

Largest Brazilian media group implicates Bolsonaro in death squad execution of Marielle Franco

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In a remarkable move last Tuesday, *Globo*, Brazil's largest media group, exposed evidence implicating President Jair Bolsonaro in the March, 2018 death-squad assassination of Rio de Janeiro city councillor Marielle Franco.

Franco, a city councillor for the pseudo-left Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), was brutally murdered in a carefully targeted operation. Street cameras picked up a car following her own vehicle from a political meeting in downtown Rio, until she reached a strategically chosen blind spot in the city's closed-circuit surveillance, where forensic evidence found that dozens of rounds had been fired at her seat point-blank. The gunfire also resulted in the death of her driver, Anderson Gomes. One of Franco's aides, seated to her left in the car, was unharmed.

The previously concealed evidence, acknowledged but described as "useless" by Rio's district attorneys in charge of the case, involves the deposition of a doorman of the Vivendas da Barra gated community where Bolsonaro's private Rio home is located. In February, Rio police arrested as the main suspect in Franco's assassination Ronnie Lessa, a neighbor of Bolsonaro at Vivendas da Barra. The gatekeeper at the complex stated—and recorded in his log book—that Lessa's suspected driver, Élcio de Queiroz, had entered the community after being allowed in by "Mr. Jair" only hours before the murder.

The decision by the right-wing media conglomerate to publicize the apparent leak from the Rio police department's still classified investigation came amid growing nervousness within Brazilian ruling circles over a continued economic slump and the dead-end of Bolsonaro's pro-US foreign policy. At the same time, there is fear that the vast acceleration of mass opposition to austerity worldwide, and particularly in neighboring Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia and Argentina, will spread to Brazil itself.

Minutes after the report on the evidence was aired on *Globo*'s flagship TV program, "Jornal Nacional"—for decades considered the most influential prime-time TV show in the country—Bolsonaro live-streamed a carefully crafted fascist rant on his Facebook page from Saudi Arabia, where he was in the middle of a state visit, charging *Globo* with trying to bring down his government.

Bolsonaro reiterated threats he had made earlier in the month that he would not renew *Globo*'s broadcast license when it expires in 2022 because of its alleged spreading of lies and attempts to "destabilize" his government. *Globo*'s radio and TV networks are the most wide-reaching in Brazil, having been put together under the dictatorship with the takeover of oppositional regional and national

TV stations after *Globo*'s owners, the Marinho family, swore allegiance to Brazil's US-backed military rulers. One of the Workers Party's (PT) many false promises for decades was that when elected it would not renew *Globo*'s concession in order to break the stranglehold over the media of the big business interests for which network speaks.

On the day after the *Globo* report, Rio's district attorneys rushed to present alternative and allegedly stronger evidence—stemming from a last-minute forensic investigation of the gate control records—that there was no communication between the doorman and Bolsonaro, and that the doorman had actually called Lessa's home to let Queiroz in. The National Association of Federal Forensics Experts immediately called the analysis into question. Then, acting as Bolsonaro's personal lawyer, the incoming Attorney General, Augusto Aras, said he would request the Federal Police to depose the doorman again in order to investigate the "defamation" of Bolsonaro by *Globo*.

After the coordinated move by officials to discredit *Globo*'s story, it briefly backtracked, only to leak an "internal memo" by its chief editor Ali Kamel praising *Globo*'s journalists for their "courage" and alleging that the network's team had been drawn into a trap laid by sources close to the president. Bolsonaro's lawyer, the memo said, concealed in an interview the fact that he already knew that there was counter-evidence to the doorman's testimony with the aim of letting the story air, and thereby laying the groundwork for Bolsonaro's fascist rant and providing a pretext for measures against the company.

Globo finally timidly returned to the offensive on Monday, reporting that an investigator in the case had also called into question the lightning speed of the new analysis of the doorman's records, but recognizing that the case had been sent to the Supreme Court after the mention of Bolsonaro's involvement. Last Tuesday, Brazil's largest paper, *Folha de S. Paulo*, claimed that the doorman's records had been with police since late 2018, and Rio's district attorneys had ignored it until October, raising further questions about the motivations for the leak to *Globo*.

There had been speculation about possible links between the murder and the Bolsonaro family from day one. Lessa is a member of the so-called "Crime Office" militia, one of many such organizations that control vast swathes of Rio, collecting informal taxes and monopolizing access to gas, electricity, internet, drugs and gambling.

The militias are mainly formed by retired and active-duty police officers, having their origins in the political death squads formed

under Brazil's 1964-1985 US-backed military dictatorship. These squads were later turned into vigilante groups offering "security" against—and the murder of—drug dealers. The militias have deep ties with the state, and Aras' predecessor at the Attorney General's Office had attempted to federalize the inquiry by presenting evidence that investigators in Rio had tried to buy confessions of militiamen in exchange for reducing sentences in cases in which they were already serving long prison terms.

