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Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy
Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center



BACK IN POWER? **BRAZIL'S MILITARY UNDER BOLSONARO**

By Roberto Simon and Brian Winter
August 2019

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Back in Power? Brazil's Military Under Bolsonaro

By Roberto Simon and Brian Winter

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Overview

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro represented the biggest shock to civil-military relations in Brazil in the last 40 years. Bolsonaro, a former Army captain who campaigned on a platform of dictatorship nostalgia amid the country's worst-ever economic crisis, vowed to bring the generals back to the center of Brazilian politics. Indeed, the military today is exercising power not seen since Brazil concluded its decade-long "gradual transition" from dictatorship to democracy during the late 1970s and 1980s. Retired (and sometimes active-duty) senior military officers are now occupying several critical positions in the administration, including in policy areas outside the realm of defense and security – from Vice President Hamilton Mourão to ministries charged with energy, infrastructure and relations with Congress. Lower-ranking officers have also taken positions throughout the large federal bureaucracy.

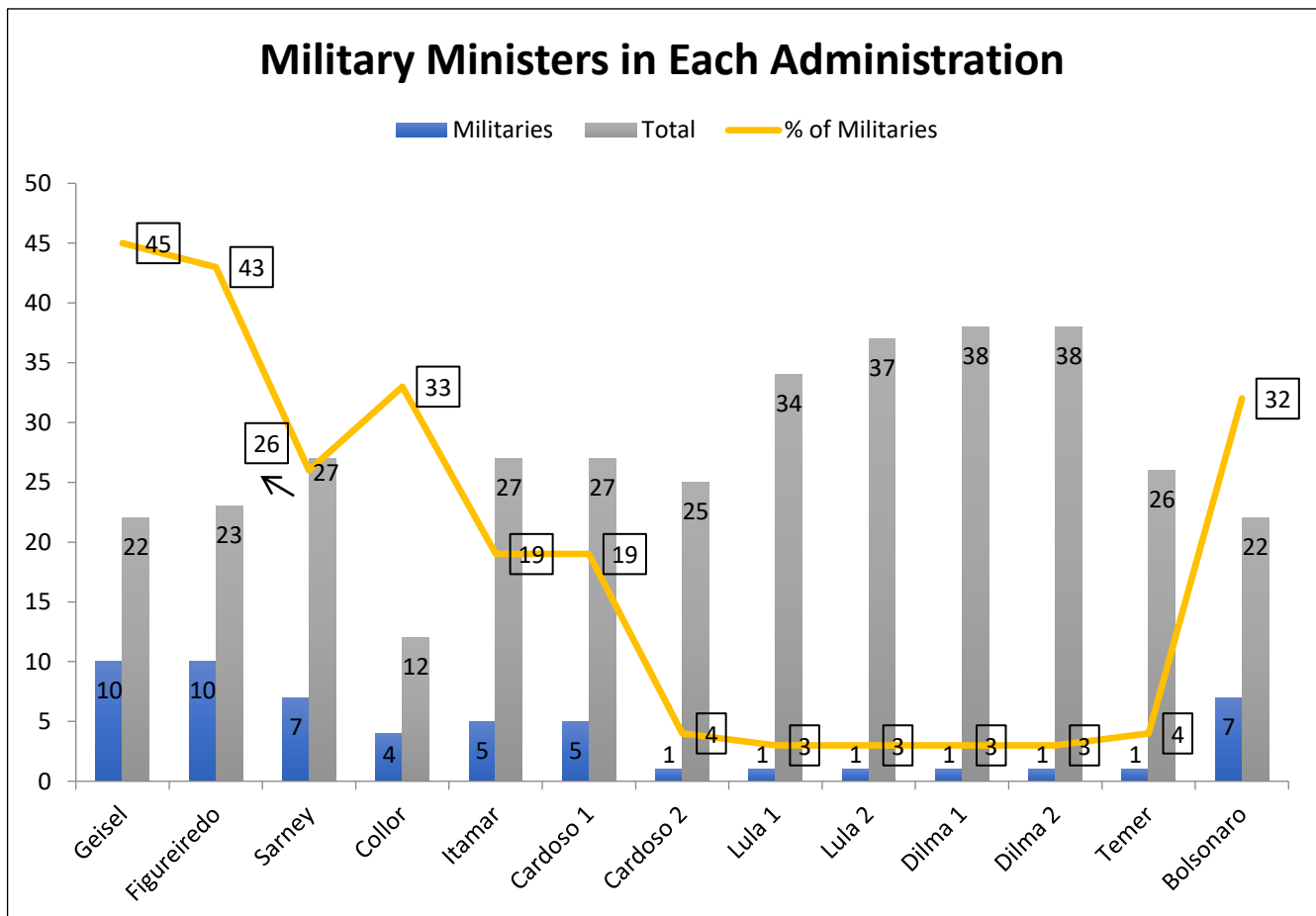
However, the Bolsonaro era is also full of contradictions and unpredictable shifts – and the civil-military relationship is no exception. Although the military is an essential partner in power, its representatives have clashed with other members of the government – including Bolsonaro's powerful sons – in public, sometimes extraordinarily vitriolic ways. The so-called "military wing" of ministers and advisers has often acted as a brake on the government's more radical voices. This is consistent with the Brazilian Armed Forces' historic vision of itself as a "moderating power" charged with maintaining stability and continuity in a diverse, continent-sized country. Yet the military too has been characterized by internal disagreements. Bolsonaro fired three senior military leaders in the span of a week in June 2019, fueling questions about whether the force's influence on the government was already waning, with uncertain consequences.

While generals are helping run the show in Brasilia, the Armed Forces as an institution are not formally in power. The 2018 election did not change Brazil's 1988 Constitution, which determines that the Armed Forces are fully submitted to civilian rule. "It's not the soldiers (who will govern Brazil), but two Brazilian citizens who were soldiers," said Vice President Mourão, a retired four-star general, during the campaign. "The Armed Forces will continue to fulfill what is established by the Constitution."¹

How much power do the Armed Forces, and its current and former leaders, really wield within the Bolsonaro government? What are the priorities of the so-called "military wing?" Which are the issues where they have wielded the most influence so far, and what are their likely areas of focus going forward? What is the importance of the military's recent history, including the 1964-85 dictatorship, in shaping its current worldview and policy priorities? This paper will seek to explore these questions and others at a time when the political influence of the Brazilian military is at the highest point in a generation – but also unpredictable and potentially fragile, like much else these days in Brasilia.

A Recent History of Civil-Military Ties

Making sense of Brazil's new moment in civil-military relations requires a broader historical look at the evolution of the dynamic between the "soldier and the state" in the country.² Three phases characterize this 45-year process with the generals moving from the center to the sidelines of power until the shock provoked by Bolsonaro's election. The first phase covers the slow return of the military to the *caserna* (barracks) at the end of the military dictatorship, a process initiated by President Ernesto Geisel (1974-1979) and concluded by his successor, João Batista de Oliveira Figueiredo (1979-1985). The second phase covers the first 15 years of Brazil's "New Republic," with the gradual dismantling of the authoritarian state in the late 1980s and early 1990s until the creation of the Defense Ministry, in 1999. During the last phase, from 2000 to 2018, the military were kept away from the centers of power in Brasília; international peacekeeping operations and the memory of the military dictatorship occupied the attention of the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff governments. Bolsonaro's victory imposed an abrupt end to this third phase, bringing back the generals to the upper echelon of the administration and initiating a new moment in civil-military relations in Brazil.



