Marielle Franco, Militias, *Jogo do Bicho,* and the Bolsonaros: State-Embedded Organized Crime and the Far Right in Brazil

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The relationship between the far right and organized crime has deep political roots in post-dictatorship Brazil. No recent incident has revealed the reach of such interests more starkly than the 2018 assassination of Rio de Janeiro’s socialist city councilor and long-standing human rights defender Marielle Franco, which exposed the tangled relationships between organized crime, police death squads, and politics in the country. Alarmingly, but not surprisingly, these entrenched connections extend to the onetime army captain and former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and his family, revealing the hypocrisy of the anti-anticorruption, law-and-order rhetoric he championed while successfully campaigning to win the nation’s highest office.

Insecurity, state violence, and politics complement one another in Brazil. As presidential candidate, Bolsonaro publicly championed the killing of criminal suspects (saying on Jornal Nacional, Brazil’s most viewed news program, in August 28th 2018: “If a policeman kills 10, 15, or 20 with 30 bullets each he must be decorated, not charged”), deploying traditional populist rhetoric used by hard-line right-wing candidates come election time. However, the 2018 election campaign pushed further than usual, with loud public promises to make it easier for more police to kill more people. Despite already-frightening numbers of police killings, individual cases of which are rarely scrutinized, Bolsonaro committed to introducing new legal mechanisms to protect police who kill from investigation. In Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel, a former judge running for the state governorship, used terminology normally reserved for the killing of cattle when pledging to deploy snipers in favela communities. João Doria, gubernatorial candidate in São Paulo, offered to pay the legal costs for police investigated after fatal shootings. The homicidal posturing paid off. All three candidates won comfortably. None contemplated tackling root causes of violence. They consciously sought to perpetuate them. In Brazil, violence is a modus operandi.

Following a last-minute endorsement by the Bolsonaro family (Jair Bolsonaro has three sons who all hold political positions), Witzel shot from 1 percent in early polls to a 41 percent second-round victory. Taking office in January, Rio’s new governor did not delay in delivering the promised violence. In a few hours in February 2019, during a single operation in a favela, his police shot and killed 13 suspects. These included nine young men in a house who, according to witnesses, were trying to give themselves up. During Witzel’s first 90 days in office police killed 434 suspects, surpassing all prior statistics and accounting for 50 percent of violent deaths in the state of Rio. By the end of 2019, Witzel’s police force had shot and killed 1,810 alleged suspects, the highest annual number on record and significantly higher than the estimated 999 fatal victims of police shootings for the entire United States that year, as recorded by the Washington Post in 2020. Rio de Janeiro state has a population slightly more than 16 million, compared to the more than 330 million in the United States. Standard

practice is to register these killings as "deaths in a confrontation." However, research has consistently proved that extrajudicial executions are the norm. In 2009, a Rio public prosecutor told Human Rights Watch that "almost all" the killings taking place in confrontations he investigated were "farces" (Human Rights Watch 2009).

The instant transformation of Bolsonaro and Witzel's pledges into reality demonstrated precisely how the far right deploys lethal state and parastate violence to spread terror and regulate and maintain social inequality in Brazil. Cops who kill with impunity, drug traffickers, and death squads have long terrorized low-income communities across the nation. Vigilante death squads with "links to the police were born in the Americas in Rio de Janeiro" (Rose 2005, 258). In rural areas, local police and hired gunmen provide such a service. In cities and their peripheries, absence of the state and lack of regulation in poor neighborhoods and favelas offer a wealth of illicit opportunity. Whoever provides security in these areas can step in to control the local economy and service provision. Rio's militias, illegal paramilitary groups known locally as *milícia*, are the latest manifestation of such parastatal despotism. For all these actors, political endorsement of the police as killing machine is an implicit call to arms.