Bolsonaro is a former Army captain, and his three sons who hold elected offices—a senator, a House representative and a Rio city councillor—all had careers in the repressive forces and close ties with Rio's murderous military police. They regularly praised militia members and the dictatorship from the floor of city, state and federal parliaments, to the point of proposing that militiamen be awarded medals. Rio's state parliament once granted its highest honor, the Tiradentes medal, to Lessa's alleged boss at the "Crime Office", Adriano Nóbrega, in a resolution introduced by Flávio Bolsonaro, today a senator.

An unrelated inquiry into unexplained enrichment of Congress members at the beginning of the year revealed that Nóbrega's mother and wife had been Flávio Bolsonaro's aides in the Rio's state parliament. The investigation targeted a common scam carried out in Brazil in which elected officials demand that aides funnel back part of their state-funded salaries. This inquiry is currently suspended by order of the Supreme Court.

The doorman's records and testimony remain, however, the only direct link presented between Bolsonaro and the suspected murderers.

It is clear that *Globo*'s report is an outgrowth of the sinister cover-ups and anti-democratic conspiracies at the highest echelons of Brazilian state that have from the start engulfed the investigation into Franco's horrific murder.

The murder took place just as Rio had been subjected to a federal military intervention after a fraudulent Carnival crime scare. The chain of command for local repressive forces shifted from the governor's office to officials appointed by Brasilia, with the ostensible aim of fighting crime and police corruption. Franco's murder was seized upon by the government, the opposition and the corporate media as a pretext for deepening the intervention.

Franco herself headed the Rio city council's control commission on the intervention, recording police abuse—a role that she had played before, giving her wide popularity. PSOL, however, opposed the intervention on a thoroughly right-wing basis. The party offered a cowardly, "technical" criticism, proposing more investment in "intelligence," community policing and even "emergency expenditures" on security in high-crime areas. Thus, the party ultimately provided a "left" veneer for the increase in state powers as the story of Franco's horrific death was reported on front pages worldwide and brought hundreds of thousands of horrified and angry Brazilians into the streets.

None of the self-styled "left" forces explained both Franco's murder and the intervention in Rio as manifestations of the worldwide decline of bourgeois democracy under the weight of the contradictions of world capitalism, chiefly the unprecedented growth of social inequality and the growing inter-imperialist conflicts. Instead, they sought to present police, militia and gang violence as something that needed to be contained in order not to delegitimize bourgeois rule and "Brazilian democracy," peppering such advice with "radical" identity politics.

As part of this policy, on the eve of the 2018 presidential election's

second round, PSOL denounced Bolsonaro's social media supporters as "virtual militias". It seized upon a report of mass illegal WhatsApp messaging in favor of the fascistic candidate to ask the Supreme Court to order the suspension of social media throughout the country until the election. The Supreme Court rejected the request. Thus, the pseudo-left PSOL presented itself as the most ardent defender of the "legitimacy" of the bourgeois state, to be defended by mass censorship if necessary. It was precisely such policies by the Workers Party and its "left" appendages that created the conditions for funneling social and political disaffection behind the fascistic demagogue Bolsonaro.

The revelations provided by *Globo* in relation to the Franco assassination came in the midst of growing anxiety within Brazilian ruling circles in reaction to the Chile's mass upheavals. Bolsonaro and his closest associates repeatedly used the Chile protests to threaten a coup in Brazil. On October 23, Bolsonaro claimed to have ordered troops to be on stand-by in case unrest reached Brazil. Using the same far-right language later employed by Trump, he blamed the Chile protests on "foreign actors" trying to destabilize the right-wing administration of President Sebastian Piñera.

Only a few days later the president's son Eduardo, the head of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, declared from the House floor that if demonstrations spread from Chile to Brazil, "history would repeat itself". Clarifying his remark in a subsequent interview, he said that mass protests in Brazil should be met with "a new AI-5"—a reference to the infamous 1968 suspension of all parties and habeas corpus by the dictatorship, leading to the institutionalization of torture and "disappearances". The threat was publicly supported by Bolsonaro's intelligence chief, Gen. Augusto Heleno.

The reaction of Bolsonaro's ostensible political opposition has been thoroughly reactionary, dismissing the deadly seriousness of these threats.

The PT's mouthpiece *Brasil 24/7* sought to bury the issue, reporting in a headline that the "Army High Command and the congressional right wing repudiate Eduardo Bolsonaro." The PT's president, Gleisi Hoffmann, dismissed Bolsonaro's fascistic rhetoric as a "smokescreen" for the corruption scandals involving his son Flávio, and later said that Eduardo should be stripped of his office on the basis of the dictatorship-era National Security Law for inciting "subversion of the social and political order."

The PT's and PSOL's policies have nothing to do with a defense of democratic rights. Rather, they are aimed at subordinating the emerging mass opposition in Brazil to the institutions of the bourgeois state, thereby paving the way for a return to dictatorship. Their right-wing reaction to the Franco murder has allowed sections of the Brazilian bourgeoisie to manipulate its investigation as a means of reining in the "rogue" Bolsonaro, in an attempt to contain a movement from below against the capitalist system as a whole.



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