By tracking the share of generals in ministerial positions, it is possible to discern these four phases. In the last decade of the military regime, the ratio of high-ranking militaries in cabinet positions was around 45%. During the first 15 years of Brazil's new democracy, the proportion dropped almost continuously (President Fernando Collor de Mello had fewer militaries in his cabinet than his predecessor, but the ratio increased due to a reduction in the total number of ministries). From the 2000s until the coming to power of Michel Temer in 2016, the only member of the military holding a ministerial position was the head of the Institutional Security Cabinet (GSI), responsible for intelligence matters and the president's personal security. Tellingly, all ministers of Defense from 1999 to 2018 were civilian, with Temer breaking this unspoken rule in his last year in office, while Bolsonaro was growing in the polls.

President Bolsonaro abruptly reversed the trend seen since the 1980s: during the first six months of his administration, military occupied almost a third of all ministerial positions. If Brazil still granted ministerial status to force commanders, as it did until the creation of the Defense Ministry in 1999, Bolsonaro's ratio would be around 40% – close to the last years of the military regime. This surge gave the militaries an unprecedented political and policy role in more than a generation. However, before addressing the implications of the new moment in civil-military relations, it is worth reviewing how we got here from the gradual dismantling of Brazil's military regime until the 2018 election.

The “Slow, Gradual and Safe” Opening

Unlike other South American dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, such as in Argentina or Chile, the Brazilian military regime went through a slow self-dismantling process initiated at the top of the state apparatus. A retired general and former president of state oil company Petrobras, Geisel rose to power in 1974 and soon began implementing his envisioned “slow, gradual and safe *abertura* (opening)” to put the military back in the *casernas* (barracks) and peacefully hand power to a civilian authority. Geisel was certainly no democrat. He considered Brazilians insufficiently “evolved, cultured or educated” to have a Western-type of democracy, and thought that torture was sometimes justifiable to fight “subversives”³ However, the president believed that the regime inaugurated in 1964 was at a crossroads: it would either go through a controlled opening or – what he saw as the worst-case scenario – a radicalized dictatorship under the *linha dura* (hardline), with disastrous and enduring consequences for the Armed Forces. The centralized and gradual transition to civilian rule sought to reimpose the Armed Forces' hierarchical structure – reining in the power of the *linha dura*, which was at the forefront of the dirty war against the left – and contain the pressure from the opposition for a swift democratic transition.⁴ The president would walk this fine line throughout his mandate.

Brazil initiated a transition to civilian rule through authoritarian means. Geisel maintained for most of his tenure the emergency powers based on the so-called “Institutional Act Number 5” (AI-5), unilaterally modifying electoral laws to create a disproportionately large ruling majority in Congress. The president also was in charge when the last remnants of rural guerrillas were decimated, including with the use of executions and “disappearances” of insurgents. Within the Armed Forces, however, Geisel managed to isolate and weaken the *linha dura*, particularly following two high-profile events. First in 1975, when he fired the head of the II Army Command following the death by torture of the journalist Vladimir Herzog and the union leader Manoel Fiel Filho. The move was a warning shot against rogue forces, especially in the Army, who refused to submit to the chain of command and accept the political transition. Then in 1977, Geisel removed from office his Minister of the Army, Sylvio Frota, who was actively working to sabotage the opening and bring the *linha dura* back to the presidency. Institutionally, the president moved in three crucial areas. Geisel began dismantling the press censorship, set the basis for a new party system, and prepared a general amnesty law. The pardon would apply to individuals from both the opposition and the regime accused of crimes, including torture and other human rights violations.

Scott Mainwaring argues that four key elements drove Brazil towards the "opening." First, the regime was losing legitimacy: fears of the "internal enemy" subsided with the decimation of the leftist insurgency, the economy was beginning to deteriorate and traditional support bases – such as the middle-class, blue-collar workers and the Church – were distancing themselves from the government. Second, tension and divisions within the Armed Forces were growing, particularly between Geisel’s allies and the *linha dura*. Third, the regime was so powerful in 1974 that Geisel and members of his inner circle believed they would be able to control the opening process fully. Lastly, the regime did not anticipate the crisis that would overtake the Brazilian economy in the second part of the 1970s and 1980s.⁵

Tapped by Geisel to succeed him, Figueiredo came to power in 1979 with the overture moving forward and the amnesty law ready to be implemented. However, the conditions for the "slow, gradual, and safe opening” had changed. Following the oil shocks of the mid-1970s, Brazil went from a phase of sustained double-digit growth – the so-called “Economic Miracle” – to one shaped by recession and high inflation. Meanwhile, Figueiredo’s erratic leadership and the fragmentation of the government’s base gave the opposition a window of opportunity. With the help of massive demonstrations in cities like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the opposition had unsuccessfully tried to push for a popular vote for president. The ailing regime managed to keep the selection of the next president restricted to members of Congress. But Figueiredo failed to control his succession and, in 1985, Congress chose the opposition leader

Tancredo Neves to become Brazil's first civilian president since 1964.⁶ In a tragic turn of events, Neves died days before taking office due to heart failure, and Vice-President José Sarney stepped in.

The day of Sarney's inauguration, Figueiredo sneaked out of the Planalto Presidential Palace through the backdoor, refusing to transmit the presidential sash to his successor. The Brazilian militaries left power after a long transition designed – although not fully controlled – by the generals. A strong amnesty law was in place, precluding any punishment of authorities involved in human rights violations. Also, Sarney had initially emerged from the ranks of the ruling party of the authoritarian regime, joining with more moderate opposition forces only in the last years of the military era. Again, compared to countries like Argentina and Chile, the Brazilian generals left power in very favorable conditions, including with a generally positive image among the population and legal protection against the crimes of the past.

Also, unlike the Argentinian and Chilean cases, the end of the dictatorship was not followed by any official investigation into the human rights violations committed during the military years. The scale of violence was significantly lower in Brazil: 434 deaths and disappearances, compared to around 30,000 in Argentina and 3,230 in Chile. Brazil's use of torture as a state policy, the disappearance of citizens and other human rights violations were not officially probed until the limited National Truth Commission (CNV) established in 2011. Bolsonaro's rise as a presidential candidate, praising the military dictatorship – including its record of human rights violations – renewed debates about the long-term consequences of Brazil's failed reckoning with the past.

The First 15 Years of Democracy

Civil-military relations during the first 15 years of Brazil's New Republic centered around two overlapping questions. The first concerned the place of the Armed Forces in the newly established civilian order. The second related to the gradual dismantling of the authoritarian state, but without jeopardizing the terms of the transition to civilian rule – particularly the amnesty law. The new constitution adopted in 1988 dedicates a full chapter to the organization and responsibilities of the Armed Forces.

