

Brazilian politics**Jair Bolsonaro's radical supporters: 'He only has us, the people'**

Brazil's president fires up extreme fringe as his popularity dips and faces calls for impeachment



Supporters of Jair Bolsonaro during a protest against coronavirus restrictions © REUTERS

Bryan Harris and **Andres Schipani** in São Paulo YESTERDAY

Clad in the yellow and green of the Brazilian flag, scores of President Jair Bolsonaro's most ardent supporters rallied in Brasília on Sunday, calling for the closure of Congress and the supreme court — institutions they deem corrupt.

"The Bolsonaro government only has us, the people. He doesn't have the media and he doesn't have Congress because lawmakers are a bunch of rats," said Carlos Antonio Bronzeri, 64, who called on Brazil's military to aid the embattled president. "We have to do a big cleaning."

As criticism mounts over the president's handling of the [coronavirus pandemic](#), Mr Bolsonaro's radical base has mobilised in solidarity. Thousands have joined convoys that drive through cities blaring their horns, including outside hospitals that are treating Covid-19 patients.

Others have demonstrated outside military bases, calling for the reinstatement of harsh anti-democracy laws used during Brazil's military dictatorship. Some have adopted paramilitary uniforms in an echo of the fascist movements of the 20th century.

The demonstrations are crucial shows of strength for Mr Bolsonaro, who, despite being only 18 months into a four-year term, is facing multiple requests for his impeachment over his refusal to back global health measures to stop the pandemic.

He is also under active investigation for allegedly interfering in police work, in a probe that could result in his being removed from office and potentially prosecuted.

“Mobilising his base is an attempt to show strength that he does not really have,” said Esther Solano, a professor of politics at the Federal University of São Paulo. “Bolsonaro is already losing institutional support from Congress, the supreme court and the press. Now the Covid crisis is losing him society’s support too. And he is facing a possible corruption scandal.”

The controversies appear to be weighing on Mr Bolsonaro’s approval ratings. According to an MDA/CNT poll released last week, the president’s personal approval ratings tumbled 9 percentage points from the beginning of the year to 39 per cent this month.

The president knows, however, that if he can keep his base energised and maintain an aura of strength, Congress will be less likely to entertain thoughts of impeachment.

So far he has succeeded in uniting supporters on the importance of ending lockdowns and restarting the Brazilian economy.

“We understand this virus exists, but the country cannot stop. This isolation is anti-human. Humans were born to interact,” said Ted Martins, a congressional aide and supporter of the president.

Other supporters are more extreme. At rallies, some supporters of the president have called the virus a hoax. Others have called for military intervention to overthrow the governors and lawmakers who have backed mandatory social distancing measures. Roberto Jefferson, a political ally of Mr Bolsonaro, went further, publishing on social media a photo of himself holding an assault rifle. “Preparing to fight the good fight,” read the caption.

Mr Bolsonaro, a former army captain who appointed a slew of senior military figures to his cabinet, has repeatedly egged on such rhetoric.

But many Brazilians remain deeply suspicious of the military, which ran the country as a dictatorship for more than 20 years until a return to democracy in 1985.



Jair Bolsonaro holds a child in a military costume during a rally in Brasília on May 17 © AFP via Getty Images

Daniele Almeida Rego, a 30-year-old Bolsonaro supporter and business owner, acknowledges there is a contradiction between protesters' demands for an end to strict pandemic restrictions and their requests for the re-enactment of draconian military laws.

Such activists are a small minority, she said, but their demands reflect a broader unhappiness about the state of Brazil and a belief that only the army can end the rampant corruption and violence. "People are tired of getting robbed and the offenders not being punished. The courts and congress don't work for Brazil," she said.

Alessandro Vieira, a senator from the north-eastern state of Sergipe, said a coup was unlikely in today's Brazil because "the generals remain extremely faithful to the constitution".

The enduring popularity of the president, he said, could be explained by a tradition of voters in Brazil "seeking the myth".

"We are always looking for a person who will be the saviour of the motherland."

It is an idea that Mr Bolsonaro plays up with frequent references to his middle name: Messias (Messiah). His supporters have long referred to him as *Mito* — myth.

"The staunch Bolsonaro supporters blend a combination of anti-system politics with a refusal to process information that is not created within the Bolsonarista universe," said Isabela Kalil, a professor of anthropology at the São Paulo School of Sociology and Politics. "They see themselves as the people, but they represent a small portion of the population."

The president's popularity, however, appears to have been hit by allegations from his former justice minister that he meddled in police investigations. For some of his most loyal supporters, corruption — if proven — would be a bridge too far.

“Bolsonaro is like a father to me. I am a Christian and I see that God sent him to the nation,” said Rafael Moreno, an unemployed former Uber driver. “But I have no pet politician. If someone's named for corruption, I'm going to hit out.”

Additional reporting by Carolina Pulice

In an earlier version of this story, it incorrectly said that the MDA/CNT poll was released this week. It was released last week. This has now been amended.

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