity of the State and the oversight bodies to take care of Brazilian forests and fight crime in the Amazon. Experts from the Observatory argue that "land invaders, miners, illegal loggers and murderers of Indians, practicing their crimes, knew how to interpret the signals that come from the Presidency and, in an unprecedented way, from the Ministry of the Environment" (Infobae, 2022).

In October 2021, the AllRise, an Austria-based NGO filed a complaint with the International Criminal Court (ICC) accusing the Brazilian president of "facilitating and accelerating" Amazon losses with policies that encourage deforestation, land grabbing, and illegal mining (RFI, 2021). The non-governmental organization emphasizes that "Jair Bolsonaro is fueling the mass destruction of the Amazon with his eyes wide open and in full knowledge of the consequences” (RFI, 2021). There have been another three complaints by indigenous organizations, but the AllRise presentation is the only one which shows a clear link between forest lost and global human health. If the ICC accepts the case, AllRise believes that could help deter other heads of state from enacting similarly environmentally destructive policies.

## COVID-19: Rescuing the Economy or the Brazilians?

Bolsonaro's belief that COVID 19 was not more than a flu, took Brazil to hell. So far there have been more than 21 million cases with 601,574 deaths. In October 2021, only 93 million people, out of a population of 214,417,992 million, are fully vaccinated (WHO, 2021).

Regarding the number of cases until October 2021, Brazil is the third country after the United States and India. Regarding the number of deaths, it is the second country, after the United States.

During the first months of the pandemic, the images from Brazil were horrendous, thousands of coffins to be buried and many ill people in hospitals while the President continued to minimize the consequences of Covid 19.

Still now Bolsonaro refused to be vaccinated. He has also refused to order a lockdown claiming he was fighting to protect the economy and jobs. Bolsonaro wanted the Supreme Court to prevent governors and mayors to implement lockdowns. Despite this, recent figures show that almost 8 million jobs were lost during the pandemic (Pedroso, 2020). The final number for 2020 was 13.67 percent (Macrotrends, 2021). Indeed, the pandemic created a decline of internal and external demand and a constrain in supply. It has threatened the result of years of progress in poverty reduction.

However, due to rising commodity prices and a strong foreign demand, economic growth is expected for 2021, analysts see the economy expanding 5.0 percent in 2021 and 1.9 percent in 2022. For instance, Brazil's unemployment rate dropped to 13.7 percent in the three months ending in July of 2021 from 14.7 percent in the three months to April of 2021 (Trading Economics, 2021). Nevertheless, 2022 could bring economic and political uncertainty due to the general elections.

	1990	2000	2010	2020
GDP (current US\$) (billions)	461.95	655.42	2,208.87	1,444.73
GDP growth (annual %)	-3.1	4.4	7.5	-4.1
Inflation, GDP deflator (annual %)	2,700.4	5.6	8.4	4.8

Source: World Bank (2021) The World Bank in Brazil, [Brazil Overview: Development news, research, data | World Bank](#)

## Brazil after Bolsonaro

The main issues that Bolsonaro's successor will have to face, either in 2022 or in 2026, is to send the military back to the barracks, to regain regional and international power and to protect the Amazon. Since the impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff in 2016, the political polarization in Brazil became more evident. The country went from a left-wing government to a conservative period under President Michel Temer until 2018. Bolsonaro won the elections with the support of the conservative sector, the military, and the Evangelists Churches.

What could happen in the 2022 presidential elections? First, Bolsonaro is not related to any political party. He left the Liberal Social party which took him as presidential candidate in 2018. This October he presented a new political formation Alliance for Brazil, but it will take some time before it can be registered as a political party (Infobae, 2021). Secondly, former president is out of jail. However, his political party, and himself, has been damaged by huge corruption cases such as the *Mensalao* and the *Lava Jato*. Many observers emphasized that Lula could win national elections again. However, a renovation of the political class could be more beneficial to Brazil rather than relying on leaders who polarized society and politics. According to the last poll from Datafolha (Lopes, 2021) 59 percent would not vote for Bolsonaro and 38 percent wouldn't do it for Lula.

The scenario is open and uncertain. Brazilian young politicians should aim to leave behind polarization to build political dialogue in a very diverse society. The main lesson from these last turbulent years could be to reinforce democratic institutions and rebuild the country's role as a middle power. Internationally, bringing Jair Bolsonaro to the ICC would be a great achievement for the future of the climate change international agenda and future generations. It will also show that the ICC is not a court which only tries leaders from African countries which is one of its main criticisms.

Brazil needs the world, but the world also needs Brazil. The same goes for Latin America which needs a regional leader.

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