Since the early 2000s, the *milícia* (militia), often constituted or supported by off-duty or former police, firefighters, prison guards, and members of the armed forces, have expanded and grown in power across Rio de Janeiro, flushing out drug traffickers from communities and taking territorial control. Once installed, the militia establishes itself as both local security provider - charging all residents and businesses a "tax" - and de facto government, overseeing political access to the community, all businesses, and installing and running services such as TV, internet, gas, and water. Militia members are known to torture and kill innocent residents to spread fear in the communities they dominate. Militias use traditional death squad activity to preserve, expand, and diversify their extensive legal and illegal business interests. Militia leaders include city councilors and elected representatives in the state parliament. Because of their close official ties, police raids on militia areas and consequent gun battles are infrequent.

Militias originated in Rio's West Zone, which includes the opulent, aseptic Barra da Tijuca neighborhood, home to the 2016 Olympic Park. The West Zone, where more than one in three of the city's voters live, is a political power base. In 2008, a then-obscure Rio politician and Barra resident, Jair Bolsonaro, defended militias in a BBC interview, claiming that they provided security, order, and discipline for poor communities.

Gun ownership rocketed by 98 percent during Bolsonaro's first year as president, confirming his intent and ability to arm his supporters. Weapons newly obtainable to the public included the Brazil-made T4 semiautomatic rifle, previously available only to the army. In April 2020, he revoked decrees that existed to facilitate the tracing and identification of weapons and ammunition. One week later, he tripled the quantity of ammunition available for purchase by civilians.

The rise of Jair Bolsonaro and his subsequent onslaught on democratic institutions, represented the greatest setback for social progress in Brazil since the military coup of 1964. With more guns and ammunition than ever before now available to the general public, more than 2,500 members of the armed forces employed in senior government positions and strong, vociferous support from the rank and file of the police and armed forces, Bolsonaro and his backers held Brazilian society to ransom. His political philosophy, wrote Fernando de Barros e Silva, editor of the respected Piauí current affairs magazine, represented "the victory of the militia model of management of Brazilian violence."

Central to Jair Bolsonaro's activity in Rio de Janeiro, where he began his political career, was a family aide called Fabrício Queiroz. Queiroz's friendship with the former president dates to 1984, when he served as army recruit under Bolsonaro. On leaving the army, Queiroz joined Rio's military police. He remained friends with

Jair Bolsonaro and worked for his eldest son, current senator Flávio Bolsonaro, for eleven years, between 2007 and 2018, after joining his Rio state assembly parliamentary team on secondment from the police. Although his formal job was to provide security for the politician, Queiroz was essentially Flávio's right-hand man for more than a decade.

The unofficial role of Queiroz as the Bolsonaro family's "Mr. Fixit" came under intense scrutiny following numerous alarming allegations: that he ran a ghost employee scheme for Flávio, who siphoned off salaries of no-show employees for personal use; that he was involved with militias; and that he (and Flávio) was associated with Adriano da Nóbrega, the now-dead suspected founder of the death squad believed to have carried out the assassination of Marielle Franco in 2018.

Such revelations expose the Bolsonaro family's proximity to entrenched, intertwined political and criminal interests that have deep historical and territorial roots in Rio de Janeiro, roots that spread across Brazil. Marielle Franco, an Afro-Brazilian LGBT human rights defender raised in a favela, who highlighted and campaigned for years against police excesses in Rio's low-income communities and participated in a highly effective Rio state parliament commission of investigation into militias, stood in direct opposition to such interests.

The killing of Marielle Franco and the *jogo do bicho*

"What I have to say, nobody would like to hear: there is a battalion of murderers acting for money in Rio today, most of them coming from contravention. The Homicide Police and the head of the Civil Police know who they are, but they receive money from *contraventores* not to touch or direct the investigations, thus creating a network of protection so that the contravention kills whoever it wants. Tell me, in recent years, which murder case has targeted a *contraventor*?" In 2018, Orlando de Curicica, a former policeman, was falsely accused of ordering Marielle Franco's murder in a fabricated setup designed to protect the real culprits. His statement (above) to reporters helped blow the lid on the cover-up, revealing the extent to which organized crime penetrates Rio's police and state (Araújo and Otávio 2018). Central to this corruption is the *jogo do bicho*, or *contravenção*, as he refers - Rio's illegal gambling mafias.

