

Lula's "Security Bill" strengthens police state in Brazil

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This week, the Brazilian Congress began discussing a Proposed Amendment to the Constitution on Public Security drafted by the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, of the Workers Party (PT). If approved by a two-thirds majority, it will bring about a significant concentration of police powers at the national level.

The bill provides for the integration and coordination of Civil and Military Police and Municipal Guards between the federal government, states and municipalities through the Unified Public Security System, expanding the federal government's role in policy-making and combating organized crime. It also expands the powers of the Federal Police, Federal Highway Police and Municipal Guards, and elevates national security funding to constitutional status to guarantee specific resources.

Echoing the rhetoric of far-right politicians who advocate a policy of "zero tolerance" even for minor crimes, Lula declared in March: "We will not allow criminals to take over our country. We will not allow the 'republic of cell phone thieves' to start scaring people on the streets of this country." He added: "That is why we are presenting a Security Constitutional Amendment so that we can say that the state is stronger than the criminals."

The Lula administration also sees the PEC as a way to respond to the Brazilian population's growing concern with violence, an expression of the intensifying social inequality in the country, for which the PT's capitalist government has no solution. An April poll by Quaest showed that 29 percent of Brazilians cite violence as their main concern. In October 2024, violence was the main concern of 16 percent of Brazilians.

Numerous public security experts have criticized the violent and reactionary nature of the Lula government's bill. Gabriel Feltran, a sociology professor at the Federal University of São Carlos, said earlier this year in an interview with the Humanitas Unisinos Institute that the bill reinforces "our public security model, which is militarized... produces a military war against crime, produces a very high rate of police lethality." He drew particular attention to the fact that the text "makes the Federal Highway Police the ostensible federal police, which would receive much more resources from now on and become a federal military police."

Despite its reactionary character, the bill's progress has been

marked by disputes between the federal government and politicians allied with Brazil's fascist former president Jair Bolsonaro. The governor of the state of Goiás, Ronaldo Caiado (União Brasil), declared last November: "[The bill] is unacceptable, it is a usurpation of power, it is an invasion of a prerogative that is already guaranteed to us governors."

The PT government responded to those criticisms of "usurpation of power" from the states by making significant concessions to the far right. In January, the government amended the proposal, maintaining the power of the states to legislate on "general rules of public security, social defense, and the prison system." But these changes did not reduce the resistance of the fascistic political opposition.

The disputes surrounding the bill include a clear electoral component. Caiado and other governors, such as Tarcísio de Freitas of São Paulo, are concerned about losing a crucial constituency among the police just over a year before the 2026 elections. Both are positioning themselves as far-right presidential alternatives to Bolsonaro, who is ineligible to run, and are vying for the ex-president's voters.

Above all, the fascist forces see Lula's campaign to strengthen the repressive apparatus as a misappropriation of a political flag that belongs to them.

Caiado, Tarcísio, and other figures in Bolsonaro's sphere model themselves closely on the fascist politics of El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele. Under the pretext of fighting criminal gangs, Bukele has promoted a brutal increase in repression and mass incarceration of the population, without due process, in prison camps that violate the most basic human rights. His police state measures have served as a platform to subvert the constitutional regime and move toward establishing a presidential dictatorship in El Salvador.

The clashes surrounding the Public Security bill took place amid the release of the Brazilian Public Security Yearbook, published in July, which revealed a situation of violence comparable to countries at war. In 2024, Brazil recorded 44,127 intentional violent deaths, with 6,243 of them caused by police forces—a figure about five times higher than that recorded in the US. While the total number of violent deaths decreased by 31 percent between 2017 and 2024, deaths caused by police increased by 21 percent during that period.

In São Paulo, police lethality increased by a staggering 61 percent between 2023 and 2024, from 504 to 813 deaths. Last year, the Military Police commanded by Governor Freitas, Bolsonaro's former Minister of Infrastructure, was responsible for one of the bloodiest police operations in recent years in Brazil.

Freitas used the death of a special forces officer, which occurred on July 27, 2023 in Guarujá, as a pretext to launch a bloodbath in Baixada Santista, on the coast closest to the state capital, São Paulo.

