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SOS Brazil: democracy under attack

In early 2021, I wrote a Correspondence about science under attack in Brazil¹ after being prosecuted and threatened for expressing my scientific disagreement with Brazil's monumental failure to respond to COVID-19.² Despite the fact that all charges against me are now filed, the censorship movement is far from over. One and a half years later, the situation has not got any better. Instead, Brazil is standing on the edge looking into the abyss, with its democracy at stake.

In early June, 2022, a British journalist and a Brazilian Indigenous expert were reported missing in the Amazon rainforest, after the Indigenous expert's organisation reported being threatened for its fight against illegal mining and fishing in the Amazon.³ The attacks against the Amazon rainforest and Indigenous people are not new. In 2019, the Director of the National Spatial Research Institute, Ricardo Galvão, was exonerated after presenting and commenting on data on deforestation.⁴ In mid-2020, results from the EPICOV-19 survey showing a high risk of COVID-19 among Indigenous people⁵ were censored in a Ministry of Health press conference.⁶

As of June 13, 2022, Brazil's cumulative COVID-19 mortality was 3122 deaths per million people, compared with a world average of 801 deaths per million people. This 3.9-fold difference illustrates the fact that Brazil is the country with the highest cumulative COVID-19 mortality out of the ten most populous countries in the world. Brazil also has the highest COVID-19 mortality among all BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China).

Two events occurred during a presidential visit to the USA in June, 2022, that are important to help understand the magnitude of the risk

faced by Brazilian people. First, it was released that President Bolsonaro asked US President Joe Biden for help in his re-election run.⁷ Second, a Brazilian fugitive was one of the stars of an event with the presidential entourage in Florida—many fans posted selfies with the fugitive.

Most Brazilians are hoping for change, as the country is expected to face presidential elections later this year. However, the 2022 elections are subject to many risks. Since the 2018 election, President Bolsonaro has questioned the security of the very electronic voting system that elected him. Recently, the military has joined the President in questioning the security of Brazil's elections.⁸ The last time the military was this involved with elections in Brazil was to keep them from happening from 1967 to 1989.

Not even the polls are free to be released. Recently, the release of the results of a poll that supposedly show former President Lula ahead of current President Bolsonaro has been cancelled after external pressure.⁹ Furthermore, it was announced that the formerly weekly poll will now be made monthly.

More than ever, the Brazilian people should learn from the words of Martin Niemöller (1892–1984), a prominent Lutheran pastor in Germany. "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

Brazil's democracy is under attack. The Brazilian people and people around the world must react while there is still time.

I declare no competing interests.

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For more about Niemöller see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Niemöller



Perilous two-tier COVID-19 global vaccine roll-out

"The essence of global health equity is the idea that something so precious as health might be viewed as a right."¹ This beautiful sentiment, a legacy of the inspirational Paul Farmer, powerfully accentuates the evocative Comment published online in the week of his death.² Arguing persuasively for the waiver of intellectual property rights for

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COVID-19 vaccines, the authors' philosophy resonates with the WHO Values Framework for the Allocation and Prioritization of COVID-19 Vaccines' vision that "COVID-19 vaccines must be a global public good".³ Tragically, COVAX, the revolutionary mechanism for equitably supplying COVID-19 vaccines to everyone, has fallen well short of this ideal. High-income countries (HICs) have failed to adequately contribute financially and thus guarantee universal vaccine access, and in an attempt to encourage greater HIC participation, double-standard vaccination targets (20% for low-income and middle-income countries [LMICs] and 50% for HICs) were introduced in the COVAX self-financing mechanism.⁴

Wealthy countries have hoarded vaccine doses through bilateral deals with multiple manufacturers. This vaccine nationalism resulted in perverse wastage of expired vaccines, and by January, 2022, less than 10% of LMIC populations had received a single dose of any COVID-19 vaccine.⁵

This two-tier global vaccine roll-out probably delivered the omicron variant, and the resulting HIC booster roll-out further aggravated the coverage disparity with LMICs.

For all countries' sakes, HICs' donations remain essential to accelerate LMIC vaccine access, while intellectual property disputes continue. With further immune-escape variants an inevitable consequence of selfishness, global solidarity and equity must eclipse national interest.

I declare no competing interests.

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Tobacco company funding and conflict of interest

In his declaration of interests, Derek Yach stated "From September, 2017, to October, 2021, I was President and CEO of the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, a non-profit entity funded by Philip Morris International."¹ We would add that Philip Morris International (PMI) is the foundation's sole funder.²

We were concerned that the publication of this Correspondence¹ would provide legitimacy to the views of someone strongly aligned with the tobacco industry. Our concern was heightened because the conflict of interest appears to be reflected in the content of the Correspondence.

For example, the Correspondence refers to "alternative nicotine delivery devices, such as e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products" in relation to their possible role in the UK's leadership in reducing smoking prevalence. This characterisation of vaping products and heated tobacco products (HTPs) as being equivalents within the same family of products is a narrative that PMI, which dominates the market in HTPs, is strongly advocating. This characterisation also implies that HTPs have made an important contribution to recent declines in smoking prevalence in the UK.

However, we note that use of HTPs in the general population³ and among smokers⁴ in the UK is very low, and hence these products are very unlikely to have made any

substantial contribution to changes in smoking prevalence in the UK. In addition, HTPs, unlike e-cigarettes, have not been shown to be effective smoking cessation aids in randomised controlled trials.⁵ Finally, although the evidence is not definitive, it is probable that HTPs will be more harmful to long-term users than e-cigarettes.⁶

The publication of this Correspondence led us to question what *The Lancet's* policy is on appraising and publishing Correspondence and research papers from authors and researchers who display a conflict of interest with the tobacco industry. If there is no such policy, we suggest that the journal should consider introducing one, given the tobacco industry's history of subverting science and public health policy relating to tobacco products. If there is such a policy, we suggest the journal should reappraise whether it is adequate, and whether it is being implemented effectively in light of the publication of the Correspondence from Derek Yach.

We declare no competing interests.

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