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FEATURED Q&A

Is Argentina Making Progress in Fighting the Covid Pandemic?



Argentine President Alberto Fernández, who tested positive for Covid-19 this month despite receiving Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, is facing an escalating number of infections in the South American country. // File Photo: Argentine Government.

Q The Argentine government recently adjusted its Covid-19 strategy to focus more on bolstering the economy, which contracted around 10 percent last year. The strategy will seek to use data to establish short-term and localized restrictions, as well as accelerate vaccine rollout and maintain control over the country's borders. The decision comes as a second wave of infections threatens to hit Argentina, but opposition groups have slammed the proposed restrictions, citing the government's failure to establish an official health policy. How well has the Argentine government managed the pandemic over the past year, and does the latest strategy strike the right balance between spurring economic recovery and fighting the pandemic? Why exactly has the opposition criticized the government's plans, and how can the administration of President Alberto Fernández improve its pandemic response? With midterm elections scheduled for October, to what extent are political considerations influencing Fernández's strategy shift?

A Adrián Nador, deputy chief of mission at the Embassy of Argentina in the United States: "There has been no shift in the government's strategy; the new preventive measures that President Fernández announced on April 8 are the government's timely response to a second wave of Covid-19 infections that has just started in Argentina. The new measures are similar to other measures taken in neighboring countries and in some European countries to stop the accelerated spread of the disease. Some leaders of the opposition have stated their resistance to what they consider

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

U.S. VP Traveling 'Soon' to Mexico, Guatemala

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris is planning a trip to Mexico and Guatemala "soon" as part of her role leading the Biden administration's efforts to stem surging migration to the United States from Central America.

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ECONOMIC

Lower House of Mexico's Congress Passes Fuels Bill

Mexico's Chamber of Deputies approved a controversial bill that would give the state greater control of the country's fuels market.

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POLITICAL

Brazil's Supreme Court Allows Probe of Response to Pandemic

Brazil's Supreme Court upheld an order by one of its justices to allow a Senate investigation of President Jair Bolsonaro's response to the Covid-19 pandemic to proceed.

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Bolsonaro // File Photo: Brazilian Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Brazil's Supreme Court Allows Probe of Covid-19 Response

Brazil's Supreme Court on Wednesday allowed a Senate probe of President Jair Bolsonaro's response to the Covid-19 pandemic to proceed, the Associated Press reported. In a vote of 10-1, the court upheld an order by Justice Luís Roberto Barroso for the Senate to launch its investigation of Bolsonaro's management of the pandemic. The required number of senators had sponsored the probe, the justice ruled. The Senate's president had attempted to delay the investigation, citing safety concerns amid the pandemic. Bolsonaro's critics say the president has mismanaged the health crisis, accusing him of failing to secure vaccines and pointing out that he has resisted lockdowns and promoted unproven remedies for the disease. Bolsonaro and his allies say he is being unfairly blamed for Brazil's surge in Covid-19 cases and deaths. The country's single-day death rate has hovered at record-high levels of around 4,000 in recent days. "Since the beginning of the pandemic, President Jair Bolsonaro has been leading a relentless effort to protect both the lives and jobs of Brazilians," Brazil's ambassador to the United States, Nestor Forster Jr., told the Advisor in a [Q&A](#) published March 26. "We have already begun producing the vaccine domestically, and the first shipment from the Covax facility Initiative has been received." Brazil has recorded more than 13.6 million cases of Covid-19 and more than 361,000 deaths related to it since the pandemic began more than a year ago, according to a count by Johns Hopkins University.

U.S. VP Harris to Travel 'Soon' to Mexico, Guatemala

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris is planning a trip to Mexico and Guatemala "soon," as part of

her role leading the administration's efforts to handle surging migration from Central America to the United States, Harris said Wednesday, Politico reported. "Our focus is to deal with the root causes, and I'm looking forward to traveling ... to the Northern Triangle—stopping in Mexico and then Guatemala sometime soon," she said during a virtual roundtable of experts on the so-called Northern Triangle nations, which include Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. Harris said she would go "as soon as possible." It would be her first foreign trip as vice president, and it appears that the visit would not include a stop at the U.S.-Mexico border, NBC News reported. U.S. President Joe Biden last month tasked Harris with heading the administration's efforts to address an influx in migration from Northern Triangle countries. The announcement comes amid mounting criticism from the Republican Party regarding the situation at the border. "It has been 3 weeks since President Biden appointed VP Harris to oversee the border. Since then, the crisis has only continued to spiral out of control," House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) wrote on Twitter on Wednesday. "The VP has not traveled to the border, held a press conference, or offered ANY plan to mitigate the ongoing crisis." The administration's special envoy to the Northern Triangle, Ricardo Zúñiga, visited Guatemala and El Salvador last week. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the March 12 issue of the Advisor.]

