

Brazil's Bolsonaro rejects Chinese vaccine against COVID-19

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Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro listens during a presentation at the Planalto Presidential Palace in Brasilia, Brazil, Monday, Oct. 19, 2020. The Brazilian government announced the results of clinical tests with use of the drug Nitazoxanide for COVID-19 treatment. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)

Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro rejected on Wednesday the announced purchase of 46 million doses of a potential vaccine against COVID-19 being developed by a Chinese company and tested in the state governed by his political rival, prompting concern he was allowing politics to steer public health decisions.

"The Brazilian people will not be anyone's guinea pig," Bolsonaro said on his social media channels, adding that the shot is yet to complete testing—which is true of all potential vaccines. "My decision is to not purchase such a vaccine."

Brazil's health minister Eduardo Pazuello had announced the purchase on Tuesday in a meeting with Sao Paulo's Gov. João Doria, a foe of Bolsonaro's whose state is participating in the vaccine's development through its Butantan Institute. The cost of the acquisition was estimated

at 2 billion reais (\$360 million).

"Butantan's vaccine will be Brazil's vaccine," Pazuello said.

Shortly after his social media postings, Bolsonaro accused his adversaries, including Doria, of "promoting a narrative of terrorism since the start of the pandemic."

"It is regrettable, that governor only knows how to do this," the Brazilian president said after a visit to Navy facilities in the Sao Paulo state countryside. "It seems it is his last card as he seeks popularity, recovering all he lost in the pandemic. Many decisions by Mr. Joao Doria do not match those I would have liked to take if courts had not stopped me."

A Brazilian health ministry document issued on Monday and shared by Sao Paulo's government Wednesday confirmed that the ministry had put in writing its intention to buy the doses of the "Butantan Vaccine-Sinovac/Covid-19" for an estimated price of \$10.30 each.

The document made explicit that purchase was contingent upon the health regulator's approval. Bolsonaro told journalists that protocol will be canceled.

The Brazilian president's move on Wednesday has little to do with stopping the virus, said Claudio Couto, a political science professor at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a university. Rather, it is firstly a means to avoid handing a win to Doria, who is widely cited as a likely challenger to his 2022 reelection.

"His concern is to be a strong candidate for reelection, and that often means giving trouble to his adversaries," Couto said.

Bolsonaro and Doria have had an adversarial

relationship since the start of the pandemic, with each taking opposite stances regarding stay-at-home recommendations and restrictions on activity. The governor of Brazil's most populous state heeded the counsel of public health experts and adopted such measures, which the president blasted, arguing the economic fallout could kill more than the disease.

Brazil has confirmed more than 153,000 deaths from COVID-19, the second most in the world, behind only the U.S. The South American nation has also reported 5.2 million cases of the disease, the world's third highest tally.

Doria told reporters in capital Brasilia, where he was set to meet with the Speaker of the Lower House, that this is no time to play politics.

"It isn't ideology, isn't politics, and isn't the electoral process that saves. It is the vaccine," Doria said.

Brazil has a long tradition of immunization programs. The South American country has a struggling, but universal public health care system, which has been key to stopping outbreaks of measles, yellow fever and other diseases.

Bolsonaro has said no one will be forced to get a COVID-19 vaccine. But today's comments reflect particular skepticism of the shot made by Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinovac.

He has often expressed mistrust for the Asian power, Brazil's biggest trading partner, particularly on the campaign trail in 2018. He called China "heartless" and said that under his watch it wouldn't be allowed to buy up Brazil.

While he softened his rhetoric in office, a cabinet minister and his son, a prominent lawmaker who presides over the lower house's foreign relations committee, stoked separate diplomatic rows with China.

"THE CHINESE VACCINE OF JOÃO DORIA," Bolsonaro wrote on social media on Wednesday. "For my government, any vaccine, before it is made available to the population, must be PROVEN SCIENTIFICALLY."

Notwithstanding concerns about scientific rigor, Bolsonaro for months touted the healing powers of hydroxychloroquine, even as a growing body of studies indicated the anti-malarial was ineffective against the virus and caused harmful side effects. When Bolsonaro recovered from COVID-19 himself, he chalked it up to hydroxychloroquine and brandished a box of the medicine to crowds.

In June, Brazil's government announced a deal with Oxford University and pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca to purchase 100 million doses of its potential coronavirus vaccine.

It has become common practice for governments to purchase doses of promising COVID-19 vaccines, to build a stockpile in case they are proven effective. That investment is usually not refundable if the shot fails.

"We sent resources to Oxford, not only to buy the vaccine, but also to take part in the research and development plus a batch of vaccines for us," Bolsonaro said. The Oxford research is actually funded by the British government. Brazil is one of the countries in the list of buyers, which include the United States and the European Union.

After Bolsonaro's messages, the executive secretary of Brazil's Health Ministry said in a televised statement that there had been a misunderstanding in the announcement about buying the CoronaVac vaccines.

"There is no intention to buy vaccines from China," said Antonio Elcio Franco, who added there will be only "a Brazilian vaccine" made at the Butantan Institute in Sao Paulo. Those shots, however, would still be based upon Sinovac's research.

Lawmaker Bia Kicis, a close ally of Bolsonaro's, published on her social media channels another message that she said came directly from the president.

"I warn that we will not buy a single dose of vaccine from China, and my administration does not maintain any dialogue with João Doria on the matter of COVID-19," the message said.

At least two governors, including Maranhao's Flavio Dino, said they will fight Bolsonaro's administration if it refuses authorization for a shot that works, whatever its provenance.

"We don't want a new war," said Dino, another adversary of the president's. "Governors will go to Congress and to courts to ensure that the population has access to all vaccines that are efficient and safe. Health is a bigger asset than ideological or electoral disputes."

Other politicians have voiced their opposition to Bolsonaro's move, but he did not backtrack.

"I am the president, I do not give my authority away," Bolsonaro said.

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