

Brazilian Workers Party uses crime wave to back fascistic Bolsonaro on repression and austerity

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A wave of attacks on public infrastructure in Ceará, one of the poorest states in Brazil's Northeast, has provided an opportunity for the self-styled "anti-fascist" opposition in the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT)—which runs Ceará's state government—to collaborate with Brazil's fascistic new president, Jair Bolsonaro.

The government has so far reported 235 attacks in 50 municipalities, mostly directed at police and mass transit, including the metro of the state capital, Fortaleza, but also extending to schools, garbage collection and energy transmission infrastructure.

The crime wave was reportedly initiated by a "tactical agreement" between the state's largest drug trafficking gangs as a response to the nomination of a new head for the state's prison system. Already entering its fourth week, it is only the latest episode in the protracted and tragic crisis of the country's overcrowded and abusive prison system, true dungeons of a system of social apartheid in one of the world's most unequal societies. Hundreds of inmates have been killed in numerous riots, many by the most horrific methods.

Brazilian prisons are filled to no less than 100 percent overcapacity. Forty percent of the 700,000 inmates—the world's third largest prison population—have not even been sentenced, while fully 20 percent of those sentenced are in jail for simple theft and are eligible for alternative sentences judges never bother to apply.

The situation is even worse in Ceará, where overcrowding stands at 300 percent, and an even more staggering two-thirds of inmates have not been sentenced. Even so, the PT state governor announced at the end of 2018 he would nominate Luís Mauro Albuquerque Araújo, the former head of the prison system in neighboring Rio Grande do Norte state, for the same position in Ceará.

Araújo has been held responsible for institutionalizing state-sponsored torture in Rio Grande do Norte's prisons in a 2018 report by the Justice Ministry's Torture Prevention Committee. The panel compared his administration to that of the US-run Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq with regular humiliation of naked inmates, beatings, isolation and deprivation of family visits.

The dismal conditions of prisons are widely considered by experts as the single most influential factor in gang recruitment, since belonging to a gang is considered by inmates the best means of avoiding abuses ranging from theft of personal belongings to rape. "Christened" inmates are from then on required to obey the gangs after they are released, under the threat of torture and execution of family members by their own "chiefs."

At the beginning of the crime wave, Governor Camilo Santana asked the Justice Ministry for the deployment of the National Guard, which was swiftly implemented amid reports of an increase in police abuse beginning to flood the state's Human Rights Council. Reports vary from house-to-house searches and fabricated evidence to a doubling down of inmate abuse, with guards unleashing dogs on naked inmates. In perhaps the most serious abuse, security agents have been forcing suspects to declare belonging to gangs in widely shared whatsapp videos, a procedure considered by experts to be a death sentence, allowing for rival factions to come after the suspect on the streets or in prison.

The most lasting impact of the crime wave, however, is the Workers Party's embrace of Bolsonaro's proposal to extend the country's anti-terrorism law to include "burning buses" and "damaging public buildings." The move was formalized in a meeting between Santana and Bolsonaro's right-wing justice minister, Sérgio Moro, on January 17 in which Santana asked for the federal government's support. This followed an interview with Santana on CBN radio January 11, in which he suggested that "state autonomy" should be wider in defining terrorism—a matter currently in the hands of the federal government.

A longstanding demand of Brazil's far-right, such an extension of the definition of terrorism is directed at the criminalization and repression of social opposition. It would vastly widen the reach of a draconian law approved under PT President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 using the pretext of the 2016 summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.

The 2016 anti-terror law characterizes as terrorism "sabotage with the goal of provoking social or generalized terror."

Defended by the PT as a “democratic” law that drew a distinction between actions carried out for the purpose of pressing demands and those aimed at “provoking generalized terror.” However, it left it to the security forces to determine which was which.

The right-wing shift in Brazilian politics beginning under the PT, with the 2013 mass anti-austerity and anti-World Cup protests against Rousseff, has already seen 23 demonstrators sentenced to an average of seven years imprisonment for “qualified damage” and “resistance,” based on 2013 and 2014 laws that pre-date the anti-terror legislation.