ECONOMIC NEWS

Lower House of Mexico's Congress Passes Fuels Bill

Mexico's lower house of Congress on Wednesday passed a controversial bill submitted by the government to boost the state's role in the country's fuel market, another move toward President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's goal of reinstating the state's monopoly in the energy sector, Bloomberg News reported. The chamber approved the proposal, which gives

NEWS BRIEFS

Argentina Tightens Restrictions as Cases Surge in Buenos Aires

The Argentine government has tightened restrictions in Buenos Aires, among them shuttering schools and imposing a curfew starting at 8 p.m., as Covid-19 cases surge in the capital city, Reuters reported Wednesday. President Alberto Fernández said the country needed to "gain time" in fighting the spread of the novel coronavirus. "The virus is attacking us and is far from giving in," he said in a televised address. Daily cases hit a new record this week, according to the report.

Economist Who Coined 'Washington Consensus' Dies at 83

John Williamson, the economist who coined the term "Washington Consensus" to describe policies that sought to spur struggling economies in Latin America and elsewhere, died Sunday at age 83, The Washington Post reported Wednesday. The Washington Consensus was controversial from its beginnings "because this suggested that there were some people sitting in Washington deciding what Latin America needed to do," Williamson said in 2006. Williamson said imposing policy on the region was not his intention.

IHS Holding Acquires Centennial's Operations in Brazil, Colombia

Telecommunications tower firm IHS Holding announced in a statement Tuesday that it has acquired Centennial Towers' Brazilian and Colombian operations, adding 602 towers in Brazil and 217 towers in Colombia. The announcement came shortly after IHS Towers bought Skysites in Brazil and Cell Site Solutions as parts of its efforts to expand in Latin American telecom markets, the statement said.

state oil company Pemex greater control over the fuels market, with 292 votes in favor, 153 opposed and 11 abstentions. The bill will go to the Senate after debate on certain articles in the lower house. López Obrador's Morena party has a majority in both chambers of Congress. If approved, as expected, the legislation would reform Mexico's hydrocarbon law and give a greater role to state entities in the distribution, import and marketing of fuel. It would also allow for the suspension of permits based on national or energy security, and Pemex would be able to take control of facilities whose permits have been suspended, Bloomberg News reported. The law would partially roll back the 2013 energy reforms that opened up the sector to foreign and private investment.

Jamaica Sees 39% Rise in Remittances for January

Jamaica's level of remittance inflows rose to \$224.4 million in January, a 39 percent rise as compared to the same month last year, the country's central bank said Wednesday, Loop Jamaica reported Wednesday. The country's rate of growth exceeded those of Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador, which saw increases of 27.3 percent, 8.7 percent and 6.6 percent year-on-year in January. The United States was Jamaica's largest source of remittances, or 69.8 percent of the total in January, according to the Bank of Jamaica. That was an increase from 65.2 percent in January of last year. Britain, Canada and the Cayman Islands contributed 11.9 percent, 8.9 percent and 5.6 percent of Jamaica's remittance inflows in January, the central bank added. Last month, Fitch Ratings said it expected Jamaica's economy to see 4.5 percent growth this year. The ratings agency said on March 18 that it sees "risks to the downside stemming from uncertainty around the vaccine rollout and a possible third wave of the virus." Fitch added that it expects accelerated economic growth of 5.2 percent next year "assuming that the tourism industry will have a better 2021-2022 winter season than the one that is just ending."

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'excessive or poorly calibrated restrictive measures,' without offering much detail on what is wrong and/or any set of alternative measures to address the health crisis. President Fernández explained in a message to the public recorded on April 8 that he cares for the life and health of Argentines above any other objective or policy goal. In the same vein, President Fernández has said that if the political price for taking unpopular measures, such as restrictions on social gatherings that are necessary to flatten the curve and reverse the current trend, is losing the midterm election this year, he would pay such a price without hesitation and do what is right to preserve the health and lives of the Argentine people."

