

Memoirs of ex-army commander expose drive toward dictatorship in Brazil

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The publication in early February of the memoirs of Eduardo Villas Bôas, Brazilian Army commander between 2015 and 2019, has thrown national politics into turmoil and exposed the drive towards dictatorship in the sixth most populated country in the world.

A political crisis was unleashed by the book's foremost revelation, in which Villas Bôas claimed the Army High command had full knowledge of a tweet he posted in 2018, on the eve of the vote by the Constitutional Court (STF) on a habeas corpus petition by former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Lula was serving a nine-year sentence for corruption and was the frontrunner in polls for the October presidential elections, which the fascistic Jair Bolsonaro would later win. Three members of the high command in 2018 are current ministers in the Bolsonaro administration.

The book is an edited version of 13 hours of interviews with Villas Bôas by Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV) military researcher Celso de Castro.

On April 2, 2018, Villas Bôas tweeted: "In the situation currently confronting Brazil, we must ask the institutions and the people, who is really thinking of the wellbeing of the country and future generations and who is only worried about personal interests?" He concluded menacingly: "I reassure the nation that the Brazilian Army shares the desire of all good citizens in repudiating impunity."

The most senior member of the court, Justice Celso de Mello, decried the tweet as appearing to foreshadow "the resumption of attitudes that are strange and harmful to constitutional orthodoxy," referring to the pressure exerted by the 1964-1985 US-backed military dictatorship over the court, which remained formally open during the blood-soaked regime. In what was effectively a vote taken at gunpoint, Lula's habeas petition was defeated by a 6-5 majority.

The book's revelation sparked a political frenzy. On February 15, STF Justice Luiz Fachin, who was at the time the rapporteur on Lula's habeas petition, called the revelations "intolerable and unacceptable." Villas Bôas reacted on Twitter a day later with menace and contempt. He posted a link to a news report of Fachin's declaration and wrote, "three years later."

On February 19, the escalating crisis led to the unprecedented arrest of Brazilian House member Daniel Silveira, of the Social Liberal Party (PSL)—on whose ticket Bolsonaro was elected—for defending the general as well as the January 6 Washington putsch in a YouTube video, and calling the 1964 US-backed coup establishing the 21-year military regime a "warning" to STF members.

Silveira, a former Rio de Janeiro Military Police soldier, filmed his arrest live and contemptuously said he had already been arrested "90 times" for military offenses and knew exactly what was coming. Currently detained in a military prison, he is reportedly being treated as a "hero" by inmates, other fascistic soldiers deemed too dangerous even by a force that murders over 6,000 Brazilians a year. Silveira was already investigated by the STF for collaborating with a fascist group known as "The 300 of Brazil," which campaigned throughout 2019 for the army to shut down the court to halt corruption probes against Bolsonaro.

A few days later, further exposing the political dangers being recognized by Brazilian authorities, former Defense Minister Raul Jungmann wrote an open letter to the STF appealing for it to bar recent decrees by Bolsonaro deregulating gun ownership. He warned that the increased arming of civilians "evokes the blight of civil war," citing the January 6 coup attempt in Washington as an example of what might happen in Brazil. Bolsonaro himself has already threatened not to recognize the 2022 election results if he loses, claiming that election fraud would make the presidential elections in Brazil "worse than those in the US."

Jungmann's warning is even more significant, coming from a senior figure in the right-wing government of President Michel Temer. Temer came to power through the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff of the Workers Party (PT) with a mandate from the financial markets to impose brutal austerity on Brazilian workers. Also, Silveira's arrest was ordered by STF Justice Alexandre de Moraes, Temer's former justice minister.

He is considered the main representative in the court of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), the former traditional right-wing opposition to the PT, which entered into a coalition with Temer. Moraes opened the investigation into the "300 of Brazil" fascists in 2019 based on the reactionary dictatorship-era National Security Law, which originally targeted left-wing guerrillas.

The arrest of Silveira was a dangerous move. Both Bolsonaro's intelligence chief, Gen. Augusto Heleno, and Attorney General Augusto Aras have warned repeatedly that they view the Constitution as allowing the calling out of the army in cases of an "overreach of power"—the exact term used by Bolsonaro loyalists to describe Silveira's arrest.

The move also risked activating Bolsonaro's base among junior officers and soldiers of the state-controlled Military Police, which form Silveira's constituency. In March 2020, a strike by Ceará state Military Police was organized by Bolsonaro allies and led to open reports in the press that governors were afraid the police might turn against them if they opposed the president. Bolsonaro has proposed to amend the Constitution to create a rank of Military Police General under his control, to which governors reacted with a mix of nervousness and fear, calling it a breach of states' rights.

The House, which eventually upheld the arrest, had to postpone its vote on the issue to allow room for negotiations with the STF and the army. In an indication of the reactionary content of these negotiations, the Rio de Janeiro Military Club, known as the place where the 1964 coup was planned, seized on Moraes' use of dictatorship-era legislation, issuing an open letter asking if the same criteria applied against Silveira would be used against the left.