Other PT governors have also since early 2018 aped Bolsonaro’s far-right, repressive agenda, making “security issues” a central tenet of their electoral campaigns. Some of them have even discussed issues of controlling protest and surveillance with the Israeli ambassador to Brazil. Repressive “partnerships” with Israeli law enforcement and security companies are one of the central issues in Bolsonaro’s far-right rants. The PT’s Piauí state governor, Wellington Dias, is currently in Israel to discuss such issues, after his counterpart in the state of Bahia, PT Governor Rui Costa, did his own right-wing “pilgrimage” to Israel after reelection, in November 2018.

Meanwhile, some 20 congressmen from Bolsonaro’s Social Liberal Party (PSL) returned from a recent trip to China, paid for by the Chinese government, in which they were presented with a system of facial recognition to be installed in Rio de Janeiro’s streets and mass transit system, allegedly to fight crime. The trip was offered by the Chinese government as a “goodwill” gesture to deflect the anti-Chinese demagoguery that characterized Bolsonaro’s election campaign.

For its part, Justice Minister Sérgio Moro left Ceará to meet his Argentine counterpart in Brasília to sign a new treaty expediting extraditions between the two countries, in order to avoid “what happened to Cesare Battisti,” who was subjected to a rendition operation with which the Bolivian, Italian and Brazilian governments illegally cooperated. As Moro considers that existing rights to challenge extradition were an obstacle to Battisti’s rendition, the new treaty can only mean Brazil and Argentina will work to legalize such methods.

Most importantly, the collaboration on “security issues” has been a central argument for meetings between PT governors and Bolsonaro’s candidate for speaker of the House, Rodrigo Maia, of the Democrats party (DEM), who is seeking reelection. The support for Maia, who was first elected as speaker in 2016 with crucial PT votes, has been posed by the PT and its allies as a defense of Congress’s “independence.”

After Maia left a meeting with PT congressmen and the Piauí governor Dias, the PT-aligned *Brasil247* celebrated with a headline: “Maia defends pact with the PT and displeases Bolsonaro clan.” The meeting happened after the PT’s president, congressional representative Gleisi Hoffmann, feigned indignation over Bolsonaro’s support for Maia, saying that the party would not support him if Bolsonaro’s PSL did.

Maia will nonetheless have the official support of the Democratic Labor Party (PDT), which came in third in the October presidential vote and was courted by the PT with the offer of the vice-presidential position on its slate, and of the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), which actually accepted a similar PT offer, running Manuela D’Ávila for vice president. It is clear that if Maia is reelected, it will be due to PT “defections.” The same must be expected on the crucial votes on the “pensions reform,” which PT governors already have declared “must be discussed” in a November 14 letter to Bolsonaro.

Another PT ally, Renan Calheiros of the Brazilian Democratic Movement party (MDB), who twice presided over the Senate under PT’s rule, is also seeking favor with Bolsonaro in order to be elected for a third term. Calheiros’ son was elected with PT support as governor of Alagoas state, also in the northeastern region. During his campaign, the PT’s presidential candidate Fernando Haddad declared at a rally: “I come here to bring the acknowledgment of Lula for your defense of him and your dignity.” Calheiros, however, saw no obstacle to jumping from Lula’s defense to that of Bolsonaro’s son, senator Flávio Bolsonaro, under pressure to resign over accusations of graft and of collaboration with death squads in his home state of Rio de Janeiro. On January 18, he described the younger Bolsonaro as “a boy with strong opinion and who defends them, who wants to do good.”

Just three weeks into Bolsonaro’s administration, the PT’s claims to offer a “democratic resistance,” let alone an alternative, are being thoroughly exposed. The same is true for all the pseudo-left currents, many of which posture as socialist or even “Trotskyist,” which not only called for a vote for the PT, but which are now covering up the party’s collaboration with Bolsonaro.

These include first and foremost the myriad Pabloite and Morenoite currents operating within the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), the parliamentary split from the PT, but also the PT apologists within the Workers Cause Party (PCO), which claims that the collaboration with Bolsonaro is restricted to the “right wing” of the party, and that its “left” should be defended. Such a “left” includes jailed former president Lula—who hand-picked the right-wing, pro-austerity Fernando Haddad to substitute for him in the elections, Hoffmann, and the union bureaucrats who on December 18 recorded a video sent to Bolsonaro saying they were “sorry” for questioning his legitimacy and also offering to negotiate the “pension reform.”



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