

Amid deepening crisis, Temer turns to Brazil's military

Gabriel Lemos
3 June 2017

The brutal police repression unleashed against demonstrators at the May 24 “Occupy Brasília” march, and the “Guarantee of Law and Order” decree that sent 1,500 armed soldiers into the streets of Brazil’s capital, mark a definite bid by the crisis-ridden government of President Michel Temer (PMDB) to find a base of support within the military.

The Temer government’s increasing turn toward the military coincides with its attempt to push through the National Congress labor and pension “reforms” against which the demonstration was initially called. At the same time, since the first demonstrations in March, popular anger against these counter-reforms has been growing, culminating in the April 28 general strike, the largest such action in Brazil since 1989.

The “Occupy Brasília” march brought tens of thousands of demonstrators from all over the country to the Brazilian capital. Temer’s crackdown and his “law and order” decree, however, were aimed not merely at repressing the march itself, but at preparing for social unrest once the regressive labor and pension laws are enacted, scheduled for the coming weeks, and to create a state of siege in Brasília to deal with future major demonstrations.

Initially, the “law and order” decree was set to last until May 31, with the possibility of it being renewed. However, it was revoked one day after being decreed, on May 25, in the face of broad criticism that it was an unnecessary and disproportionate response to what had been a largely peaceful demonstration.

The leading political figure behind the “law and order” decree was General Sérgio Etchegoyen, minister of institutional security. Etchegoyen, together with Defense Minister Raul Jungman, acted as the government’s spokesmen during the “Occupy Brasília” march, announcing the decree after convincing Temer of the need to call out the armed forces, according to the Brazilian daily *Globo*.

Globo also reported that Brazil’s Intelligence Agency (ABIN), controlled by the institutional security minister, was monitoring the march’s organization and, a week before, “had alerted the ministries and the government of the Federal District to the presence of vandals and the possible radicalization of the march.”

Brasília was heavily guarded for the march by 3,000 military policemen and members of the heavily armed, militarized National Security Force. This repressive apparatus had been in preparation since April 27, one day before the general strike, when the vice-minister of institutional security, General Antonio Freire Gomes, and other senior officers joined with representatives of the National Congress and the Brasília government in issuing an Integrated Tactical Protocol for Demonstrations.

The protocol allows for demonstrators to be searched, forbids glass bottles and flagpoles on the *Esplanada dos Ministérios* (Ministries’ Esplanade) area near the National Congress and outlines 110 possible scenarios of how the repressive forces should act in confronting political demonstrations.

Within this repressive framework, the slightest provocative action by the demonstrators could serve as a pretext for calling out the armed forces. As

if by plan, the provocation began with members of the so-called “black bloc” advancing on a police barricade, unleashing police repression and leading to the issuance of the “law and order” decree.

Etchegoyen’s considerable influence in the Temer government has grown even greater since May 17, when the president was plunged into a new crisis. Secretly recorded tapes implicated him in a conspiracy, together with the heads of the Brazilian meatpacking giant JBS, to pay hush money to the jailed former speaker of the lower house of the Brazilian Congress, Eduardo Cunha, a pivotal figure in the massive bribes and kickbacks scandal surrounding the state-run energy conglomerate Petrobras.

According to the UOL web site, “Since the beginning of the political crisis unleashed by the plea bargain negotiations of the JBS executives, President Temer has been meeting almost daily with the minister of defense, Raul Jungman, Sérgio Etchegoyen and even with the armed forces commanders.”

A right-wing general of the army, Etchegoyen is a member of a century-old military dynasty. His father was charged by Brazil’s Truth Commission with carrying out murders and torture under the US-backed military dictatorship, a charge to which his son reacted furiously, calling for the commission to be disbanded. The outburst represented a direct challenge to civilian control of the military.

He played a leading role in the issuance of previous “law and order” decrees this year, particularly the first one, in which the armed forces were sent to contain a prison rebellion in the northeastern state of Rio Grande do Norte. According to an article published by *Época* magazine, Etchegoyen was the one who convinced Temer to use the “law and order” decree in this situation.

In the beginning of May, Etchegoyen announced a new National Security Plan, saying that Rio de Janeiro, the Brazilian state facing the deepest economic crisis, while confronting growing urban violence, would be the “laboratory” for this plan if the state government failed to halt the rise in crime. With the National Security Force policing Rio de Janeiro since May 15, the daily *Extra* reported that the National Security Plan’s “inspiration is the scheme mounted for the Olympic Games,” in which 22,000 armed troops were sent into the streets of Rio.

The growing influence of the military in Temer’s government represents an intensification of a process that was initiated with the removal of former Workers Party (PT) President Dilma Rousseff by means of impeachment in August of last year.

The Ministry of Institutional Security, which had been disbanded in 2015 by Rousseff, returned under Temer, who appointed Etchegoyen to head it. At the same time, Brazil’s Intelligence Agency (ABIN), placed under civilian control under Rousseff, was returned to the Ministry of Institutional Security under Temer and, with Etchegoyen at the ministry’s head, put back under the control of the military.

In a profile of Etchegoyen published on May 2016, headlined “Ministry of Institutional Security views the MST (Rural Workers Movement) with

concern,” the influential daily *Folha de São Paulo* reported that, under then generals’ control, “Brazil’s Intelligence Agency will make an intense list of left-wing movements in order to avoid surprises for the government like the demonstrations of June 2013.”

