

The club of virus deniers

Sreeram Chaulia

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Leaders who kept the economy open are having to tackle both a severe health and an economic crisis

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who has managed the pandemic in the most disastrous manner, [has tested positive for COVID-19](#). In Brazil, COVID-19 has affected more than 18,60,600 people and claimed more than 72,000 lives.

Mr. Bolsonaro's ostrich-like behaviour towards the unprecedented public health crisis has defied logic. His dismissal of the virus as "a little flu", bragging that people like him who have had an athletic past "have nothing to worry about", refusal to wear a mask in public until ordered by the judiciary, promotion of unproven medicinal cures for the virus, unwillingness to impose lockdown restrictions, active encouragement of mass rallies, and firing of the Health Minister (whose replacement resigned a month into the job) are all astonishingly cavalier actions. They show that the Brazilian President inhabits a parallel world.

A hall of infamy

However, he is not alone. There is a hall of infamy of like-minded world leaders who have deliberately denied or downplayed the dangers posed by the virus. Their callousness is leading to a large number of cases and deaths in their respective countries. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson wasted valuable months when the virus was spreading like wildfire and shied away from preventive social distancing measures. He cheerfully insisted on shaking hands in public, [then got infected himself](#), and oversaw a health disaster that the U.K. has not suffered for generations. U.S. President Donald Trump famously said the virus will just disappear; his country has the highest number of cases and deaths in the world. Vice President Rosario Murillo invited Nicaraguans to participate in a 'Love in times of COVID-19' walk. Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko said that drinking vodka and working in fields with a tractor will "heal everyone". Tanzanian President John Magufuli argued for people to flock to churches as "COVID-19 cannot survive in the body of Jesus". Turkmenistan's Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow urged that the use of the word 'coronavirus' be censored. These are all heads of government who have more or less replicated the Bolsonaro and Johnson models and plunged their societies into deep tragedy.

Although the above listing of leaders has a mix of far-right and far-left populists, their common threat is the politics of extremism. They share comparable traits of mistrusting expert knowledge, stoking suspicion about formal institutions, stirring up their social base of hardcore, die-hard loyalists, cultivating a cult of personality around themselves, and maintaining a self-image as the sole guardians of the interests of the ordinary masses.

Primacy of the economy

An oft-observed tendency among the virus-denying leaders is the belief in the primacy of the economy as the be-all and end-all of life which should never get disrupted by “psychosis” about human health or environmental protection. These politicians are short-sighted enough to buy into the false dichotomy between livelihoods and lives, and prioritise the right of the working classes and businesses to work over the right of every citizen to receive healthcare and survive.

In an abstract sense, the economy or markets shape society and politics, according to these leaders. But as the virus tears into their countries, it is painfully proving the fallacy of their overly materialistic and inhumane world view.

The U.S., Brazil and the U.K., to name a few, have been saddled with the proverbial worst of both worlds — mass casualties from the virus and economic depressions not seen in a century. The club of deniers chased narrow, short-term goals of keeping the economy open and ended up with the double whammy of high cases and deaths and no GDP growth to flaunt.

Given how obstinate politicians like Mr. Bolsonaro are, they may never learn from their critical mistakes until booted out of power. History will judge them harshly.

Sreeram Chaulia is Dean of the Jindal School of International Affairs