

Brazil's populist pandemic

by GWYNNE DYER

What do you do if you are in charge of dealing with the pandemic and the number of deaths is getting out of control?

Simple. Stop publishing the number.

Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has been having a bad time with the pandemic. His default mode has been callous disinterest: when told in early May that the country's Covid-19 death toll had reached 5,000, he said 'So what? I'm sorry. What do you want me to do?'

So on Sunday, with Brazil's death toll about to pass 40,000 and become second only to that of the United States, Bolsonaro stopped his government from publishing the total any more.

From now on, only today's number of infections, deaths and recoveries will be announced. No more awkward comparisons with other countries, no five-digit running total to confront him with his failure each day. And of course no attempt to establish the real number of deaths, which is almost certainly at least twice the official number since many victims never got to hospitals.

There is a temptation to group the three populist leaders of big Western democracies together, and they do have a lot in common. Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson removed a similarly damning piece of data from the daily press conference when the UK's death toll per million overtook that of every other major European country. (It is now second-worst in the entire world.)

America's Donald Trump, Bolsonaro's idol, spent just as much time in the early months of this year belittling the gravity of the threat (Bolsonaro: 'It's only a little flu?'; Trump: 'It's going to disappear. One day it's like a miracle, it will disappear.') None of the three men will wear a mask, and they are all compulsive serial liars.

Nevertheless, there are major differences. Johnson manages to sound as if he cares about all the lives lost, and Trump at least goes through the motions occasionally. Johnson eventually declared a lock-down, although much too late, and Trump at least went along for a while with the lock-downs declared by almost all of the states.

Bolsonaro, by contrast, openly condemned the lock-downs declared by the various Brazilian states and ostentatiously disobeyed them. He held rallies and took crowd baths. He swiped his nose on the back of his hand and then shook hands with a fragile old lady. He showed up at a barbecue on a jetski.

He has fired two successive health ministers since January because they were taking the pandemic too seriously and hindering Brazilians' return to work. He joined a street protest calling for a return to the military dictatorship that finally fell in 1985. He regularly vilifies the poor, the left, indigenous Brazilians, gays and non-whites.

And he is currently presiding over a pandemic that will probably kill over 100,000 Brazilians without lifting a finger to stop it.

Yet in late 2018 he won the presidential election in the first round with 55% of the vote, and his character was hardly a secret even before the election. A recent poll showed that his popularity is now down to 32%, so Brazilians have noticed that something is wrong with him, but it still verges on the inexplicable. Or does it?

The electorate that voted for Bolsonaro in 2018 was little changed from the one that gave Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva, the absolute antithesis of Bolsonaro, two terms in the presidency immediately before him. Just as the American electorate that put Trump in office in 2016 was little changed from the one that elected Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012.

They didn't suddenly go blind when confronted with a candidate as fraudulent as Trump or Bolsonaro. They deliberately overlooked his flaws because he offered them something they needed. It was probably something economical or psychological, and not specific to any single country because the mood struck British and Brazilians and Americans at the same time. (And Hungarians and Turks and Filipinos and Indians too.)

What this tells us ? and I'm sorry to be the bearer of this news ? is that if that same something is still bothering the voters when the next election rolls around next November in the U.S., or in Brazil in 2022, or in the UK in 2024, the same person can win again, no matter how badly he misbehaves in the meantime.