Military threatens Congress over COVID inquiry as Bolsonaro says Brazil “may not have” elections

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With a Senate investigation implicating a number of military officers in corrupt multi-million-dollar COVID vaccine deals, the Brazilian high command issued an ominous threat last week. In a joint statement, the generals declared that they will “not tolerate any frivolous attack against the institutions which defend democracy and the freedom of the Brazilian people.”

Emboldened by these threats from the military chiefs, Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro told his supporters that Brazil “may not have elections” in 2022, when his term ends. He would claim the right to cancel the elections, he said, if his discredited charges of fraud in the country’s electronic balloting are not addressed through the adoption of his proposed “printed ballot” backup system.

Such threats from both Bolsonaro and the military command have no precedent in Brazil since 1985, when the military, faced with a mass strike movement of the working class, left power, ending 21 years of US-backed dictatorship. The immediate trigger for these threats is the Brazilian Senate’s Inquiry Commission (CPI) into Bolsonaro’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than half a million Brazilians. A tumultuous hearing last Wednesday ended with the arrest of the Health Ministry’s former logistics director, Roberto Dias.

Dias’ imprisonment for perjury was ordered by the CPI’s chair, Senator Omar Aziz. He charged the Health Ministry official with lying when he denied holding a pre-arranged meeting in a restaurant in the capital Brasília with Luiz Paulo Dominghetti, the representative of a US-based medical supply firm. Dominghetti denounced him for demanding one dollar in kickbacks for every jab of the AstraZeneca vaccine being negotiated by the government. Dias claimed he had a casual encounter with Dominghetti, but the CPI was in possession of messages from Dominghetti’s phone arranging the meeting. At the end of Wednesday’s proceedings, Aziz declared he would not allow the CPI to be mocked, and ordered the Senate’s police to take Dias to jail. He was later released on bail.

In his testimony, Dias denied any wrongdoing, shifting the blame onto the Health Ministry’s ex-executive secretary, Col. Élcio Franco, who now works as an aide to Bolsonaro’s chief of staff, Gen. Luiz Eduardo Ramos. During the testimony, Aziz, informed that Dias was a retired Air Force sergeant, declared: “The good ones in the Armed Forces must be very ashamed with some people being featured in the press today, because for a long time, many years, Brazil hasn’t seen members of the rotten side of the Armed Forces marred in wrongdoing within the government.”

Aziz then proceeded to cite by name a number of those involved in the scandal, including Gen. Eduardo Pazuello, who was health minister for most of the pandemic after two civilian medical experts resigned in protest over Bolsonaro’s adamant opposition to social distancing and the use of masks, and his promotion of quack cures such as hydroxychloroquine.

Aziz used a common Brazilian expression – “the rotten side” – which is more commonly applied to the state-controlled military police forces, and refers to tolerance within their high commands for criminal elements involved in extra-judicial killings and organized crime. The Armed Forces are increasingly seen as a pillar of the crisis-ridden Bolsonaro government, which shares political responsibility for the mass death and current social catastrophe in Brazil.

Far from indicting the Armed Forces, however, Aziz intended his remarks as a warning against the threat to Brazilian capitalist stability posed by the open involvement of the military in the crimes of the hated Bolsonaro government. In the same remarks, he contrasted the current scandals with the period of the dictatorship, saying “one thing the military was not accused of was corruption” – a lie in itself. To emphasize his “loyalty” to the military’s murderers and torturers, Aziz ended his remarks with a eulogy to the dictators Ernesto Geisel and João Baptista Figueiredo, who he claimed “died in poverty” for being “honest.”

Nonetheless, the Armed Forces considered Aziz’s right-wing remarks intolerable. Late Wednesday, the defense minister and the heads of the three branches of the military released a joint statement repudiating “the remarks of the CPI president, Omar Aziz” as “striking the Armed Forces in a vile and frivolous way with a grave, unfounded and above all irresponsible charge.” It concluded with the phrase about the military being the

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institution that upholds “democracy and freedom” for the Brazilian people.” In other words, “democracy” is something that the Armed Forces alone have the right to to give, and to take away.