According to its first paragraph:

“The Armed Forces, formed by the Navy, Army and Air Force, are national permanent and regular institutions, organized based on hierarchy and discipline, under the supreme authority of the President of the Republic, and are meant to defend the Fatherland, to guarantee the constitutional powers and, by the initiative of any of them, to (guarantee) the law and order”.⁷

In short, under the 1988 Constitution, the Brazilian military has three responsibilities: defending the territory against an external threat, protecting the three branches of government and, at the request of at least one of these powers, acting to guarantee law and order temporarily. The Armed Forces' authority is not limited to defense issues: domestic security remained one of the military's core constitutional responsibilities. The Constitutional Assembly that drafted the 1988 text debated removing the Armed Forces' authority over law and order, but the generals strongly resisted and, in the end, managed to retain that clause.⁸

Also, the new Constitution did not explicitly overturn the 1979 Amnesty Law. Although legal scholars and Brazil's Bar Association (OAB) have argued that the Constitution only recognizes amnesty for the victims of crimes during the military years, Brazil's Supreme Court (STF) determined in 2010 that the pardon also applies to perpetrators of human rights violations, including torture and disappearances.⁹

Meanwhile, the new civilian governments moved ahead with the disassembling of the authoritarian state apparatus, particularly in areas like nuclear technology and intelligence – which the generals controlled and kept under a heavy veil of secrecy. During the military regime, Brazil made significant breakthroughs in its nuclear program, reaching an agreement with West Germany in 1975 to produce eight uranium reactors and establish a domestic nuclear industry. The agreement met strong opposition in Washington and profound suspicion in Argentina, which was also silently advancing its own nuclear program. Fueling fears of a nuclear race in the region, both South American countries were simultaneously developing ballistic missile technology.

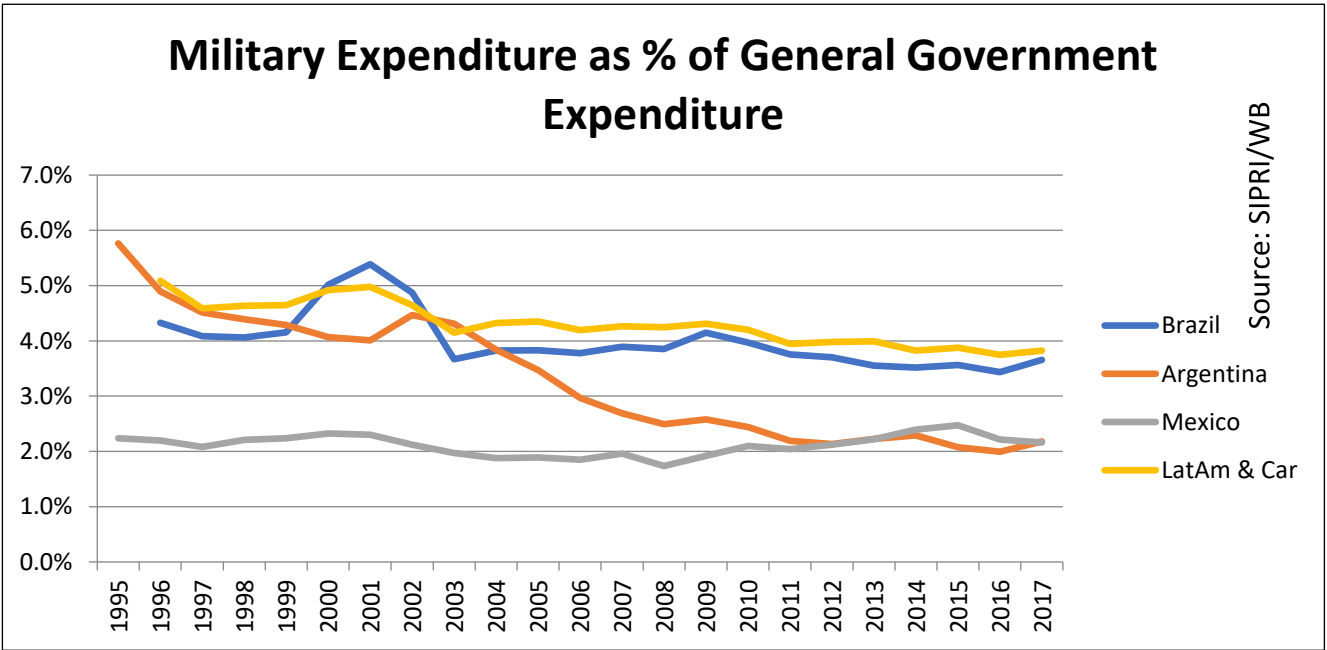
The transition to democracy brought new levels of transparency to Brazil's nuclear program and helped ease the bilateral distrust. The 1988 Constitution explicitly prohibited Brazil from developing nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, the personal relationship between Sarney and Argentine President Raúl Alfonsín allowed for the establishment of new cooperation channels. In 1991, Brazil and Argentina created a bilateral agency to conduct mutual inspections (ABACC). Moreover, President Fernando Collor de Mello personally oversaw the destruction of an underground Air Force facility in the State of Pará built during the military years for secret nuclear tests.

In his first day in office, Collor also extinguished Brazil's National Information System (SNI), created following the 1964 coup to centralize all intelligence operations as a "Brazilian CIA." The SNI became a parallel power, operating with no oversight or external control – its founder, General Golbery do Couto e Silva, famously said that he had "created a monster." Virtually all candidates in the 1989 elections, the first time Brazilians voted for president in almost 30 years, promised to abolish the intelligence agency.

A campaign promise of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), the creation of Brazil’s Defense Ministry represented the last major institutional effort to update the Armed Forces to the new reality of Brazilian democracy. The new ministry – officially announced in 1997 and finally created in mid-1999 – was meant to formalize the submission of the three armed forces to civilian authority. Cardoso also replaced the Casa Militar, a military bureau at the President’s Office, with the Institutional Security Cabinet (GSI). The Defense Ministry became a reality but did not gain traction until later in the 2000s. The first ministers were perceived as weak and lacking authority over the generals. According to some high-ranking generals, the first “real” Minister of Defense was Nelson Jobim, a former Justice Minister and Supreme Court Justice appointed by Lula in 2007.¹⁰

The Changing Profile of the Armed Forces in the 2000s

From the 1980s until the early 2000s, the civilian political class reclaimed control of the government, while the military went through a gradual loss of political power and space in Brasília’s policy circles. This change in civil-military relations did not translate into any significant redistribution of government resources. Since the mid-1990s, military expenses represent around 4% of Brazil’s total government expenditure (with a slight uptick in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the Defense Ministry was created, and Brazil purchased new surveillance systems for the Amazon region). Proportionally, Brazil spends less on defense than the average of Latin America and the Caribbean, but more than Mexico and Argentina.



In 2002, the election of Lula from the leftist Workers' Party (PT, for its initials in Portuguese) further consolidated Brazil's democratic and institutional gains. The peaceful handover of power from one elected civilian president to another civilian from a different party was the first such transition since 1960. Lula, a former union leader and radical leftist – who had been briefly jailed during the military years – tilted to the center during the presidential campaign, embracing a more business-friendly posture. Once in power, Lula kept his promise of preserving the macroeconomic policies that had controlled inflation and the budget, while building a broad and diverse political coalition in Congress. With booming commodities' prices, Brazil began experimenting in a phase of accelerated growth, bringing millions of families out of poverty. During the PT years – which spanned from January 2003, with Lula's inauguration, to mid-2016, when Rousseff was impeached – three events shaped the Armed Forces in decisive ways.

The first was Brazil's decision to head the military component of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), starting in 2004, when the fall of the Jean Bertrand Aristide government pushed Haitian politics to the brink of civil war. The Brazilian military had participated in UN peacekeeping operations before, including in the Suez Canal (1956) and East Timor (1999). The mission in Haiti was unprecedented both in size – more than 37,000 soldiers mobilized over 13 years – and political profile. Brazilians represented the largest contingent of peacekeeping forces, with up to two battalions, and all MINUSTAH force commanders from 2004 to 2017 were Brazilian generals. Four of them would join the Bolsonaro administration in ministerial positions. In a broader sense, the perceived success of MINUSTAH enhanced the prestige and credibility of the Brazilian military inside and outside Brazil, boosted internal morale and gave the force a new sense of purpose in a post-Cold War world.

MINUSTAH also provided the Armed Forces new expertise in urban security operations – called in Brazil “Law and Order Guarantee (GLO)” missions. The military provided security for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games. Also, in 2018 – for the first time since the return of democracy – President Temer ordered a federal intervention under military auspices to fight drug cartels in Rio de Janeiro, amid a context of collapsed state finances and spiraling violence. Later in 2018, the Armed Forces were also sent to Roraima state as the influx of Venezuelan refugees continued to increase. In short, the Brazilian military became involved in security operations at the state level in ways unseen since the end of the military regime.

The second decisive event for the Armed Forces in the PT era was the National Truth Commission (CNV), which Lula's successor, Dilma Rousseff, instituted in 2011. The CNV was a tardy effort to investigate the crimes of the military dictatorship by a president who herself had been a leftist guerrilla in the late 1960s and was jailed and tortured by the regime in the early 1970s. The CNV was

always limited in scope, especially compared to other efforts in Argentina and Chile - under intense pressure from the generals, Rousseff agreed to focus on all human rights violations committed by the Brazilian state since 1946. Nevertheless, behind the scenes, the generals complained of being stonewalled by Rousseff and the CNV's leadership.¹¹ More importantly, they saw the investigation as a concerted and illegal effort to overturn the 1979 Amnesty Law.¹² The CNV's final report listed 377 people, the vast majority members of the military, who had committed human rights violations on behalf of the Brazilian state.¹³

The report also recommended the partial nullification of the amnesty law, so that those accused of the crimes could be prosecuted. The proposal, which was not unanimous among the CNV leadership, had no binding effect. Neither the Rousseff administration nor Congress took any action to modify the 1979 law.¹⁴ The report increased the dissatisfaction among the high command of the Armed Forces with the Workers' Party in general and the Rousseff administration in particular.

The third decisive event impacting the Armed Forces' views and political stance was Operation Lava Jato (Car Wash), the massive investigation into a multi-billion-dollar corruption scheme involving a cartel of construction companies preying on Petrobras. Lava Jato soon implicated all major parties in Brasília, including several PT leaders, and after four years, would lead to the arrest of former President Lula. The military was not directly involved in Lava Jato, although the probe led to the arrest of a former Navy admiral accused of money laundering and influence peddling in the construction of a nuclear reactor. The massive corruption scandal convinced large sections of the Armed Forces, including the majority in the high command, that corruption had irreversibly overtaken the political establishment in Brazil. Lava Jato made the anti-PT sentiment a decisive element shaping the Armed Forces' views of politics and policy.

As the pressure in the streets and Congress against Rousseff continued to grow, the decades-long taboo around military involvement in politics began to diminish – and the generals made their views known. In October 2015, General Mourão – then the head of the Southern Military Command, one of the top positions in the Army – delivered a speech at a private event calling for Rousseff's removal due to "corruption and incompetence." The four-star general cautioned that impeachment would "not change the status quo" in Brasília and an "awakening for the patriotic struggle" was needed to restore order. Mourão's speech was leaked, going viral on social media. A few months before, the general was accused of giving his blessing to an official Army ceremony organized by his subordinates in honor of an infamous torturer during the military years. Instead of removing him from active duty, Rousseff sent him to a less prestigious position.¹⁵ The Armed Forces' high command remained publicly silent during the months leading to the impeachment of Rousseff. Army Commander general Eduardo Villas Bôas would

later say in an interview that “congressmen from the left” had asked the military to impose a state of emergency precluding the impeachment proceedings, but the request was turned down.¹⁶ General Villas Bôas’ account has not been confirmed by other sources. During the impeachment session in the Chamber of Deputies, Bolsonaro famously declared that he was voting against Rousseff to honor the memory of Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, a torturer who headed the DOI-Codi intelligence division in the 1970s.

Two years later – as President Temer was facing a third indictment for corruption – Mourão delivered a second controversial speech, saying that the high command would not refrain from a “military intervention (...) if the judicial branch does not solve the political problem”. The Brazilian media quoted generals criticizing Mourão’s comments (off the record) as “inflammatory”¹⁷ In February 2018, the controversial general left the Army in a high-profile ceremony with several members of the high command present. Six months later, he joined Bolsonaro’s presidential ticket as Vice President (although Mourão was not Bolsonaro’s first choice for the position).

Another public indication of the High Command’s increased politicization and opposition to the Workers’ Party came just Lula was arrested, in April 2018. The former president entered that year’s presidential race as a clear frontrunner to return to office. The day before a critical Supreme Court ruling against Lula, Army Eduardo Villas Bôas tweeted that the Army “repudiated impunity” and was “attentive to its institutional missions.” The tweet was widely interpreted by Brazilian media as a warning that the “wrong” judicial decision, i.e., not holding Lula accountable for his crimes, would anger the military - with unpredictable consequences. The stage was now set for one of the least predictable elections in Brazil’s history, one in which the military would play a significant role.

Bolsonaro’s Election

Although Bolsonaro came from a military background, he has always had a complex relationship with the Armed Forces – particularly its leadership. His last years as an active duty soldier were marked by a series of controversies. In 1985, Bolsonaro gave an on-the-record interview to the popular magazine *Veja* denouncing poor conditions and insufficient salaries for low-ranking officers. The piece prompted a small crisis in the Armed Forces, with the Army minister stating that *Veja* had “made up” the interview. Nevertheless, the captain spent 15 days in a military penitentiary. The following year, the same magazine published a detailed account of Bolsonaro’s alleged plans to disrupt water supply to Rio de Janeiro using TNT explosives, also to pressure the government to increase soldiers’ salaries. The article included maps

allegedly drawn by Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro was court martialed but acquitted by the Superior Military Tribunal for lack of evidence that he was the author of the sketches.

