

The Big Read **Brazilian politics**

Bolsonaro and the generals: will the military defend Brazil's democracy?

As his position has come under threat, the president has raised the prospect of political intervention by the army

Bryan Harris in São Paulo and Andres Schipani in Brasília 11 HOURS AGO

Brazil's armed forces are adopting a new tactic to raise their profile: they are developing a video game for kids, where virtual soldiers can don the olive green of the Brazilian military and shoot at the bad guys.

The objective is to burnish their image among the nation's youth. But wary of being depicted as rampaging mercenaries, the army leadership has ordered that the game "not show too much blood". Scenes that could generate an "institutional crisis" are also banned, which means no fighting in Brasília and definitely no coups.

The foray into video games speak volumes about the increasingly ambiguous role the military is playing in [Brazilian public life](#).

In the more than three decades since the end of a violent military dictatorship, the armed forces largely kept their heads down and offered strong support for the country's democratic institutions.

But that was before Jair Bolsonaro, a rightwing former army captain, was elected president in 2018. Mr Bolsonaro has appointed a large number of former military personnel to senior positions in his government. And now that his own position is coming [under threat](#), he has openly raised the idea of some form of military intervention in Brazilian politics by claiming in June that the armed forces would not accept "absurd decisions" by the nation's supreme court or Congress.



A Jair Bolsonaro supporter in Manaus protests against lockdown measures proposed by a state governor. Some of the similar nationwide rallies were attend by the president himself © Bruno Kelly/Reuters

The comments were seen as a reaction by the president to the multiple criminal investigations he and his family are facing in the nation's highest court — investigations that have the potential to lead to his impeachment or the annulment of his 2018 election.

Yet it was not the first time the president invoked the military to try to cower his opponents. As the coronavirus pandemic started to rip through Brazil in April and May, the president attended rallies outside military bases, where his radical supporters called for an armed intervention to oust governors, judges and lawmakers who were implementing lockdowns.

“Brazil wakes up every day afraid of aggression to democracy, to the constitution, to the Congress, to the supreme court,” said João Dória, governor of São Paulo, at the time. “President Bolsonaro, stop this endless aggression.”

For now Mr Bolsonaro appears to be trying to reduce the [political temperature](#). He has tried to mend fences with the supreme court and he managed to form a political alliance with a controversial group of parties in Congress known as the *Centrão*, which analysts say should fend off efforts to eject him from office — at least for now.



Clockwise from top left: Hamilton Mourão, Bento Albuquerque, Augusto Heleno, Eduardo Pazuello © Reuters; AFP/Getty Images

Hamilton Mourão

VICE-PRESIDENT

A retired army general, Hamilton Mourão is viewed as the “adult in the room” in the Bolsonaro administration for his calm demeanour and pragmatic approach to politics. He oversees key policy issues for Brazil, including the protection of the Amazon rainforest and bilateral relations with China.

Augusto Heleno

MINISTER OF INSTITUTIONAL SECURITY

Another retired army general, Augusto Heleno is one of the more controversial members of the Bolsonaro administration. He has defended Brazil's military dictatorship and said publicly he believes it is up to the military to “put this house in order”.

Eduardo Pazuello

ACTING MINISTER OF HEALTH

Eduardo Pazuello was appointed acting health minister, despite having no experience in healthcare or with public health services. Before taking the post, the Major General led Brazil's efforts to handle the arrival of tens of thousands of Venezuelan refugees in the northern state of Roraima.

Bento Albuquerque

MINISTER OF STATE FOR MINES AND ENERGY

A decorated navy admiral, Bento Albuquerque served as a UN military observer in the Balkans and later became commander of Brazil's submarine force.

But with the continuing investigations into the Bolsonaro family, with the [economy](#) probably entering a new recession after already suffering a decade of stagnation and with the government widely viewed as having [bungled](#) the response to the coronavirus pandemic, Brazil could be about to enter a new period of [political turbulence](#). Deaths from Covid-19 passed 100,000 at the weekend.

This situation has raised urgent questions about what is the role of the military in Brazilian society today and what is its relationship with Mr Bolsonaro. If the Brazilian leader decided to ignore a ruling by the supreme court, what would the armed forces do? Are the former military people around the president an accelerator or a brake on his authoritarian instincts?

Serving and retired officers and soldiers, as well as senior defence figures, are adamant that the armed forces would never again launch the type of military interventions that pockmarked Brazil's 20th century history. They argue that the military would be committed to safeguarding the country's democratic order in the event of Mr Bolsonaro forcing their hand.



President Bolsonaro is greeted by supporters in São Raimundo Nonato during the coronavirus pandemic © Alan Santos/Brazilian Presidency/Handout/Reuters

“The army has been quiet for 35 years. It won't be getting into party politics now,” says Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, a retired army general and minister in the Bolsonaro administration until he was fired after clashing with the president's powerful sons.