On the next day, the threat from the high command was reaffirmed by the Air Force chief, Lt. Brig. Carlos de Almeida Baptista Jr., who said that it was a “warning to the institutions” of the Brazilian state. It was the “only time” they would warn Aziz, he said, adding that the military had the “legal means” to enforce its warnings. The “legal means” reference echoes the discredited claims made by Bolsonaro and other right-wing figures that article 142 of the Brazilian Constitution allows the president to call out the military against Congress or the Supreme Court in in the event they “overstep” their authority.

General Baptista specifically named as a “victim” of Congress former Health Minister General Pazuello, who appointed all the major figures in the scandal. He was ousted under pressure from Bolsonaro’s supporters in parliament in March, at the height of a second wave of the COVID pandemic, which was claiming 4,000 lives a day. Pazuello, an active-duty general, then violated the military code by joining a political rally in support of Bolsonaro. Dissident generals warned that his going unpunished threatened to “create anarchy” in the barracks. Pazuello is now Bolsonaro’s strategic affairs advisor.

The growing threats by the military have been coupled with the renewal of Bolsonaro’s claims that Brazilian elections are essentially fraudulent and that the 2018 elections were rigged to stop him from winning outright in the first round. Bolsonaro now claims this would justify the suspension of the 2022 elections, if no changes are made to the system.

Bolsonaro is finding himself increasingly cornered by the spiraling economic and social crisis, with growing sections of the ruling class considering him a liability to bourgeois rule. His charges of systemic electoral fraud have been repudiated by every significant political force, including his own congressional base. A number of dissident senior military figures have warned that he will attempt a coup and must be reined in. In the final analysis, Senator Aziz was speaking for such layers.

Nonetheless, the threats from the military expose the advanced preparations for dictatorial rule, whatever Bolsonaro’s political fate. The driving force behind these preparations is the objective incompatibility, in Brazil and internationally, between the unprecedented growth of social inequality and democratic forms of rule.

Bolsonaro’s herd immunity policy towards the COVID-19 pandemic, with its horrific toll of 540,000 deaths and millions suffering with the disease, has been the most naked expression of the relentless pursuit of profits by the ruling class, at whatever cost. In taking over the Health Ministry under General Pazuello, the military became the direct enforcers of this murderous policy.

The latest resurgence of authoritarianism was politically prepared by the two decades of rule by the Workers Party (PT), the supposed center of political opposition to Bolsonaro.

The PT endorsed the blanket amnesty granted to the military in exchange for the gradual return to civilian rule. In the four decades that followed, none of the dictatorship’s crimes, including the murder, torture and disappearance of workers, students and left-wing opponents, were prosecuted. When it finally came to power in 2002, the PT promoted a massive rearmament program under the guise of industrial and technological development, and bloodied the Brazilian Army in foreign interventions in Haiti and other countries under the command of the very generals who are now backing Bolsonaro.

From the outset of the pandemic, the PT demanded that Bolsonaro resign in favor of his vice-president, Gen. Hamilton Mourão, as the “least costly way” of solving the crisis. When Bolsonaro replaced the entire military command in late March in order to align it with his plans, the entire bourgeois setup, including the PT, welcomed the new commanders, who are now threatening Congress, as the ultimate guarantors of Brazilian democracy.

These political forces, which have have helped create the conditions in which the Brazilian military now claims impunity and the right to overrule the elected government, have responded to the latest crisis with further lies and deceit. The PT, accused the Bolsonaro government of promoting a “lack of discipline and insubordination” within the military. The president of the Senate, Rodrigo Pacheco, called a press conference to condemn Bolsonaro’s threats against elections as “anti-patriotic.”

The growing sections of the Brazilian ruling class that openly criticize Bolsonaro and are toying with a possible impeachment believe that the conditions for a new dictatorship are not yet in place. Their attempts to subordinate the growing movement of the working class to the capitalist state, including through a possible return to power of the PT in the 2022 elections, has the ultimate goal of creating such conditions.

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