For his part, former Defense Minister Jungmann is spearheading the return of the military, and particularly the army, to political life in Brazil, barely 30 years after they were forced to retreat by the powerful strike movement which brought the dictatorship to an end in 1985. A former Communist Party member, Jungmann politically sponsored the 2018 federal intervention against crime in Rio de Janeiro, which saw the army

all but depose the governor and police the streets. He is now the public face of the newly founded CEDESEN think tank, which describes itself as the first think tank dedicated to defense issues in the country. He shares this platform with Temer's former intelligence chief, Gen. Sérgio Etchegoyen, a key ally of Villas Bôas whom Rousseff declined to punish when he criticized a Congressional Truth Commission into the crimes of the 1964-1985 dictatorship.

The revelations in Villas Bôas' memoirs were not entirely new, as the general himself had previously declared his position to be that of the entire high command. But by naming as his direct co-thinkers key ministers in the Bolsonaro government, Villas Bôas lent additional weight to worries that the deep involvement of the military in this deeply unpopular administration will provoke uncontrolled social opposition and engulf it in the deep crisis affecting bourgeois rule in Brazil.

Bolsonaro has filled positions throughout his government with active and retired members of the armed forces, whose ranks now number over 6,000, more than at any previous point in history, including under the military dictatorship.

Most significantly, the military has been directly mobilized in support of Bolsonaro's murderous herd immunity policy in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, with an active duty general heading the Health Ministry, and the army being employed to produce hydroxychloroquine, which Bolsonaro relentlessly promotes as a cure for COVID-19. Brazil has the second largest number of COVID-19 deaths in the world, having just passed the quarter million mark.

Under these conditions, official reaction to the crisis has been to downplay the risk of dictatorship with empty reassurances that the "checks and balances of democracy" are working. This attitude was personified by STF president Luiz Fux, who cast himself as conduit for the military, declaring on February 19 that Defense Minister Fernando Azevedo had told him the Villas Bôas allegations were not true and there had been no meeting to discuss the tweets.

As for the nominal target of the conspiracy, the Workers Party, its attitude towards the crisis is a mixture of deception, cowardice and hypocrisy. PT party president Gleisi Hoffmann, a House member for the state of Paraná, reacted with a perfunctory call for a congressional testimony by the current defense minister and Army commander.

Lula's former foreign and defense minister, Celso Amorim, told one of the party's mouthpieces, *Carta Capital* magazine, that the revelations meant the tweets were a coup, and he was surprised by them.

In reality, the PT is principally responsible for the current dangers faced by the Brazilian working class, which cannot be stressed enough.

It was the PT that named Villas Bôas as army commander. It covered up for his threats when they were made in order to contain public reaction and cast itself as the best alternative for the Brazilian ruling class, as it had been considered for the better part of the 21st century.

In April 2018, Lula was barred from running for the presidency, but the acceptance of his habeas petition by the STF was seen as a potential turning point in appeals that could reverse this situation. Lula had been sentenced for receiving a beachfront penthouse from one of the key defendants in the Lava Jato (Carwash) corruption probe, the OAS construction company. While Lula was unquestionably at the center of the vast bribery and kickbacks scandal that centered on the state-run energy giant Petrobras, his appeals were based on the fact that he never established ownership or made use of the penthouse.

Business lobbies opposed Lula's candidacy, worried that he would come under pressure to slow down the brutal austerity implemented by the right-wing factions which had ousted the PT in the trumped-up 2016 impeachment of Rousseff.

Those factions exploited the massive corruption schemes overseen by the PT and uncovered by the Lava Jato corruption probe, despite being involved in them up to their necks. They used the less than two years of

Temer's caretaker administration to impose a draconian 20-year freeze on health, education and public works spending and enact a labor reform authorizing zero-hours contracts and provoking massive pay reductions.

At the time of Villas Bôas tweet, the PT bent over backwards to cover up for the army's assault on civil institutions, absurdly blaming the Globo media conglomerate for "manipulating" the tweet in order to vilify Lula. The PT chose not to alert the working class to the dangers of Villas Bôas' threats, instead boasting treacherously that it had spent record sums on the military.

Villas Bôas had been named army commander by Rousseff in 2015, the youngest of candidates in a break with tradition. He was chosen on the grounds that he was supposedly a constitutionalist and opposed to the questioning voiced by other commanders of the work of the Congressional Truth Commission established in 2012 to investigate the crimes of the 1964-1985 dictatorship.

He had defended Lula's rearmament program in 2015 before Congress as a "landmark achievement" and received standing ovations from the PT's Senate caucus in 2017 when he publicly denied that the army considered intervening in the crisis of the Temer government. Barely a month before his coup threat on the eve of the habeas vote, Rousseff's former defense minister, Jaques Wagner, publicly praised Villas Bôas, declaring: "Villas Bôas is a classical military man, a nationalist Brazilian who abides by the law. He has always become a leader wherever he commanded for being brave, kind and compelling. He is a democratic figure, someone who looks forward"—implying that he was not a defender of the 1964 coup and would never support extra-constitutional intervention by the military

As late as May 2019, when Villas Bôas came under fire from the Brazilian fascist ideologue Olavo de Carvalho, a key ally of Bolsonaro and bridge between him and the US far right, Jaques Wagner came to his defense, calling him "my Army commander."

The closest historical analogy to the events that have unfolded in Brazil is Salvador Allende's nomination of Augusto Pinochet as the commander-in-chief of the Chilean Army in 1973, providing him the means to overthrow Allende himself.

The working class must draw the lessons of the latest revelations in Brazil and fight to break the straitjacket of the Workers Party, whose main objective is to prevent the drive towards dictatorship being countered by a mass movement against the source of the crisis, the capitalist system.



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