

Bolivia's Morales and Brazil's Bolsonaro collaborate in rendition of Cesare Battisti to Italy

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The arrest of the former Italian leftist Cesare Battisti on the streets of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, and his summary expulsion to Italy, where he faces life in prison, has been celebrated by Italy's far-right government and its strongman interior minister, Matteo Salvini, as well as by the Brazilian government of Jair Bolsonaro, the fascistic former army captain who became president this month.

The arrival of the Italian air force plane carrying Battisti at Rome's Ciampino military airport Monday morning was turned into a grotesque spectacle of revenge and reaction. Salvini turned out for the affair dressed in a police jacket, posing as if he had personally captured the 64-year-old fugitive. He brayed that now the "communist assassin will rot in jail." Accompanying Salvini was Italy's justice minister, Alfonso Bonafede.

Salvini followed up this squalid spectacle with a televised interview in which he vowed to hunt down all the "red assassins" and demanded that French President Emmanuel Macron "return to Italy the fugitives that should not be drinking champagne under the Eiffel tower, but should be rotting in jail in Italy." According to the Italian daily *Repubblica*, there are nine Italian former leftist fugitives living in France.

Bolsonaro also celebrated, sharing a congratulatory phone conversation with Salvini. He then held a meeting at the Palacio do Planalto with the Bolivian ambassador to Brazil and participated in a gala luncheon with various ministers and members of the military to which the Bolivian and Italian ambassadors were invited.

The Brazilian president's son had previously sent a message to the right-wing Italian interior minister promising him that his "little present" was on the way.

The language echoes that used by the former US-backed military dictatorships that, with the aid of the CIA, launched Plan Condor, a conspiracy to collaborate in the hunting down, rendition and murder of thousands of left-wing opponents.

The treatment of Battisti was entirely in keeping with the methods utilized during that bloody period in Latin America's history.

A former member of the short-lived autonomist organization *Proletari Armati per il Comunismo* (Armed Proletarians for Communism, PAC), which advocated armed acts as a means of promoting the "self-organization" of the working class, he was arrested in 1979 and convicted two years later of belonging to an armed group and concealing a weapon. As a youth, Battisti had been arrested for a number of petty criminal offenses before, at the age of 18, joining the armed group during Italy's so-called *Anni di piombo* (Years of Lead) in the 1970s and early 1980s. This was a convulsive decade that saw killings and kidnappings by armed groups like the Red Brigades, along with far bloodier terrorist bombings by neo-fascists, as well as police state repression and threats of a fascist-military coup.

Escaping from prison in 1981, Battisti was sentenced in absentia to life in prison by a court of appeals in connection with four murders, two of which he was accused of committing, and two of being an accomplice. The conviction was carried out based on so-called "special laws" adopted by the Italian state for the alleged purpose of combatting terrorism.

Battisti, who has maintained his innocence, was convicted on the basis of his interrogation, which included a brutal form of waterboarding, as well the testimony of mentally unstable witnesses and others providing testimony in return for lighter sentences, along with forged documents and ballistics evidence that appeared to exonerate him.

One does not have to embrace the retrograde guerrillaist politics of Battisti's youth nor to pronounce definitively on his guilt or innocence to recognize that his arrest and transfer to Italy represented a gross violation of international law and his basic democratic rights.

Battisti had twice been granted political asylum because of the recognition that he would not be treated justly by the

Italian government. The first instance was in France, where he lived for 14 years thanks to the so-called “Mitterrand Doctrine” established under French President François Mitterrand, barring the extradition to Italy of those convicted of violent acts under Italy’s “special laws” so long as they had renounced violence. The practice was terminated under the right-wing government of French President Jacques Chirac, which signaled its intention to extradite Battisti in 2002.

He then traveled to Brazil, where he was arrested in 2007, spending four years in jail before Workers Party President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, on his last day in office at the end of 2010, moved to rescind an extradition order and set him free.

The renewed attempt to extradite Battisti from Brazil began under Michel Temer, the vice-president of PT President Dilma Rousseff, who assumed the presidency after her impeachment. The election last October of the fascistic Bolsonaro sealed his fate as far as Brazil was concerned.

On December 14, Battisti crossed the border into Bolivia and applied for political asylum, presenting Bolivian officials with four folders of documents on his case.

He had heard nothing in relation to his application when on Saturday he was surrounded by Bolivian police along with Italian police working as agents of INTERPOL in Santa Cruz.

After he was safely aboard the Italian air force jet, the Bolivian government of President Evo Morales claimed that it had rejected Battisti’s plea for asylum last month. If so, this was a decision taken in total secrecy, with Bolivia’s National Commission for Refugees never bothering to inform him or the public, much less provide a hearing of his case.

Morales has remained silent about the extra-judicial rendition of Battisti to Italy, but his minister of government, Carlos Romero, defended the action, claiming the fact that Battisti had entered Bolivia illegally required his “obligatory departure from Bolivia.” This is the same doctrine that the Trump administration has attempted to impose in the US to deny Central American refugees the right to apply for asylum, a claim that has been overruled by the US judiciary.

The reality is that Battisti’s life and freedom have been traded by the Morales government as part of a filthy deal with the far-right regime of Bolsonaro in Brazil and the fascistic Salvini in Italy. Morales attended Bolsonaro’s inauguration on January 1, and it is likely that Battisti’s fate was sealed there as part of talks to guarantee relations between Bolivia and Brazil, including the 23 million cubic meters of gas per day that Bolivia sells to its far larger neighbor to the north.

The Bolivian president, who has secured the support of the

country’s courts in overriding a popular referendum and the country’s constitution in order to run for a fourth consecutive term as president, apparently had no difficulty in riding roughshod over international laws regarding the right to asylum and the treatment of refugees.

The Bolivian government’s actions are in line with the sharp turn to the right by what remains of the governments of Latin America’s so-called “Pink Tide” and their pseudo-left satellites, which, under the combined pressure of global finance capital from above and an increasingly restive working class from below, are repudiating the defense of even the most basic democratic rights.

Bolivia’s rendition of Battisti follows the measures taken by the Ecuadorian government of President Lenin Moreno to impose punishing conditions upon WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who sought refuge in Ecuador’s London embassy, and to prepare the way to handing him over to US prosecutors.

While Bolivian police played the leading role in the arrest of Battisti, the Morales government has been treated as a bit player in the operation, with Salvini promoting his semi-fascist ally Bolsonaro as the main partner in this extra-judicial operation.

For his part, Bolsonaro had sought to have Battisti returned to Brazil so that he could be subjected to another “perp walk” on Brazilian television before being flown off to Italy. Italian authorities, however, feared that this would provide him access to his Brazilian attorneys and invoke a requirement under Brazilian law that his life sentence be reduced to 30 years in prison, which, given his age, likely entails an effective life sentence in any case.

The Battisti rendition has far broader international significance. It is emblematic of a sinister shift in world politics, in which flagrant violations of international law and human rights by authoritarian regimes are becoming more and more common and accepted in Latin America, Europe and beyond. It recalls the conditions that existed in the darkest days of the 1930s, when the Brazilian regime of Getulio Vargas deported the German-Brazilian Communist Party member Olga Benário Prestes to be gassed to death in a Nazi concentration camp.



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