One month later, in June 2016, the magazine *Carta Capital*, in an article titled “Military on stage?” denounced Temer’s turn to the armed forces, charging that the then-interim president had “assigned to General Etchegoyen the monitoring of the Workers Party’s movements.” *Folha* then noticed that the Brazilian government “received information from the intelligence services about regular meetings between former PT president Lula da Silva and Guilherme Boulos, from the Homeless Workers Movement (MTST), besides a list of meetings and demonstrations against interim president Michel Temer.”

One of the most controversial acts of spying on left-wing movements was revealed last September by the Spanish daily *El País* daily and the Ponte web site, when they reported the infiltration of an army captain into a group of demonstrators in São Paulo. In the run-up to a demonstration against Temer’s government, 21 members of the group, including the infiltrated army captain, were arrested on charges of criminal association. The army captain was the only one immediately released.

A judge released the prisoners some days later, ruling that they had been subjected to an “irregular” arrest and comparing their imprisonment to acts committed by the military dictatorship. “We live in a sad time for our democracy,” said Judge Rodrigo Tellini. “Sad is the country whose citizens need to keep their mouths shut.”

At the time, the federal prosecutor, Debora Duprat, said that the monitoring of left-wing movements is illegal. “The Inter-American Court affirmed that social movements cannot be monitored because it is against the right of free association,” she told Ponte.

Last December, the São Paulo Public Attorney charged 18 demonstrators from the group with criminal association and corruption of minors. The evidence presented by the prosecution included a bottle of vinegar—used to combat the affects of tear gas—first aid materials, a metal disc and an iron bar. The prosecutor charged that these last two items “would be used as a shield” and “to hit policemen and damage public buildings,” respectively.

The prosecutor omitted both the army captain’s illegal infiltration of the demonstrators and the demonstrators’ testimony that the iron bar was planted by police officers. Judge Tellini said the “Brazilian democratic state of law cannot legitimize an ‘arrest for investigation,’ under the pretext that the group of demonstrators could, eventually, act violently.”

As for the army captain, the prosecutor shelved the investigation into his illegal infiltration of the group of demonstrators.

Although it has been intensified under Temer, with the monitoring and criminalization of left-wing movements, the PT government of Dilma Rousseff paved the way for such actions. Her government approved the criminal organization law, in 2013, which was used to charge demonstrators in São Paulo, and the antiterrorism law, enacted just before the Rio Olympic Games of 2016.

Just like Temer, Rousseff had invoked the “law and order guarantee” in June 2013 in response to protests in Rio de Janeiro when her government privatized the first *pré-sal* oilfield (underwater deposits off the shores of southeastern Brazil).

Before sanctioning the antiterrorism law, Rousseff vetoed two articles of it, one of them that classified acts of terrorism as including acts to “burn, depredate, loot, destroy or explode means of transport or any public or private good.” Pseudo-left parties, like PSOL and PCdoB, claimed that, as a result of the vetoes, the antiterrorism law did “not apply to political demonstrations ... with the aim of defending constitutional rights, guarantees and freedoms.”

However, according to Martim Sampaio, of the São Paulo Bar Association, the antiterrorism law can still be used against left-wing

movements. In an interview given last year to *Brasileiros* magazine, he said the law’s provisions are “wide” enough to reach well beyond acts of acts of terrorism, which may open the way to include social movements.

Now, with the Temer government, this is what is most likely to happen. In its profile of Etchegoyen, *Folha* cited a speech the general gave in 2015—before the law was enacted—criticizing the government for obstructing its use against the social movements. “It is necessary to take care of social preservation and cohesion and look at those who stray from legitimacy,” he said.

The militaristic right-wing turn of Temer’s government, which tends to place General Etchegoyen increasingly at the forefront of the repressive actions of the government, has been echoed by a shift to the right by the popular fronts *Brasil Popular* (Popular Brasil) and *Povo sem Medo* (People without Fear) composed of the pseudo-left parties, social movements and unions, which are leading the demonstrations against the Temer government.

While the “Occupy Brasilia” march was initially called against Temer’s “reforms,” after the revelation of the corruption scandal involving Temer, the popular fronts shifted the struggle to the demands “Fora, Temer” (Out with Temer) and “Eleições Diretas Já” (Direct Elections Now). This shift left the possibility of another and longer general strike against the reforms even more remote.

Last Sunday, May 28, in Rio de Janeiro, 100,000 demonstrators gathered in Copacabana to listen to music performances, TV actors and representatives of the popular fronts, which included politicians of the PT, PSOL and PCdoB raising the demand of *Diretas Já*.

Pseudo-left leader Guilherme Boulos, of the Homeless Workers Movement (MTST), who attended the rally, declared, “In 1983, there was the first great movement of the *Diretas Já*, which brought down the military dictatorship. On May 28, there is the beginning of a new great national movement.”

This is a gross historical falsification. What brought the Brazilian military dictatorship down was the increasing resistance of the workers movement from the end of the 1970s, which led to the first general strike against the military dictatorship in 1983. The *Diretas Já* movement channeled the growing hostility of the Brazilian youth and working class into an institutional and parliamentary means of preserving bourgeois rule while transferring power from the military dictatorship to a civilian government.

Thirty-four years later, the PT and pseudo-left parties that orbit it are attempting to channel the struggle against Temer’s reforms in the same way, threatening to repeat the earlier process in reverse, suppressing the independent struggle of the working class and opening the way for the military to consolidate its growing power.

The road to Temer’s social counterrevolution and the growing threat of military rule was paved by the Workers Party governments. A successful struggle against them can be waged only on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. The most urgent task in Brazil today is the building of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class, a Brazilian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact