

Brazilian army sent into streets of Rio amid mounting protests

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Some 9,000 Brazilian troops began to deploy in the streets of Rio de Janeiro Tuesday in the face of mounting protests against austerity and privatizations and the threat of a work stoppage by the Military Police (PM), the force that patrols the country's second-largest city and the state which bears the same name.

On the same day that Brazil's right-wing President Michel Temer announced the deployment, calling the threat of a walkout by the PM an "insurrection against the constitution," workers of Rio's State Water and Sewage Company (CEDAE) staged another mass protest outside the state's Legislative Assembly in opposition to a planned privatization of this essential social service.

Last Thursday, riot police violently repressed a similar demonstration, leaving a number of people severely injured.

The military deployment in Rio follows a similar dispatch of federal troops to its neighboring state to the north, Espiritu Santo, where blockades organized by wives, mothers and other relatives outside PM barracks, demanding higher pay and improved conditions, led to the PM staying off the streets and triggered a sharp rise in homicides and other crimes.

Schools, public transportation and businesses shut down in the course of the protests, particularly in Vitoria, the state's capital. While some 3,000 troops, including armored units and paratroopers, were sent in to restore "law and order," the return of the PM to the streets at the beginning of this week appeared to be the result of an agreement reached between their representatives and the state government.

The PM, an inheritance from the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil for two decades following a CIA-backed coup in 1964, is under military discipline and legally barred from striking. The force is responsible

for killing thousands of Brazilians each year. In 2015, Brazil's police killed at least 3,300 people, roughly three times the number killed by cops in the US.

Off-duty police have participated in protests against the austerity measures, in some cases calling for a return to military dictatorship and forcing workers to take down their banners. There have also been reports of off-duty cops pulling guns on riot police sent to quell their protests.

The deployment of federal troops to Rio was requested by Rio's state governor, Luiz Fernando Pezão, who is a member of the PMDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party), the same party as President Temer. Under the federal intervention, known as a "guarantee of law and order," the troops are to be deployed until February 22, when an evaluation will be made by the government over whether they will be kept occupying Rio for a longer period. The following week is that of Rio's Carnival, which brings visitors from around the world.

The use of the army to carry out policing functions has become increasingly frequent as Brazil continues to face its worst economic crisis in a century, and with the Temer government's approval ratings falling to the abysmal level reached by former Workers Party President Dilma Rousseff before her impeachment on trumped-up charges of budgetary manipulations last August. Some 47,000 troops were deployed in Rio during the summer Olympic Games, and more recently the government sent troops in to quell bloody prison revolts.

In announcing the deployment to Rio, Brazil's Defense Minister Raul Jungmann insisted that, as opposed to the events in Espiritu Santo, there was no loss of "control" in Rio de Janeiro nor any "inability of Rio's organs of state security to maintain law and

order.” He claimed that 95 percent of Rio’s Military Police were operating as normal. Instead, he said, the deployment was of a “preventive” character, designed to “free members of the PM on account of demonstrations.”

Jungmann’s estimate of the percentage of Military Police going out on patrol is no doubt overly optimistic, even though the stoppage has reached nowhere near the level seen in Espiritu Santo. Still, wives and relatives of police have sought to block the entrances to nearly 30 of Rio’s 50 PM barracks, including that of the Shock Battalion used to repress demonstrations. In some cases, the police have resorted to changing shifts outside the barracks and even opening up new entrances to circumvent the pickets.

Police, like the civilian public-sector workforce, have still received neither their January salary nor the so-called 13th salary, a legally mandated year-end bonus that should have been paid out at the end of last year.

The state and federal governments are particularly concerned about mobilizing sufficient repressive force to hold a vote February 20 on the privatization of CEDAE, the state-owned water company. Previous attempts to enact legislation on the sale of the public service have been blocked by protests. A vote had been scheduled for Tuesday, but was postponed for fear that the protests outside the PM barracks could deprive the Rio Legislative Assembly of an adequate security force.

The sale of the state water company is a key piece in the austerity program being championed by Governor Pezão in the face of Rio’s desperate fiscal crisis, which has been deepened by the fall in the price of oil, a commodity that had previously fueled the local economy. The privatization is supposed to secure a loan of 3.5 billion reais (approximately US\$1.1 billion) from the federal government designed to prevent the state’s complete default on debt payments.

Even as the Temer government was deploying army troops to quell opposition to capitalist austerity and privatization, it also moved in a manner unprecedented since the days of military rule to impose censorship on Brazil’s two most prominent daily newspapers—both of which had supported the impeachment of Rousseff that brought Temer to power.

Temer sent a government lawyer to court to obtain an injunction ordering *Folha de S.P.* to withdraw an article it had posted on its website reporting on an attempted

blackmail of the president’s wife, Marcela. The piece described some of the messages sent by the blackmailer, a hacker who had cloned the Brazilian first lady’s iPhone. This included a threat that unless she paid him 300,000 reais, he would make public information that would drag the president’s reputation “through the mud.”

The Rio-based *O Globo* announced Monday that it had been subjected to a similar censorship order secured by the Palácio do Planalto, Brazil’s White House.

This state censorship is particularly onerous in that it is preventing the dissemination of information that was revealed in the public trial of the hacker, who was prosecuted, convicted and sent to prison.

Temer’s actions reflect the extreme crisis of the government he heads and fear of any further public reference to scandals surrounding his administration. The Petrobras bribes-for-contracts corruption scandal that engulfed the entire political establishment could still bring down his own presidency as well. Temer is reportedly still under investigation over testimony by a top executive at the Odebrecht construction conglomerate that he solicited nearly US\$3 million in illegal campaign donations during the 2014 election.

Given the crisis and instability gripping the government, the increasing resort to calling out the army to deal with social unrest carries with it the real threat of laying the foundations for a return to military rule in Latin America’s largest country.



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