For civilian observers, however, there is cause for concern. More than 6,000 active or reserve members of the military are already embedded in government positions in the Bolsonaro administration — including more in the executive branch than during the 1964-1985 dictatorship — bringing with them a military mindset to civil governance.

The current health minister is an active duty general who followed orders from Mr Bolsonaro to dispense the discredited drug chloroquine to Covid-19 patients. For independent analysts and some politicians, the presence alone of such figures is itself a potential risk to democracy.

“What the president is now saying is: ‘I have the sword by my side and that sword is the military.’ He is always invoking the military, always speaking for the military,” says Raul Jungmann, a veteran centre-left politician who was defence minister in the previous government of Michel Temer. “This is how the president has decided to constrain Congress and the supreme court and to push forward his agenda.”

‘Politics through fear’

The armed forces have roots that spread deep and wide into Brazilian society. When Brazil declared independence from Portugal in 1822, it fell to early iterations of the military to first stamp out Portuguese garrisons and later local rebellions in the far-flung reaches of the fledgling empire.



Brazilians gather on the streets in Rio de Janeiro during the military coup of 1964, which ushered in a dictatorship that lasted until 1985 © Universal Images Group/Getty

Further operations then charted the depths of the Amazon rainforest, establishing Brazil's current borders and instilling in the military a sense of its primacy in the creation of the nation. "All those events brought a sense of identity to the armed forces because they fulfilled their role for the nation. In all times of political turmoil, the armed forces somehow participated in the government," says a former top general.

This interventionist tilt continued throughout the 20th century, culminating with the 1964 coup, which ushered in a violent two-decade-long dictatorship.

Democracy was restored in 1985. But unlike in neighbouring Argentina, where the dictatorship was more brutal and the generals were tried in Nuremberg-style proceedings, the departing Brazilian generals negotiated a broad amnesty and the military was never held to account for crimes including murder and torture.

Facing no obvious threats to national defence, the Brazilian army has in recent years pursued diverse initiatives, including humanitarian aid missions, infrastructure projects, fighting wildfires in the Amazon, and even crisis response to the coronavirus pandemic.

According to World Bank data, the country is home to the largest armed forces in Latin America, followed by Colombia, which for decades had to contend with a fiery Marxist insurgency.



A demonstrator holds a placard reading 'Bolsonaro out, general elections now!' in Rio de Janeiro, as concern rises over the number of military officers in Brazil's administration © Pilar Olivares/Reuters

“Our role is to contribute to the development of the country,” says one Brazilian colonel, who served 30 years in the army, in comments that were echoed by several junior soldiers.

It is an attitude that has helped the military rehabilitate its image since the dictatorship. For much of the past decade, opinion pollster Ibope has ranked the military alongside firefighters and the federal police as among Brazil’s more trustworthy institutions.

In 2018, the armed forces had a rating of 62 per cent, compared with 13 per cent for the presidency and 18 per cent for Congress.

That reputation now, however, risks being tarnished by many active and retired officers embracing Mr Bolsonaro in government — especially as the country’s [coronavirus crisis](#) deepens.

“They are doing politics through fear,” says Eduardo Costa Pinto, a specialist in military studies at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. “This is the problem of having a government filled with military personnel during an institutional crisis. The military will fight tooth and nail to stay in power. And they have guns, which makes political mediation difficult.”

‘Armed forces being used for political purposes’

Mr Bolsonaro’s own military career was characterised by controversy. He spent 15 days in a military jail for insubordination after criticising his superior officers in an interview with *Veja* magazine 1986. The same magazine accused him a year later of planning a bombing campaign of military units — an allegation that Brazil’s supreme military court ultimately said was unfounded.



Soldiers on the sidelines of an anti-Bolsonaro rally in Rio de Janeiro. ‘We see [the president] as a saviour. An icon. He is the man,’ a young soldier told the FT © Mauro Pimentel/AFP/Getty

Ernesto Geisel, the general who presided over Brazil’s dictatorship from 1974 to 1979, once described Mr Bolsonaro as a “bad military man”.

At the rank of captain, Mr Bolsonaro left the army in 1988 and in 1991 he began a political career as a backbench lawmaker in Rio de Janeiro, where he focused single-mindedly on protecting the interests of the armed forces and the state-level military police.

When he ran for the presidency in 2018, he was backed by hundreds of thousands of soldiers and police, who shared his conservative values and applauded his outspoken attitude on everything from race to sexuality.

“We see him as a saviour. An icon. He is the man,” says a 20-year-old soldier, who also spoke on condition of anonymity. “We practically all support him. I would say 95 per cent of us,” says a corporal.

When he was elected, the president rewarded this support by stacking his government with military figures, notably recently retired generals — a move that immediately triggered fears about the resurgence of the military in civil and political life.