The first phase, called Operation Shield, was launched the day after the officer's death and officially ended with the conclusion of Operation Summer in April 2024. The brutal nature of the operation, which resulted in 56 deaths, was pointed out by the São Paulo State Police Ombudsman Cláudio Aparecido da Silva, who explained to Agência Brasil: "Among those killed were disabled people, people who used crutches, blind people, and a mother of six children."

The São Paulo Military Police, however, is not the deadliest in Brazil. According to the Yearbook, police killings in Bahia, a northeastern state governed by the PT since 2007, are almost double those in São Paulo, reaching 1,556 last year. According to a July report by *Intercept*, as a result of policies such as an infamous "Police Performance Award," which rewards battalions for police performance and channels resources to special units with a history of high lethality, the "proportion of deaths caused by police officers has tripled since 2014, rising from 5 percent to more than 25 percent in 2023."

What is happening in Bahia is the result of a long process of intensified repression overseen by federal and local PT governments. During his first terms in office (2003-2010), Lula waged a "war on drugs" that caused the prison population in Brazil to explode. It is now the third largest in the world. During the administration of PT President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), laws on criminal organizations and anti-terrorism were passed, both of which were used to indict political demonstrators and deploy the army to repress social protests.

In Ceará, a state in northeastern Brazil ruled for a decade by the PT, in October 2023 the Brazilian Bar Association (OAB) made an official request for the removal of Luís Mauro Albuquerque Araújo from the position of Secretary of Penitentiary Administration and Resocialization. The association justified its request by denouncing "the illegalities and abuses of the measures adopted in the state's prison units," which include mistreatment and torture of prisoners. Governor Elmano de Freitas, however, defended his actions and kept him in office.

The OAB's complaint is far from surprising. In 2018, a year before Albuquerque Araújo took office in Ceará, the torture in prisons under his command in the state of Rio Grande do Norte had already been compared by a Ministry of Justice agency to "crimes committed by US troops" in Abu Ghraib, Iraq.

In Rio de Janeiro, the mayor of Maricá (RJ) and one of the

vice presidents of the PT, Washington Quaquá, has been working in the area of public security in close contact with the governor of Rio de Janeiro, Claudio Castro, a close ally of Bolsonaro. In early April, Quaquá said he intends to arm the Municipal Guard and create a special group to fight organized crime. Echoing the rhetoric of Brazilian fascists, Quaquá stated that "criminals in Maricá will have no chance" and will "go to the grave."

Quaquá's attitude is even more alarming given that Governor Castro oversaw a brutal massacre in 2021 in the Jacarezinho favela in the northern part of the capital of Rio de Janeiro. In this episode, the Civil Police killed 27 people, 11 of whom had no criminal record, and only three arrest warrants were served among the 21 used as a pretext for the operation. In 2022, Castro called the victims "bums."

The PT's growing alignment with a defense of police violence in terms previously restricted to open fascists is a manifestation of the shift to the right by the entire Brazilian capitalist establishment. This shift includes the pseudo-left satellites of the PT, whose main representative is the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL).

Covering every reactionary step of the PT government, the PSOL was tasked with fabricating arguments to present Lula's Public Security bill as a progressive move. On the day of its approval by the congressional commission, state representative Talíria Petrone of the PSOL in Rio de Janeiro praised the PEC, stating that "Brazil needs standardized procedures, the use of body cameras, and limits on the use of force." State representative Pastor Henrique Vieira, from the same party, defended the public ombudsman offices provided for in the proposal, demanding only more precision in the definition of "ombudsman" and "internal affairs."

As the Socialist Equality Group (GSI) explained in the aftermath of the last municipal elections in Brazil, which marked a leap in the conscious embrace of the political banners of the far right by the PT and PSOL:

[B]y promoting the bourgeoisie's common agenda of austerity and repression against the working class under the false flag of "unity for democracy," the PT and the pseudo-lefts are opening up political avenues for the far right to exploit mass discontent with existing conditions.



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