

Brazilian army general tapped to take over law enforcement in Rio de Janeiro

Gabriel Lemos**26 February 2018**

Last Friday, February 16, Brazilian president Michel Temer (MDB) decreed a federal intervention in the law enforcement system of Rio de Janeiro, expected to last until the end of this year. Tapped to lead the intervention is Army General Walter Souza Braga Netto, who has been given absolute powers over the state's civil (investigations) and military (patrolling) police forces and prison system, empowered to overrule any decisions by elected officials, including the governor and mayors, and even to change law enforcement agencies' internal regulations.

Gen. Braga Netto is the commander of the Eastern military division in Brazil, which includes Rio, and was responsible for the military operations in Rio de Janeiro during the Summer Olympics in 2016. With the military intervention, Rio de Janeiro's law enforcement secretary, Roberto Sá, resigned on the same day. It is the first time since the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution that such an ostensibly legal federal intervention has been triggered and the first time since the end of the Brazilian military dictatorship in 1985 that an Army General has assumed a civil position.

The immediate pretext for the military intervention was a combination of armed conflicts between the drug trafficking factions and the police and the wave of robberies and assaults on tourists and residents of the city of Rio de Janeiro during the world-famous Carnival, a period in which the city receives more than 1 million tourists and street parties are estimated to attract 6 million.

Moreover, *Folha de São Paulo* estimated on February 17 that violent crime in Rio was back at the level that existed before the high-profile military and police operations that followed the victory of the city's bid to host the 2016 games back in 2008. This is largely due to the deepening of the economic crisis in Brazil and in Rio de Janeiro in particular, the first state to both decree financial collapse in 2016 and to adhere to a federal recovery plan in 2017. The number of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants increased from 29 in 2012 to 40 in 2017.

The number of conflicts between drug traffic gangs and

the police and between each other has also increased since the deepening of the economic crisis in the state. In January of this year, the Cidade de Deus and Rocinha *favelas* [shanty towns] had 41 and 32 armed conflicts between the police and the drug traffic, respectively, closing schools, blocking streets and leading to deaths of drug "soldiers", as well as local residents struck by stray bullets.

The fact is, however, that Carnival violence was 35 percent lower than was reported in 2016. Nonetheless, partly in an attempt to change the subject from some of the most politicized parades since the 1980s, the corporate media, particularly *Rede Globo*, the largest media group in Brazil, sought to whip up public fear over the violence in Rio de Janeiro, which they covered extensively.

While Rio's Carnival contest vice-champions, Paraíso do Tuiuti, made harsh criticism of Temer's government, comparing the reforms to the legalization of slave labor, and featuring as one of its main parade components an actor dressed as Dracula wearing Brazil's presidential sash, depicting Temer as a "neoliberal vampire", Globo worked to create an atmosphere of hysteria that was used to justify the military intervention, without any concern for the mortal threat to democratic rights it represents.

Gang violence in Rio is being used as a pretext for an increasing presence of the military in Brazilian political life, in anticipation of a massive reemergence of class struggle. Operations are effectively following the strategy laid out by far-right Army Gen. Hemilton Mourão in a September address to far-right supporters last September, according to which the presence of the military should increase through "successive approximations." The address was marked by the chilling warning that "if the judiciary does not remove individuals involved in corruption from public life, we will have to impose it", an explicit reference to the charges of corruption against Temer rejected by the national congress last year.

Gen. Mourão's words prepared the way for an article in Brazil's oldest daily, *Estado de São Paulo*, by reserve Gen. Luiz Eduardo Rocha Paiva last October, in which he openly

defended a military intervention, “even without legal basis, in case the deepening of the moral, social, economic and political crises result in the breakdown of the federal powers.”

The intervention is, accordingly, only the latest step in a protracted process. Last May, 1,000 troops from the Workers Party-created Gendarmerie (Força Nacional de Segurança) and the Federal Highway Corps were sent to the state as part of a new national security plan, in which Rio de Janeiro designated as its “laboratory”.

