

# The Perfect Covid-19 Storm in Brazil

Eduardo José Grin  
Fundação Getúlio Vargas  
eduardojose01@gmail.com

The analysis focuses on the multifaceted impact of the coronavirus pandemic in Brazil. Besides its health and socioeconomic consequences, the pandemic has also accelerated and deepened other crises evolving for a long time, explicitly concerning intergovernmental relations and public policy management. One of the arguments is that the actions of the current government to deal with Covid-19 are detrimental to the cooperative type of federalism that is in place in Brazil in the last thirty years.

**Keywords:** Brazil, coronavirus, federalism, intergovernmental relations

A análise examina o impacto multifacetado da pandemia de coronavírus no Brasil. Além de suas conseqüências sanitárias e socioeconômicas, a pandemia também acelerou e aprofundou outras crises que veem evoluindo por um longo tempo no país, explicitamente quanto às relações intergovernamentais e a gestão de políticas públicas. Um dos argumentos é que as ações do atual governo para lidar com a COVID-19 são prejudiciais ao tipo de federalismo cooperativo que existe no Brasil nos últimos 30 anos.

**Palavras-chave:** Brasil, coronavírus, federalismo, relações intergovernamentais

The pandemic hits Brazil at a juncture in which several crises that have been ongoing for a long time now converge: political-institutional, public policy management, economic and social. However, Covid-19 exposed and intensified the effects underway in other dimensions on a much larger scale, and it is essential to comment on its connections and impacts in the country. Facing the pandemic, given its multiple effects, is a wicked problem (Peters 2017). Still, the country's current government is far from retaining the capacity and political will to deal with the complexity that the issue deserves.

The political and institutional dilemma is related to the challenges to democratic normality that have been increasing in recent years, especially after the election of Bolsonaro in 2018. The Covid-19 virus served as a backdrop to encourage authoritarian measures by the current government, such as the issuing of provisional measures, reducing the government's legal responsibility to respond to requests for information. Yet, the most recent initiatives have been promptly rejected by the Judiciary.

Among them was an attempt to change the Access to Information Law concerning the ban on the “Brazil cannot stop” campaign. Also rejected was the request to extend the validity of provisional measures in the face of crisis caused by Covid-19. The decree of the State of Emergency has been closely monitored by the National Congress (Grin 2020).

The pandemic only accelerated and deepened the challenges, as the president decided to confront or minimize the role of horizontal control of political institutions such as the Supreme Federal Court and the National Congress, as well as vertical control based on the constitutional autonomy of states and municipalities (Abrucio et al. 2020). The current government is based on a view of politics in which opponents are enemies (Schmitt 1991) instead of political antagonists, which supports an imperial view of governmental conduct. “I am the Constitution” summarizes this stance of political power.

The battle with the pandemic exposed this authoritarian project of power. The president has suffered defeats in the Supreme Court when it recognized that states and municipalities have constitutional competence to decide about social isolation. More recently, another judicial decision forced the government to resume the release of accumulated data on the pandemic. In the National Congress, the government also suffered defeats in the model of financial aid to states and municipalities and the monetary value and rules of the emergency aid for the informal and unemployed population.

In the vertical area, the president understands that he has the power to define actions unilaterally. Covid-19 is a complex intergovernmental problem (Paquet and Schertzer 2020). Thus, what was expected from the central sphere was the capacity for federative coordination. Yet the choice has been a confrontation with subnational entities. Conflicts and intergovernmental incoordination have been two elements that strongly reduce the effectiveness of actions against Covid-19.

Brazil is facing the new coronavirus through two conflicting conceptions of federalism. On the one hand, there is a cooperative model (Agranoff 2007), built thirty years ago starting with the 1988 Constitution. On the other hand, there is a new model proposed by Bolsonaro: “More Brazil and Less Brasilia.” It is similar to the dualist view (Loughlin, Kincaid, and Sweden 2013) defended by Trump. It aims to reduce the Federal Government's action supporting public policies. The Federal Covid-19 Crisis Committee, without state and municipal representation, illustrates this conception of radicalized dualistic federalism with centralized command. At the same time, governors' reaction to sustain their initiatives and defend SUS (the universal health care system) is positive for federalism (Abrucio et al. 2020).

In public policy management, the State is no longer an open space for social participation and becomes a producer of centralized commands. The disarticulation of government action in the fight against Covid-19 in education, social assistance, and health shows the consequences of this conception, which believes it is possible to govern centrally and disregard society and the federation. Denying the logic of politics and public policies makes the country walk many democratic steps backward and

takes a heavy toll on reconstruction. The most evident example in this direction is the dismantling that has been carried out at the Ministry of Health in full combat against Covid-19.

The peak of this process occurred with the Ministry of Health accused states of lying about the deaths from the pandemic and failing to inform about the number of victims and of those infected with the previous periodicity, which throws into suspicion the entire cooperative model of SUS (Franzese 2010). The denial of politics as a way of mediating interests, as well as of actors constituted for this mission through political parties and the congress, delegitimizes democracy. Public policies are also victims of this exclusive view because, since 1988, forums for dialogue between government and society have been established (Grin and Andrade 2020).

Besides, all cooperative logic that guided intergovernmental coordination, through arenas of dialogue and federative negotiation between the Union, states, and municipalities, has been disarticulated and disallowed as an interlocutor with technical and political legitimacy. This deconstruction process had been underway since 2019, but the fight against the pandemic uncovered and accelerated this dualist, centralized, and exclusive view of the federal government. The institutional construction effort of the Brazilian federation to consolidate forums for intergovernmental cooperation is being severely weakened.