A **Laura Gómez-Mera, associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Miami:** "Argentina offers a depressing cautionary tale, warning of the high human and economic costs of incompetence, populism and corruption. The Fernández administration was initially praised for its fast and assertive response to the pandemic. While helping to prevent a total collapse of the health care system, the longest and perhaps strictest lockdown in the world failed to significantly flatten the curve of infections. It also had devastating economic effects, as the recently announced poverty level—42 percent for the second half of 2020—shows. The Argentine government will probably pay a political price for the new restrictions in response to the second wave of infections. This would be well deserved given the mishandling and politicization of most aspects of its vaccination strategy. Argentina lags behind Chile and Uruguay in terms of doses administered per 100 people (12 versus 64 and 30, respectively). Scarcity in vaccine availability raises questions about why the Fernández administration rapidly secured deals with Russia and China but not with Pfizer. However, a much more serious and unfortunate problem was the VIP vacci-

nation scandal, which led to the resignation of the minister of health in February. As many friends and relatives of politicians cut the line to get their shots (and took pictures

“**Argentina offers a depressing cautionary tale, warning of the high human and economic costs of incompetence, populism and corruption.**”

— Laura Gómez-Mera

to document it) earlier in the year, tens of thousands of unvaccinated elderly and high-risk Argentines continue to get infected every day. Many of them will die because, as Transparency International's 2020 report highlighted, 'corruption can kill people.' ”

A **Megan Cook, manager of the Political & Regulatory Risks/Strategic Affairs Practice at Cefeidas Group:** "The Fernández administration's management of the pandemic is a mixed picture. The strict lockdown implemented in March 2020 stretched on and exacerbated the country's multiyear recession, with GDP shrinking 9.9 percent last year and poverty hitting 42 percent, despite emergency relief programs. However, the government was able to strengthen the health system and avoid collapse as well as begin a vaccination campaign that, despite challenges and scandals, has reached 10 percent of the population—behind leading countries, but on par with peers such as Brazil and Mexico and ahead of much of the region. It is clear that a new wave with more contagious strains is underway, but there is little political or economic margin for a full-scale lockdown, and the new measures are limited (a nighttime curfew and restrictions on social gatherings and public transport have been implemented in

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high-contagion areas, but most business and in-person classes continue). Political and electoral concerns are certainly at play. Argentina's early pandemic response was characterized by coordination across party lines, but the opposition—particularly more hardline elements without governing responsibilities—has become increasingly critical of the government's response as overly restrictive (or authoritarian) and insensitive to the economy. For its part, the government is counting on an economic recovery, which is showing some signs of materializing, to strengthen its position for the elections. Nevertheless, opinions are divided both within the government and opposition about how to balance economic and political versus public health concerns, and measures implemented represent compromises between viewpoints. In any case, the Fernández administration cannot afford a collapse of the health system, and despite opposition criticism, public opinion polls show majority support for additional restrictions, which may be forthcoming if case numbers and ICU occupation rates continue to rise."

A **Jonatan Konfino, professor in Public Health at Universidad Nacional Arturo Jauretche and current secretary of health in the Municipality of Quilmes:** "To face the pandemic, several strategies have been implemented in Argentina since March 2020. First, there was a need to strengthen the national (and subnational) health systems that were weakened during the previous administration, for example, through the elimination of the National Health Ministry and the consequent loss of governance over the system. The government established a lockdown by the end of March 2020 to decrease the risk of contagion and soften an increase in the number of cases to buy time to bolster medical infrastructure in the country. From March to July 2020, Argentina increased the

number of critical-care beds by 37 percent, and new hospitals were opened, particularly in the province of Buenos Aires. Community health organizations were also strengthened to deal with prevention, active search, early detection and case management. These

“These actions contributed to improve preparedness to face the pandemic with relatively good results.”

— Jonatan Konfino

actions contributed to improve preparedness to face the pandemic with relatively good results. No individual lacked access to oxygen or a critical-care bed, and there was no difference in the impact of Covid-19 among socioeconomic groups, stressing the importance of facing this pandemic through an equity lens and a social justice perspective. The current second wave, with a sharp increase in the number of Covid-19 cases, motivated an accurate presidential decision to set new restrictions in order to decrease contagion, with two main objectives: let the health system manage the number of new cases and continue accelerating the vaccine rollout, particularly among the elderly. Opposition parties are raising criticism with some irresponsibility, haranguing disobedience to their followers or hesitancy surrounding vaccination that could end in more cases and deaths. They should not politicize the pandemic and instead contribute constructively to improve, if necessary, any aspects of the strategy, as solving this global crisis requires solidarity, empathy and the collaboration of everyone."

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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