



São Paulo and Brussels, 10 June 2020

Dear High Representative Borrell,

We are writing to express our deepest concern in light of the current situation in Brazil, in particular with regard to the systematic attacks carried out by President Jair Bolsonaro against democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. Our organisations – Conectas, Justiça Global, FIDH, and MNDH – are alarmed by the President's statements and actions, which have already had serious ramifications for the Brazilian people and are leading the country into an unprecedented political and health crisis.

Since 26 February, when the first covid-19 case in the country was confirmed and according to official data, there have been more than half a million confirmed covid-19 cases in Brazil; while over thirty thousand people have died. Many fear that these numbers are grossly underestimated by the government and the country of Brazil has been identified by specialists as a new epicentre of the pandemic.

The authorities' response to the pandemic has fuelled political chaos. The President has repeatedly minimised the gravity of the situation, calling covid-19 a "little flu", encouraging the population to disobey lockdown measures put in place by local authorities. Two health ministers successively resigned. The position remains vacant at the time we are drafting the present letter.

Amidst this health crisis and throughout these past few months, President Bolsonaro has been both fuelling and surfing on and a wave of popular anxiety, to organise his greater stronghold over the pillars of democracy such as the judiciary and independent media, and we fear that he may use the COVID-19 crisis to engage in significant long-term human rights setbacks.

He has repeatedly encouraged his supporters to take part in demonstrations spreading anti-democratic messages which led to large rallies protesting against the pillars of Brazilian democracy. They are calling for a military coup, and for the shutdown of the Federal Supreme Court and of the National Congress.

President Bolsonaro's aggressive rhetoric attacking and undermining the press has also emboldened many of his supporters to target journalists both online and offline. Violent physical attacks have been reported, yet go uncondemned by the President, leading several top news organisations to stop reporting from outside the presidential residence as a sign of protest. Racist ideology is also present at pro-Bolsonaro rallies, with demonstrators displaying symbols referencing white supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan as well as Nazi and fascist regimes.

These calls occur in a context where almost half of the ministers and 3,000 ministry staff members are from the military. Other high-ranking government officials have also made declarations against democracy and the rule of law. The education minister called for the arrest of the Brazilian

Supreme Court justices, an appalling measure which did not elicit any reaction from President Bolsonaro. Other members of the government, many of whom come from the military sector, have made similar attempts to intimidate the judiciary and legislative powers. This is a cause for grave concern, in particular considering Brazil's past military dictatorship. The risks of a *coup d'état* have rarely been so high.

In parallel to the political crisis incited by President Bolsonaro and his government's actions, the current public health situation is also extremely concerning as federal authorities have been incapable of leading an appropriate nationwide response to the coronavirus pandemic. The government's deliberate bypassing of scientific evidence and medical recommendations has resulted in tens of thousands of casualties and has disproportionately affected poor, black, indigenous and quilombola populations. As we write, Brazil is recording a rate of over 1,000 deaths per 24-hour period. While experts fear the peak of the pandemic has not yet been reached, Bolsonaro vetoed last week the use of an emergency relief fund destined to support affected communities. The government has also attempted to hide cumulative data from the pandemic and delayed the release of data on new cases and casualties. Last Sunday, authorities purged the government's website of historical data, before they republished it following a Supreme Court order. Since yesterday, the government has attempted to improve its response to the crisis – but the changes have been only been superficial.

This deeply worrying situation has been met with silence by the European Union. It is essential that the international community unequivocally condemn the attacks against democracy and rule of law perpetrated by the government, as well as its failure to appropriately respond to the spread of the pandemic in the country.

The EU's founding treaties establish strengthening and supporting democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law as one of the Union's primary foreign policy objectives. We therefore urge you to:

- **Publicly state your grave concern** over the situation in Brazil, in particular the recent attacks perpetrated by the Brazilian government against democracy and the rule of law, most notably the independence of the judiciary.
- Use **all diplomatic channels** to urge Brazilian federal authorities to **immediately cease making declarations undermining the rule of law**, in particular through calls for a military coup and attacks against the independence of the judiciary; **to stop encouraging violence against independent media**; as well as to stop using racist rhetoric to incite hate and violence.

We remain available for further information and look forward to receiving your response.

Yours sincerely,

Conectas

Justiça Global

Movimento Nacional de Direitos Humanos – MNDH

International Federation for Human Rights – FIDH