After leaving the Army, Bolsonaro campaigned for city councilman as a voice against the *baderna* (“mess”) of Brazil’s young democracy – specifically, what he described as its neglect of the military’s rank and file. Significant support from low-ranking military, police and firefighters were the key to his election. He also became the most vocal proponent of a return of the generals to power and a staunch defender of the Armed Forces’ record during the military regime. Three years later, this platform helped him get elected to the federal Chamber of Deputies, where he would stay for 28 years. Tellingly, at the time the Armed Forces’ command and the generals who had governed under the military regime expressed their disdain for the young captain-turned-politician. In an interview in the early 1990s, former president Geisel – the architect of Brazil’s opening to civilian rule – attacked Bolsonaro while arguing that the return of the military to the barracks was irreversible: “As Brazil develops, the (military’s) interference (in politics) will drop. Now what related to the military exists in Congress? Let’s not consider Bolsonaro, because Bolsonaro is a completely abnormal case, and he is a bad soldier.”¹⁸

During his three decades in Congress, Bolsonaro was a mostly marginal, one-issue politician, focused almost entirely on speeches in defense of the military, against anything remotely associated with the left and, sometimes, issuing threats of violence. In the 1990s, Bolsonaro opposed Cardoso’s pro-market reform agenda and famously said the “president should be executed” for his program to privatize state assets. During the Workers’ Party years, Bolsonaro continued to rage against any efforts to investigate the crimes of the military dictatorship, while getting closer to a new religious right that was beginning to gain ground. Bolsonaro also began to speak more about topics like abortion and LGBT+ rights. In another controversial episode, for which he was fined by the Supreme Court, Bolsonaro told a fellow Congresswoman: “I would never rape you because you don’t deserve it”.¹⁹

Throughout his career in the Chamber of Deputies, Bolsonaro never played a significant role in rounding up votes or drafting bills on key policy topics. Nevertheless, the rapid economic, political and social transformation of Brazil, starting around 2014, would reposition him to become a viable presidential candidate. Pressured by the severe deterioration of Brazil’s terms of trade and disastrous economic policy decisions by Rousseff, the Brazilian economy plunged into the longest recession in history in 2014. Brazilians went from the optimism of a decade of sustained growth and almost full employment to the tragedy of double-digit unemployment and falling household income. Per capita gross domestic product would decline almost 10 percent over a three-year period. At the same time, Operation Car Wash spread beyond the Workers Party and began implicating all major parties: plea deals with prosecutors involved more than 90 members of Congress, including the speakers of the Chamber of

Deputies and the Senate, five former presidents, and numerous ministers of Rousseff and Temer. The combination of the economic crisis and the collapse of Brasília's establishment initiated a period of intense political turmoil, leading to the impeachment of Rousseff and direct threats to Temer's tenure. Meanwhile, in the streets of large and mid-size cities, violence continued to surge to unprecedented levels: homicides peaked at almost 64,000 in 2018 (a 3 percent increase from 2017).²⁰

When Bolsonaro announced his intention to run for president in 2018, most analysts dismissed the idea that someone with his meager track record in Congress and no real party could win. But they failed to grasp that, in a context where the economy, political class and Brazil's security were all collapsing, Bolsonaro's "outsider" status would turn into his greatest asset. Meanwhile, the communications space in Brazil had radically changed: social media – particularly WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter – were now as or more important as TV, radio and print news. Bolsonaro did not have the resources to build a traditional campaign in a continent-sized democracy, but he knew how to mobilize attention on social media, soon gathering millions of followers. By early 2018, the former captain was polling in second place, behind former president Lula. When a Car Wash-related sentence removed Lula from the race, Bolsonaro became the frontrunner. He won the first round of the elections, going to the run-off with Lula's replacement, the former Mayor of São Paulo Fernando Haddad. Widespread rejection of the Workers' Party pushed voters towards Bolsonaro; most of Bolsonaro's voters in the run-off were not hardcore *bolsonaristas*, but anti-Workers Party voters.

Meanwhile, the military was involved in politics to a degree unprecedented in three decades of democracy. The Armed Forces were involved in major domestic security operations, retired – and sometimes active duty – officers were making comments on social media and the press about political and legal matters, and for the first time a general was commanding the Ministry of Defense. With virtually every other political player in disgrace, polls showed the military was now Brazil's most trusted institution. 40% of the population saying they believed "a lot" in the armed forces, compared to just 3% who said the same of the presidency and congress, and 2% who expressed confidence in political parties.²¹ In 2017, 38% of Brazilians said that military rule would be "good for the country" – the highest such support in years. While the military had little or no interest in staging an old-style coup or taking direct charge of the government, its leadership was clearly appalled by the country's civilian leadership and saw itself as perhaps the only remaining power center capable of taking the country forward (the same mindset or philosophy that had usually triggered military interventions in the past). Bolsonaro, for his part, was eager to borrow the prestige of the armed forces for his own government and also rely on it for staffing both senior and mid-level positions in the bureaucracy, given his distrust of traditional

political parties and the political establishment at large. Once in office, Bolsonaro confirmed expectations and pushed the military back to the center of government and politics in Brasília.

The Present Day: Bolsonaro & The Military in Power

For many in the Brazilian military, Bolsonaro's inauguration marked a restoration of the natural order – of their rightful place at (or near) the center of power. A force that always saw itself as the enlightened guardians of Brazil's long-term interest, free of the self-interested and often vulgar needs of elected politicians, would now play a significant role in guiding the country out of a years-long political crisis and its worst recession on record. Leaders of the armed forces also believed the force had evolved since the 1970s and 80s – becoming more democratic, more disciplined, and more inserted in the world. The recent missions in Haiti and elsewhere had forged a new class of tightly knit generals and other officers who had found a clear purpose in the post-Cold War era.

All would not be harmonious, however. In its early days, the Bolsonaro administration has seen numerous, often vicious conflicts between two main internal factions: 1) cultural conservatives, many of them evangelical Christians, who advocate radical change on a number of issues, including a more “anti-globalist” foreign policy and 2) a more pragmatic group of ministers and officials more concerned with economic recovery and maintaining Brazil's traditional role in global affairs, who tend to share the preference for gradual, consensus-based change that has long characterized the Brazilian elite. Senior members of the military fall almost entirely into the second group and are often perceived as its leaders.

The “pragmatic” or “military wing” of the government has often been cohesive in both its views and its solidarity for other members, but it cannot be treated as a monolith. Its membership is ever shifting, although Vice President Mourão and Augusto Heleno, a retired four-star general who is now the minister of institutional security, are widely seen as its leaders. Meanwhile, the force itself is plagued by internal disagreements about the path forward for Brazil, how to work with Bolsonaro, and also the potential risks to the military's long-term reputation of sharing power with a government that struggled with a stagnant economy and declining approval ratings during its first six months in office.

