Fifty-five inmates killed in Brazilian prisons

Gabriel Lemos
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Between last Sunday and Monday, 55 inmates were killed in four prisons in Manaus, the capital of the northern Brazilian state of Amazonas. According to the Amazonas government, the murders were caused by a fight between two internal factions of "Família do Norte" (Northern Family), Brazil's third largest criminal organization, which controls the drug traffic in the northern region of the country.

The inmates were strangled or stabbed to death with sharpened toothbrushes, according to the secretary of Penitentiary Administration of Amazonas, Marcus Vinícius de Almeida. Eleven of those killed were "provisional" inmates, that is, they had not been tried or convicted yet of any crime. Forty percent and 65 percent of the inmates in Brazilian and Amazonas' prisons, respectively, are in the same situation.

The first response from fascistic president Jair Bolsonaro's justice minister of the government, the far-right Sergio Moro, who is responsible for Brazil's public security system, was to transfer the leaderships of the factions responsible for the deaths to federal prisons. According to Moro, federal prisons are "based on those American 'super-max'—they are maximum security prisons with individual cells, which they cannot escape from, where there is no rebellion, and no communication of the prisoner with the outside."

Moro has also sent troops of the penitentiary intervention task force to the state of Amazonas. Created in 2017 by the government of President Michel Temer, the penitentiary intervention task force is assigned to "backing state governments in situations of extraordinary crisis in the penitentiary system to control inmates' riots and solve other problems," according to a statement released by the justice ministry.

What led to the creation of the task force were the deaths of 126 inmates in the first 15 days of 2017 in riots that occurred in the three Brazilian states, among them Amazonas, where the riots began. Far from being an isolated and unexpected incident, this week's deaths are part of what has become the norm in the terrible and inhumane Brazilian penitentiary system.

The escalation of this slaughter has been caused by a 300 percent increase in the prison population in the last two decades, especially since the beginning of the "war on drugs" initiated by former Workers Party (PT) president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2006.

The situation has been worsened by the Brazilian economic crisis, which, according to the Justice Ministry, led to a 75 percent cut in the prison system's budget in 2018. Furthermore, with the increase in incarceration rate showing no sign of abating, in both 2015 and 2016, 85 percent of the funds for the building of new prisons had already been slashed.

Brazil has the third largest prison population in the world, with more than 700,000 inmates crammed into facilities designed to accommodate only a little more than 400,000. The inhuman conditions of overcrowding and lack of proper sanitation led to the deaths of 6,380 inmates under state custody between 2014 and 2017.

In 2017, 80 prisoners were beheaded in clashes inside penitentiaries in six Brazilian states.

The precarious Brazilian penitentiary situation particularly affects the state of Amazonas, one of the poorest in the country, with the most crowded prisons. The state penitentiary system has 11,390 prisoners in facilities built for 2,554, and in the Anísio Teixeira complex (CAJ), the prison where this week's massacres began—the same one where the 2017 riots began—there are 929 prisoners in cells meant for 454.

This situation in Amazonas is aggravated by the fact that the CAJ and the other prisons where this week's massacre took place have been privatized since 2014. This for-profit prison operation is essentially criminal in nature. The company that manages the prisons, Umannizzare Prisional Management, receives from the state government of Amazonas 4.7 thousand *reais* per month per inmate, almost twice as much as for inmates in the rest of the country. At the same time, in 2015, out of the 250 employees that were supposed to be working in the CAJ, the company had hired only 153. Umannizzare employees have also filed several labor suits against the company, and a prison guard was killed during one of the riots in the prison.

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The situation of the Brazilian penitentiary system has become even more explosive with the repressive measures of Bolsonaro government, which are being enthusiastically supported by Workers Party (PT) state governors.

Justice Minister Sérgio Moro, the former judge in charge of the federal attorney's office linked to the "Operação Lava Jato" (Car Wash Operation) which indicted former PT president, Lula da Silva for corruption, is an advocate of "law and order" measures that tend to strengthen Brazil's repressive apparatus, even in face of the tragic consequences of such policies over the last two decades.

With utter contempt for workers suffering daily at the hands of the murderous Brazilian security forces, he tweeted a week before the massacre, on May 16: "The solution cannot be impunity for anyone who violates the law, kills, steals private property or diverts public money. It is not possible to be lenient with violent crime, organized crime or corruption. This is the spirit of the anti-crime bill."

Moro was referring to the bill he sent to the Brazilian Congress in early February which amends several points of the Brazilian penal code. One of the most outrageous measures in Moro's bill—which has caused wide revulsion to the point of pressuring the Brazilian Congress to threaten to reject it—alters the definition of legitimate self-defense. The change would allow police officers to walk free if they murder suspects as a result of "fear, surprise or violent emotion." The measure codifies Bolsonaro's campaign promise of a carte blanche for police murders, as "fear" is invariably—from the United States to Brazil, Mexico and Central America—the universal excuse of fascistic officers who shoot even kneeling suspects in back of the head.

In addition, Moro's anti-crime bill increases penalties for those who resist a legal order—a clearly intimidatory measure—and reduces the possibility of alternative sentences and the postponing imprisonment while the case is reviewed by an appeals court.

In a *BBC* report, Moro said, "What has been done in the anti-crime bill is a proposal for a selective hardening. These are measures that enhance investigations, that harden the serving of sentences ... Let's toughen the regime against the kind of crime that really needs hardening."

Significantly, those most enthusiastically embracing Moro's anti-crime bill—which rather than reducing crime will inevitably increase the level of imprisonment in the country—have been the PT's governors in the northeastern state of Bahia, Rui Costa, and of Ceará, Camilo Santana.

Soon after the announcement of Moro's bill, Costa said that "I conceptually declare my support [for the bill]," advocating "toughening legislation to combat high rates of violence." In addition to being an advocate of military police repression in Bahia, Costa is facing a teachers' strike at state universities that began in early April. In a report of the *Bahia News* website of May 29, Costa defended the slashing of the striking teachers' wages, saying that "otherwise it turns into vacation."

Camilo Santana, the governor of Ceará, announced on Wednesday a draconian austerity program in the state, which freezes both hiring and the wages of the state's public sector workers. In early 2019, the state of Ceará went through a crime wave that made Santana one of the Bolsonaro government supporters. After hiring a known promoter of inmate torture, Mauro Albuquerque, to head the state's prison system in early 2019—as a "reward" for his work under another PT governor in the neighboring state of Rio Grande do Norte—he has backed Bolsonaro's proposal to extend the anti-terrorism law, which was approved by former PT President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, to include actions such as "setting fire to buses" and "damaging public buildings."

In February, in an interview for *Exame* magazine, Santana bluntly said that "it is necessary to review the laws of Brazil, which must be tougher," and that this is why he participated in the announcement of the anti-crime bill in Brasilia, which he viewed as "an important step in the fight against crime."

These attitudes of the PT state governors have stripped the party of its mask of alleged opposition to the Bolsonaro government. Their pro-Bolsonaro stance also includes their support for the federal government's reactionary pension "reform". In the same interview with *Exame*, Camilo said, "I have always been in favor of the pension reform ... I have a huge pension deficit that is growing like a snowball. I have taken a number of measures over the past four years, but reform is needed at the national level."

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