Then in July of last year, the federal government issued a “Guaranty of Law and Order” decree, which allowed Rio de Janeiro to be policed by 8,500 Army and Navy troops deployed along with armored cars and tanks.

Last September, 1,000 Army and Navy troops and 10 tanks blocked the main accesses to Rocinha, laying siege to the *favela* as the state police went in looking for drug trafficking leaders. Army troops were seen with their faces covered by skull-painted masks along with the Army’s Police Corps, the trademark repressive force of the country’s last military dictatorship (1964-1985).

The next step taken by Temer’s government was revealed on Monday, February 19, by defense minister Raul Jungmann, who said that the military operations in Rio de Janeiro will require the issuance of collective search and seizure warrants—a pseudo-legal cover for arbitrary mass detentions and house-to-house searches. This measure, along with a law issued last October that gives exclusive power to military courts to judge crimes committed by members of the military against civilians during emergency operations, amount to a “carte blanche” for wholesale military repression.

The corporate media, for its part, is asking for more: a day after the intervention was unveiled, Merval Pereira, one of *Globo*’s most prominent pundits, approvingly quoted comparisons made by army officials between the situation in Rio and that which the Brazilian Army faced in Haiti, where it led a United Nation Peace Mission for 13 years, committing or covering up widespread, colonial-style abuse against the local population.

Workers must have clear understanding that, under the pretext of fighting gang violence, nothing less than a path to dictatorship is being opened up. House Speaker Rodrigo Maia has withdrawn the government’s most important project, the arch-reactionary “Pension Reform” from consideration for a vote by the federal legislature because it is understood that a constitutional amendment cannot be voted on under conditions of a suspension of civil rights. It is inevitable to ask: with the intervention set to last at least until December, what about an even more important vote, the October general elections? Are they going to be canceled

as well?

As with the “Russian interference” in the United States, the “terror threat” in France, and “immigrant violence” in Germany—and the “MeToo” hysteria more broadly—unsubstantiated allegations regarding “gang influence” will be increasingly used to condition public opinion to the drive toward dictatorship.

Since September 2016 during the mayoral elections, the Electoral Court’s then-president and Supreme Court Justice Gilmar Mendes has made “gang influence” a central issue in the 2018 elections. On January 11, BBC’s Brazilian edition ran an interview with former Drug Control Secretary Walter Maierovitch, highlighting his claim that “PCC [Brazil’s largest gang], finances churches and may influence elections,” quoting similar claims by Temer’s Intelligence chief, the far-right General Sérgio Westphalen Etchegoyen. Once more such declarations beg the question: what would stop mass warrantless searches from massively targeting political opposition?

Against such a backdrop, the attitude of the Workers Party (PT) and its pseudo-left satellites is nothing less than politically criminal. The intervention and the subsequent cancellation of the Pension Reform vote in the Lower House of Congress presented the opportunity to demobilize whatever passed for “preparation” by the union apparatus for a supposed “day of struggle” set for February 19.

Accordingly, the first reaction of the PT’s mouthpiece *CartaCapital* was to highlight “technical” issues—such as arguments that “The army is not prepared to deal with urban crime”—and to counsel caution by the government with pieces like the one titled, “Intervention causes ‘discomfort’ among police ranks, says former commander-general”.

The pseudo-left, for its part, treats the intervention as “inefficient” and “populist”, in the lowest bourgeois political terms, even to the right of the bourgeois pundits.

In a typical pro-repression statement on January 17, the PSOL (Socialism and Liberty Party, a parliamentary split-off from the PT in which both Pabloite and Morenoite tendencies are active) blamed “the federal government, which fails in its constitutional duty to patrol the borders”, and called for “more integration between security agencies”, “investment in technical police (partnering with universities)” and, “the fulfillment by the federal government of its obligations in curbing the international drugs and arms traffic.”



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