Several critical issues during the early Bolsonaro administration showed both the extent of the military's influence on this government and its limitations. They provided insight as to the priorities and values of the current and former soldiers now in positions of power.

1) The United States

President Bolsonaro sees Washington as his government's most important bilateral relationship. By visiting the United States in March, he broke the longstanding Brazilian tradition of having a Latin American country as the site of the first state visit. In July, he also announced his intent to name his

son Eduardo Bolsonaro as Brazil's ambassador to the United States. Appointing a family member and close adviser, demonstrate the high value that the president placed on the partnership. The younger Bolsonaro would likely have to relinquish his seat in Brazil's Congress and his ability to advise his father on a day-to-day basis. Some observers expected Brazil under Bolsonaro could become Washington's most reliable ally in South America since Colombia in the 2000s or Argentina during Carlos Menem's 1989-99 presidency, a period often known as "carnal relations" with the U.S.

The most significant internal opposition to this alignment appears to come not from the military, but from the rank and file of the foreign ministry. Itamaraty, as the ministry is known, has long preferred to cultivate cordial relations with Washington but also work to maintain and emphasize Brazil's independence, as befitting a continent-sized country with its own interests and sphere of influence. Foreign Minister Ernesto Araujo, a leader of the government's anti-globalist wing who was previously stationed at the Brazilian embassy in Washington, has worked to suppress such concerns, declaring a new era in this and many other respects.

For its part, the military appears to support some specific measures, such as allowing the United States to use the Alcantara satellite launch base, that are at the core of seeking closer ties with Washington. However, if Bolsonaro adopts other policies perceived as infringing on the longstanding principle of Brazil's sovereignty, the military will react negatively. When Bolsonaro floated the possibility of offering the U.S. military a base in Brazilian territory during his first week in government, he very quickly withdrew the idea following negative feedback from military leaders, according to numerous press reports.²² In April, following his visit to Washington, Bolsonaro told the media he had proposed Trump a "partnership" to "explore" the Amazon together. "Otherwise, we're going to lose the Amazon, that area that is vital to the world," Bolsonaro said.²³ This proposal has also encountered resistance from military advisers, a source told the authors.

2) *China*

Brazil's relationship with China is a good example of an issue where the military's prioritization of economic interests and incremental change has been acutely felt – contributing to an apparent change in the president's policy stance.

Bolsonaro was extremely tough on China during the campaign, famously saying that Beijing is not just "buying in Brazil – it is buying Brazil." This stance appears to have been influenced by several factors. One is the belief that China is the leader of a communist, "globalist" assault on Western countries and Christianity in particular – a theory promoted by the Virginia-based philosopher Olavo de Carvalho, the so-called ideological guru of the Bolsonaro administration.²⁴

This stance has been echoed (though not always to the letter) by other voices with influence on the government, including the U.S. political operative Steve Bannon and Foreign Minister Araujo, who has said: “We want to sell soy and iron ore, but we’re not going to sell our soul.” Bolsonaro has also long practiced a unique brand of resource nationalism, particularly when it comes to niobium, a mineral that can be added to steel to make it more resilient; Brazil has about 85% of world reserves, and Bolsonaro as a congressman denounced what he saw as Chinese efforts to control its supply. Finally, the priorities of the Trump administration influenced Bolsonaro's anti-China stance. Amid the broader trade war, talking tough on Beijing has been seen as a way to get closer to Washington. Similar to its stance on the Arab-Israeli issue, the military joined a more pragmatic group (that once again includes agribusiness leaders) concerned about the economic cost of a confrontation with Beijing. China is Brazil’s largest export market, buying twice as much as the United States. Many regard its demand for commodities as the key to Brazil's best economic times in recent memory, the era that spanned roughly 2003 to 2012. Several policymakers believe that a return to prosperity will necessarily require increased engagement with Beijing, not a decrease. Meanwhile, 2018 also showed how anti-Chinese rhetoric could have a chilling effect on the relationship; Chinese direct investment fell to just \$2.8 billion from \$11.3 billion in 2017.²⁵

Vice President Mourão has been the clear leader within the military on the issue of China, pressuring and often boldly contradicting the president on China. He dismissed Bolsonaro’s tough language “campaign rhetoric,” and said: “A fight with China isn’t a good one for Brazil.”²⁶ Such public divergences caused considerable anger within the president’s inner circle, but it was echoed in private by other military leaders, including the powerful Heleno. Agribusiness leaders also repeatedly lobbied the president to be more accommodating. “We don’t want to segregate or distance ourselves from China,” one such leader told the media. “We have presented our demands to the government, and we have received a positive response.”

Indeed, by March and April, Bolsonaro appeared to have shifted, at least temporarily, to a more pragmatic stance on China. The president announced plans to travel to Beijing in the second half of the year. His March declaration that “Our big partner is China; in second place, the United States,” made with the anti-China foreign minister Araujo by his side, sent shockwaves through diplomatic circles on multiple continents (although many believed he meant this in a strictly trade-focused sense).²⁷ He also passed up a chance to talk tough during his March trip to Washington; asked by reporters about China while standing next to President Trump, Bolsonaro replied, “Brazil is going to keep on doing as much business with as many countries as possible.” However, the anti-China faction within the government did not give up hope, pointing to plans to expand commercial ties with Japan

and South Korea as part of a slow-building alliance against Beijing. “This isn’t over yet,” one source told the authors. “The military guys think they’ve won, but we’re playing the long game.”

3) *Venezuela*

South America’s biggest humanitarian crisis is also a national security issue for neighboring countries, including Brazil. The collapse of Venezuela has sent at least 160,000 Venezuelans, and probably many more, across the border – especially into the state of Roraima. While Brazil has been largely welcoming, the unprecedented influx has created strains in a country that has no recent history of large-scale immigration; foreign-born citizens account for just 0.1% of Brazil's population. In April 2018, Roraima's governor asked the Supreme Court to close the border with Venezuela temporarily; the request was denied.

In addition to those tensions, Venezuela is clearly a topic of considerable significance to Bolsonaro for both humanitarian and political reasons. As the Venezuelan crisis deteriorated in recent years, it became a kind of touchstone in the rest of the region for broader opposition to leftist and socialist policies. Electorates in many countries that experienced leftist rule, including Brazil and Argentina, believed (with considerable exaggeration, in the authors’ view) that their countries “almost became another Venezuela.” As such, being perceived as tough on Venezuela was an important priority for candidates on both the center-right and right during Brazil’s 2018 campaign. Much of Bolsonaro’s base also believes that the Sao Paulo Forum, a conference of leftist leaders that included Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez and PT leaders including Lula, deserved considerable blame for Brazil’s economic collapse and almost succeeded in co-opting the country into a broader leftist coalition. Finally, a hard line on Venezuela is perceived as a critical way to increase Brazil’s alignment with the United States, which the Bolsonaro government sees as its most important bilateral foreign relationship.

As a result, Bolsonaro has staked out aggressive territory on the Venezuela issue that has often made Brazil’s establishment – including members of the military – uncomfortable. The government was one of the first to recognize Juan Guaidó as the legitimate interim president of Venezuela in January 2019. Acting contrary to the advice of the “military wing,” according to numerous press reports²⁸, Bolsonaro also received Guaidó’s ambassador in Brasilia in June. The Brazilian military is widely perceived as supporting a political transition in Venezuela that would see the departure of Nicolás Maduro. However, it has reservations about contributing to an even more destabilizing crisis that could see violence or an even higher flow of refugees spill over into Brazil. Brazil has a long, cherished tradition of peaceful relations with its neighbors and the armed forces (along with the

foreign ministry) have long seen non-intervention as perhaps the most important principle of Brazilian foreign policy. The military also has long-established channels with its peers in Caracas – Vice President Mourão was the military attache in Brazil’s embassy from 2002 to 2004 – that it believes can be leveraged at a future time, making some in the armed forces hesitant to take a more aggressive stance.

For these reasons and others, Brazil has stopped short of supporting a foreign military intervention in Venezuela. It is unclear whether the Brazilian military has been a decisive moderating influence on this front. Before taking office, Bolsonaro himself expressed deep reservations about potential Brazilian participation in a Venezuelan intervention, even if Washington specifically requested it, sources close to the government told the authors. At the very least, Bolsonaro appears to be aware there is little to no support for intervention in Venezuela within the Brazilian armed forces, which have repeatedly made this view explicit in private and in the media. Mourão told the press in January, in response to President Trump’s declaration that “all options are on the table” in Venezuela: “Brazil doesn’t participate in interventions. It’s not our foreign policy to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries.” Mourão also traveled to a meeting of the Lima Group in January to make clear Brazil’s opposition to a military intervention, a trip widely interpreted as an attempt to attenuate the influence of Foreign Minister Araujo, who is closer to the more hawkish “ideological” camp within the administration.

4) The Israeli-Arab Conflict

Bolsonaro promised during his presidential campaign to follow the example of the United States and move Brazil’s embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The move would respond to a long-held demand by evangelical Christian supporters, a critical element of his electoral coalition. In November 2018, a month after his inauguration, Bolsonaro confirmed that “we intend to transfer the embassy to Jerusalem. Israel is a sovereign state, and we respect it.” To secure the transfer and signal Israel’s support, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attended Bolsonaro’s January 1 inauguration (the first time an Israeli leader had ever done so). Bolsonaro then reciprocated by making Israel one of his first visits abroad in March 2019, where he was received at the airport by Netanyahu and signed numerous bilateral cooperation agreements.

Despite this considerable momentum, Bolsonaro has as of the writing of this paper declined to complete the transfer of the embassy. On April 1, he declared his “commitment” to make the move, but said “things must be done slowly and calmly,” and noted his term would last until 2022. While it was unclear if this was a delay or a reversal of Bolsonaro’s previous decision, the influence of the

so-called “military wing” was widely perceived as having played a vital role in the shift. As early as January, Vice President Mourão said, following a meeting with the Palestinian emissary in Brasilia, that “for now, the Brazilian state is not thinking of moving the embassy.” These comments generated extensive press coverage since they were seen not only as an obvious divergence from Bolsonaro’s official position but a possible sign of Mourão trying to pressure his superior via the media.

More pragmatic officials within the government, including some in the military, were alarmed by the potential economic fallout of the embassy move. Brazil is the largest exporter of Halal meat in the world and had a \$6.6 billion trade surplus with Arab countries and Iran. In the government's early months, several Arab countries signaled in public and in private that they would review their purchases of Brazilian meat, and the Palestinian Authority called back their emissary to Brazil for “consultations.” More pragmatic internal voices saw the embassy transfer as an unnecessary risk to a critical economic sector, agribusiness, that had been one of Bolsonaro’s main pillars of support during the campaign. Anything that would reduce exports, especially at a time when Brazil's economy remained flat and unemployment was still stuck around 12%, was seen by these pragmatic, results-focused officials as a significant negative. Meanwhile, in the diplomatic space, many were concerned that Brazil would sacrifice its traditional posture as equidistant from both parties in the Arab-Israeli conflict, with a possible consequent loss of respect for Brazil in the broader international arena.

Mourão and other military emissaries including Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, then the minister in charge of relations with Congress, helped put this more cautious message in front of the president. As such, this seemed like a classic case of the military exercising its influence to push for a gradual, interests-based decision that does not subordinate economic growth or international prestige to more ideological or religious considerations.

5) Climate Change and The Paris Accord

Bolsonaro has made opposition to the climate change “agenda,” including special protections for the Amazon, one of the pillars of his campaign and presidency. Two main factions influence his position. One is those within Brazil’s agribusiness community who chafe at restrictions over the last two decades on deforestation (this group tends to be dominated by smaller-scale farmers, since multinationals and other large producers tend to appreciate the need for conservation, mostly because of pressure from their environmentally-minded consumers). The other group is “anti-globalist” in nature and sees pressure on Brazil's Amazon policy as an unfair form of intervention in Brazil's domestic affairs by foreign powers, particularly left-leaning or socialist governments in Western

Europe. Bolsonaro said during the campaign that he would withdraw from the Paris environmental accords.

Once in office, Bolsonaro immediately set about attending to these groups of supporters. He appointed a foreign minister who has called climate change a “Marxist conspiracy” and an environmental minister, Ricardo Salles, who in one of his first interviews lashed out at the “impositions” of the international community on conservation-related issues. While Salles said Brazil would continue to “comply with the law” regarding deforestation, he also moved to weaken regulators and fired numerous civil servants within the environmental ministry, accusing them of being ideologically biased. The government announced the cancellation of a major international environmental summit due to take place in Salvador in August 2019 (although this decision was later rolled back under pressure from that city’s government). Bolsonaro also continued to defend the economic development of the Amazon, calling it a sovereign right of Brazil and said he would combat what he called excessive fines by environmental regulators. Nearly all (96%) of the 12 million reais in the 2019 budget for the National Policy for Climate Change were included in a broader budget spending freeze.

Loggers and other developers immediately responded to the legal and rhetorical signals from Brasilia, building on an increase in deforestation that had already accelerated under the Temer administration. Deforestation grew 88% in June 2019 compared to the same month a year before and was up 15% in the period from July 2018 to June 2019.

The military has held a somewhat nuanced position on this issue, reinforcing some of Bolsonaro’s positions while acting as a moderating position on others. Emphasis on national sovereignty has long been one of the Brazilian military’s most firmly held positions, especially concerning the Amazon, historically perceived as coveted by foreign powers. Augusto Heleno, a former general, regarded as the most influential Bolsonaro adviser, not within his family, told the press: “The one who cares for the Brazilian Amazon is Brazil. I’m worried about these foreign NGOs and entities, and often the heads of state who are behind them, trying to give us advice on how the Brazilian Amazon should be treated.”²⁹ Salles has relied on the military to staff the environmental ministry with officials aligned with this more sovereign view.

However, the “military wing” has also mostly been careful not to deny the existence of climate change itself, and has usually balanced its rhetoric with the recognition that Brazil must protect the environment out of its own self-interest. At a meeting of seven former Brazilian environmental ministers in May 2019 to criticize Salles’ management, several of the ex-officials nonetheless congratulated the military for its responsible stewardship. “The military is making a contribution to

the government, as incredible as it may seem ... as a moderating influence,” said Marina Silva.³⁰ The most important visible contribution may have been Bolsonaro’s decision not to withdraw from the Paris climate accord, although it’s important to note that larger agribusiness companies worried about possible backlash influenced this decision, as well as a broadly held perception that Brazil could stay in the accord without significant consequences due to its non-punitive nature.

Other Notable Events and Trends

Outside of the major policy debates, the relationship between the military and the Bolsonaro government is constructive but characterized by the same volatility that has marked other aspects of the administration.

On the one hand, members of the “military wing” have provided critical support in several positions, including the government’s communications with the press. Military or military-aligned officials are also deeply involved in what media are calling the biggest privatization drive in Brazil’s history, with an estimated 450 billion reais in revenues expected in the coming years. The military has also generally supported efforts to stabilize Brazil’s economy, including a critical reform of the pension system (notwithstanding some efforts to exclude the military’s rank-and-file from some of the more complicated terms).

However, disputes about the “military wing’s” influence and proper role have frequently spilled into public view and seemed to be becoming more acrimonious as the administration progressed. Former officers have been very critical, in public and in private, of what they see as Bolsonaro’s frequent conduct unbecoming of the presidency – particularly his infamous March “golden shower” tweets, which generated widespread international press coverage and derision.³¹ The specific concern was that the military’s self-cultivated reputation as a moral, apolitical force would suffer lasting damage if Bolsonaro did not adopt a more statesman-like, more disciplined, and less polarizing form of governing. Disputes continued to spill into the open, often on Twitter, despite efforts behind the scenes by military-aligned officials to convince the president and his sons to adopt a more conciliatory approach – at least toward allies – on social media. As the economy remained stagnant and the political scene appeared riven by infighting and dysfunction, Bolsonaro’s approval rating consistently sank during his first six months in government, with just 32% of Brazilians giving his government “good” or “great” marks by early July, and an equal percentage calling it “bad” or “terrible.”

For his part, Bolsonaro appeared to be bristling at attempts by the military to impose its policy agenda and try to change his personal style. Repeated public contradictions from Vice President Mourão were said to particularly bother the president, especially in a country where three of the five previously

elected presidents have seen their terms interrupted and power transferred to the vice president (because of illness in 1985, impeachment in 1993 and impeachment in 2016). In June 2019, Bolsonaro fired three senior officials from the “military wing” in the span of just a week, including one of his most powerful aides, General Santos Cruz. A source close to the family told the authors this was a pointed attempt to “show the military who is in charge.” Santos Cruz countered by giving an interview to media in which he called the government a *show de bagunça*, freely translated as a “shitshow.” Shortly thereafter, one of the president’s sons, Carlos, published a major attack on Twitter against General Heleno, the most senior remaining member of the “military wing.” A report in the July 2019 issue of *Piauí* magazine said that several officers including Heleno met to discuss whether the military should depart en masse from the Bolsonaro administration.

These clashes raised questions about whether Bolsonaro’s alignment with the military was, in fact, a relationship of convenience – a stopgap measure designed to borrow the institution’s popularity and ability to staff the government – until the more socially conservative wing of the government could take and hold positions of more significant influence. Others said the disputes were simply a natural consequence of a completely new coalition in power in Brazil, and that conflicts are more visible in the age of social media and round-the-clock political coverage. “The transition was always going to have noise,” one former military leader told the authors. “Although this has been noisier than most.”

Conclusions

In August 2019, it was still possible to imagine a delicate equilibrium taking hold in civil-military relations under President Bolsonaro. The president continued to depend on the Armed Forces to a significant extent for both personnel and popular support, given the military’s unparalleled reputation in post-crisis Brazil. The influence of the more pragmatic “military wing” remained strong in areas from foreign policy to the day-to-day business of the presidential palace. The group’s two most important individuals still wielded considerable power – with Heleno as arguably Bolsonaro’s most important adviser and Mourão unable to be fired because of his position as vice president.

Despite the political volatility, unemployment was declining (albeit very slowly) while most economists were forecasting economic growth above 2% for 2020. Meanwhile, data showed most Brazilian cities were experiencing double-digit declines in homicide rates. This, plus the pending approval of pension reform, suggested that Bolsonaro could retain the support of his base (roughly 25-30% of the Brazilian electorate) as well as much of the business community. Under this scenario, a certain amount of governability could take hold that, over time, could allow many Brazilians to feel the crisis of recent years had been surpassed. This would be a significant achievement that would likely

satisfy many within the leadership of the Armed Forces, and convince them participation in the government had been worthwhile – for reasons of both long-term institutional prestige as well as the welfare of the nation.

However, it was unclear if this relatively positive scenario – or the relationship with the military – could endure the nearly constant disruptions from the center of power. Bolsonaro’s allies, including his powerful sons, continued to antagonize the “military wing” both privately and in public. It was increasingly clear that the generals simply could not control the president’s position in numerous areas to the extent they had believed possible. From education and environmental policy to “culture wars,” the generals and more radical *bolsonaristas* were on opposite sides, with the latter group winning several public battles. A military leadership that had never been fully comfortable with Bolsonaro’s style and temperament going all the way back to the 1980s was newly shocked by the president’s volatile and often explosive behavior, and his continued reliance on social media to govern.

Meanwhile, Brazil’s economy has consistently underperformed expectations for more than five years, raising questions about whether forecasts from financial markets and economists were overly optimistic once again. Without a meaningful economic recovery, a continued deterioration in Bolsonaro’s popular support seemed certain. The relative decline in urban violence also appeared to be more a product of dynamics within organized crime factions than a product of the government’s security strategy – raising the prospect of the trend’s reversal. Rising deforestation in the Amazon was gaining international media attention in a way that tarnished Brazil’s global reputation – but seemed highly unlikely to dissuade the more radical factions in government.

In many ways, Bolsonaro and the military forged an alliance of convenience. Its sustainability will be a function of the balance discussed above. If Bolsonaro moves closer to the positions and the governing style defended by the more radical sectors of his government, the likelihood of the generals moving away from him in some manner will increase. But the generals are likely to stay with Bolsonaro if they see a path for moderation and the strengthening of more pragmatic sectors within the cabinet, including those responsible for economic reforms. The association with Bolsonaro was a risky bet for the Armed Forces, considering potential long-term consequences. If growth and political stability return, it would reinforce the prestige and power of the military moving forward. But if Bolsonaro becomes a toxic figure and if the government fails to put Brazil back on track, the negative consequences for the Armed Forces will likely be enduring – with the possibility of yet another long period distant from real political power.

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