Similar criticisms can be made for other strategic areas of the welfare state. Concerning education, the National High School Exam is not being formulated in conjunction with the Council of State Secretaries of Education. Regarding social assistance, the implementation of emergency measures to serve the most vulnerable population did not consider public facilities in the municipalities. The most likely effect of the dualistic federalism of Bolsonaro government, as Covid-19 has shown, will be the weakening of the cooperative model.

In the economic field, the arrival of the pandemic exacerbated the country's weakness, as the virus arrived at a moment of a fragile recovery and with a contingent of around 12 million unemployed people, besides the underemployed population. The inability to generate new jobs, associated with the escalation of the political and institutional crisis, was exacerbated by the pandemic. Its effects on the economy will be profound and should generate a shrinkage of more than 5% this year, according to a study by Economic Commission for Latin American (2020). Political instability and pandemic will be a combination with intense effects on the economy, so the country is likely to face the worst economic recession in its history.

Recovery will be slow, as the decline in economic activity and the resumption of employment will be slow. The pandemic did not create the economic crisis, but given its weakness, Covid-19 arrived unexpectedly and augmented the seriousness of the problem. Since 2014, the informal labor market has grown, but even that possibility has not reached the poorest. The pandemic will worsen this situation, and extreme poverty is expected to increase.

The social crisis was already deep in Brazil and had been intensifying since 2015, with the expansion of unemployment and the growth of poverty being two indicators that callously exemplify this reality. For millions, the economic crisis with its slow recovery has left the poorest 40% even

worse off than before Covid-19. Almost a third of the population (66.3 million people) lives in families where more than half of the income comes from unprotected sources of work (Muñoz 2020).

The most dramatic social effect of Covid-19 in the short term will be the disproportionate increase in the number of infected and dead within the most vulnerable population. At the most immediate level, the main ones affected by the deaths caused by the pandemic are poor and black people living on the outskirts of large cities. After the health crisis, its most pronounced effect will be the intensification of social inequality and income concentration, since the most disadvantaged sectors will be those with more significant difficulties in economic reintegration, apart from educational, family, and health consequences.

Covid-19 did not create the problems the country is facing since 2015, and that has become more acute in the Bolsonaro government. However, the perfect storm has formed in this juncture. The health crisis outcome is still not entirely predictable, although the country is moving quickly to increase its deaths that are at levels like those of the United States. However, the pandemic highlighted the country's political, social, and economic dramas. The horizon still shows only many clouds, and there is no sign of optimism.

---

---

**Eduardo José Grin** is professor and researcher at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, São Paulo, Brazil. He holds a PhD in public administration and government (Getulio Vargas Foundation). He has carried out research projects supported by UNESCO, the British Embassy in Brazil, the Global Initiative for Fiscal Transparency, and the Latin American Development Center for Administration. His areas of interest are local governments, intermunicipal cooperation, federalism and intergovernmental relations, and state capacity.

---

---

## References

Abrucio, Fernando Luiz et al.

2020 “Combate à Covid-19 sob o federalismo *bolsonarista*: um caso de descoordenação intergovernamental”. *Revista de Administração Pública* (article in submission).

Agranoff, Robert

2007 “Intergovernmental Policy Management: Cooperative Practices in Federal Systems.” In *The Dynamics of Federalism in National and Supranational Political Systems*, edited by Michael A. Pagano and Robert Leonardi, 248–284. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Economic Commission for Latin America

2020 “Pandemia de COVID-19 levará à maior contração da atividade econômica na história da região: cairá -5,3% em 2020.” Available on: <https://www.cepal.org/pt-br/comunicados/pandemia-covid-19-levara-maior-contracao-atividade-economica-historia-regiao-caira-53>. Access: 13 Jun. 2020.

Franzese, Cibele

2010 *Federalismo cooperativo no Brasil: da Constituição de 1988 à constituição dos sistemas de políticas públicas*. São Paulo: EAESP.

Grin, Eduardo José

2020 “COVID-19 também puede infectar y matar la democracia.” *Diálogo Político*. Available on: <https://dialogopolitico.org/agenda/covid-19-tambien-puede-infectar-y-matar-la-democracia/>. Access: 13 Jun. 2020.

Grin, Eduardo José, and Lilian Furquim Andrade

2020 “A Constituição sou eu, e daí?” *Jornal O Nexo*. Available on: <https://www.nexojournal.com.br/ensaio/2020/A-Constituicao-sou-eu-Bolsonaro-e-o-presidencialismo-imperial>. Access: 21 Jun. 2020.

Loughlin, John, John Kincaid, and Wilfried Sweden

2013 *Handbook of Regionalism & Federalism*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Muñoz, Rafael

2020 “Novos números mostram por que é crucial proteger os mais pobres na crise da COVID-19.” Available on: <https://nacoesunidas.org/artigo-novos-numeros-mostram-por-que-e-crucial-protoger-os-mais-pobres-na-crise-da-covid-19/>. Access: 15 Jun. 2020.

Paquet, Mireille, and Robert Schertzer

2020 “COVID-19 as a Complex Intergovernmental Problem.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 14 April: 1–5. doi: [10.1017/S0008423920000281](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423920000281)

Peters, Brainard Guy

2017 “What Is So Wicked about Wicked Problems? A Conceptual Analysis and a Research Program.” *Policy and Society* 36 (3): 385–96.

Schmitt, Carl

1991 *El concepto de lo político*. Madrid: Alianza Universid