“With Bolsonaro the efforts to assert civil prominence over the military have been paralysed. It shows the great fragility of Brazilian democracy,” says Carlos Fico, a professor of military studies at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

The comments are echoed by Alcides da Costa Vaz, director of the Brazilian association for Defence Studies, who says the military had become a pillar of support for the president, but this had cast a “shadow of uncertainty over their political designs”.



Military police disperse anti-Bolsonaro protesters in Rio de Janeiro. Critics are concerned about what the military would do if the president chose to ignore a court ruling © Bruna Prado/Getty

For some observers, the situation has echoes of socialist Venezuela. Since a 2002 coup attempt that briefly ousted the late Hugo Chávez, himself a parachutist, the country’s government has been stacked with loyal generals in an attempt to create what President Nicolás Maduro, a civilian, calls a “civic-military union”. Analysts say the military assures social control for the benighted Maduro regime, in return for preferential access to goods and hard currency.

The escalating concerns in Brazil have prompted a judicial inquiry, with the federal audit court now investigating the “excessive presence of the military in civil public service.”

“I consider it important that society knows exactly how many military, active and inactive, currently occupy civilian positions given the risks this can represent and the differences between military and civilian regimes,” Bruno Dantas, the presiding judge, said in June.

The fears surrounding the influence of the military have been compounded by the silence of the current leadership. Many of the active top brass are believed not to share the same enthusiasm for Mr Bolsonaro as younger officers, but they have said little in the face of the president’s excesses.

“In the higher ranks, there are officers who see the military as a defence force and who do not welcome this incursion into politics. But it is those military leaders who now need to dispel fears,” says Mr da Costa Vaz.

With little communication forthcoming from the military leadership, attention is instead focused on the attitudes adopted by retired generals now serving in Mr Bolsonaro’s cabinet, including Augusto Heleno, the national security adviser, who in May appeared to threaten judicial authorities when he warned of “unpredictable consequences for the nation” as a result of efforts to investigate the Brazilian leader for corruption.

Mr Jungmann, the former defence minister, said: “The problem is that you have many ministers who are also retired generals, so the tendency is to understand what they say as the speech of the military institution.”

“But that is not the case. The armed forces are being used for political purposes.”



Brazilian army tanks arrive at Guanabara Palace in Rio de Janeiro during the military putsch of 1964 © Humberto Castelo Branco/AFP/Getty

Prof Pinto points out that some of the generals joined Mr Bolsonaro's administration because they thought they could moderate their former underling and unite the country, which was split sharply along left-right allegiances.

"Bolsonaro was nicknamed 'the horse' because everyone thought they could ride him wherever they wanted — they thought they could control him," he said. "It is now obvious these generals are subservient to the president."

'Abject dictatorship'

Throughout his career Mr Bolsonaro never hid his admiration for Brazil's military dictatorship. During the congressional vote to impeach former president Dilma Rousseff, he dedicated his ballot to one of the regime's most notorious torturers.

"Who says whether a country will see democracy or not are the armed forces," he once told the Financial Times.

His rhetoric, however, began turning into action in recent months when he joined rallies calling for a military intervention to close the supreme court and Congress. Some of his supporters adopted paramilitary uniforms. Mr Bolsonaro himself arrived at one rally on horseback, a clear nod to the *caudillo* — strongman — tradition in Latin American history.

Tensions escalated to the point where Celso de Mello, a supreme court justice, warned that Brazil was in a position akin to Weimar Germany and the president was turning the country into an "abject dictatorship".

In Brazil, those close to the armed forces vehemently defend the political impartiality of the military.

"I am absolutely convinced that today there is no possibility of military intervention. The commitment of the military today is with the democratic process," says Nelson Jobim, a former minister of defence under the leftwing governments of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Ms Rousseff.



Soldiers in Brasília walk past as Jair Bolsonaro talks on the phone, soon after the president announced he had tested positive for coronavirus © Andre Borges/Getty

The comments were echoed by three active duty soldiers.

Civilian analysts point out that the military should have responded forcefully when Mr Bolsonaro claimed the armed forces would not accept “absurd orders” from the court. But ultimately, many believe the military would not support such a move.

“If Bolsonaro ignored a decision from the supreme court, his government would lose legitimacy and it would mean the end of the rule of law. The impact on Brazil’s institutions would be devastating,” says Hussein Kalout, secretary for strategic affairs during the Temer administration.

“Some military personnel may like it, but their position is irrelevant. The armed forces as an institution would not endorse it.”

The comments were echoed by an army general, who says the president constantly pushes the limits, but is yet to break them.

“The political history of President Bolsonaro has been one of permanent tension,” he says. “But the armed forces will follow the law, as they have been doing for a long time.”

Additional reporting by Carolina Pulice and Emily Costa