Comprehending the reach of these groups is key to understanding organized crime in Brazil and its historical hold on the state. Prominent assassins, like Adriano da Nóbrega, suspected of working for *jogo do bicho* operators, are connected to militias, the Bolsonaro family, and the murder of Marielle Franco.

Conventional narratives and study around law and order and public security in Brazil, both inside and outside the country, focus on the power of prison-based criminal groups and favela-based drug factions such as the Primeiro Comando do Capital (First Capital Command) and the Comando Vermelho (Red Command). These narratives sustain a discourse that lays the foundation for repressive policing and human rights abuses against poor populations while often ignoring state-embedded organized crime and corruption. In reality, these groups and factions exist within and depend on a sophisticated, opaque criminal structure involving state actors and more established organized crime groups. Such mafias are protected by social silence in Brazil. Considered part of everyday life and taken for granted by the public, their inner workings are largely ignored by the media and little studied by academia. They belong to "the universe of the undiscussed" (Bourdieu 1977, 168).

For this reason I studied Rio de Janeiro's gambling mafias for my master's thesis at Cambridge University. My curiosity was vindicated by the words of a Rio de Janeiro police chief who told me:

If you go deeply into this [*the jogo do bicho*], at the very minimum you'll be studying the history of the Republic or better, the history of Brazilian politics since the proclamation of the Republic. . . . The history of organized crime in Rio de Janeiro

and Brazil begins with the *bicheiros*. The first criminal organization in Rio de Janeiro and Brazil is [*run by*] the *bicheiros*. But there's no organized crime without the state - it penetrates the state. In our case it confuses itself with the state itself. You get to a point where you don't know what is the state, and what is a *bicheiro*. (Platt 2013, 70)

The *jogo do bicho* (animal game) is an illegal lottery akin to a numbers racket. It is played across Brazil. It originated in Rio de Janeiro over a century ago, and tickets can be bought today on street corners across the city (and the country). For the millions who play, *jogo do bicho* is part of everyday life. Yet despite its apparent simplicity, to bet on the lottery is to participate in a time-honored process that enables corruption and undermines social progress in Brazil.

The freethinking entrepreneur João Drummond (known in Brazil as Baron Drummond) invented *jogo do bicho* in 1892, at a moment of dramatic change in Rio de Janeiro, to raise funds for a zoo - hence the name and the practice of certain numbers being associated with particular animals. Initial prohibition of the game rose out of an unclear stance by the authorities on what constituted criminal activity, reflecting a need to control and regulate popular practices. This criminalization created an underground illegal economy and network of relationships that nourished the activity. Juridical ambiguity and an inconsistent approach from the authorities contributed to a failure to stop its growth (see Chazkel 2011). Full criminalization of all gambling across Brazil in 1946 saw the rise of powerful *jogo do bicho* bankers in the 1950s and 1960s, initiating a new golden era for the lottery. These bankers not only came to control the lottery but also all illegal gambling rackets in Brazil, such as casinos, bingo, and from the late 1980s onward, electronic gaming machines.

Protection was essential to their activities. The *jogo do bicho* racketeers functioned in a criminal structure maintained and protected by state actors, principally members of the police forces, who illegally sold their services to protect the illegal markets. According to the Brazilian scholar Michel Misse, when an illegal product creates a secret economy to survive, it spawns a second clandestine economy, constituted by the illegal provision of services to the first. This helps elucidate webs of operational relationships that might sustain illicit activities, such as *jogo do bicho* or drug trafficking. The common factor is a service that he calls "political merchandise," constituted principally by favors offered by state agents who expropriate state powers to protect the interests of a third party, or raise funds from actors involved in illegal economic activity through extortion. He shows how, in this way, the informal illegal market is constituted by a logic of double illegality, with demand for illegal services existing parasitically alongside a market for illicit produce (Misse 2006, 198).

This process conceded considerable power to the *bicheiros* (lottery organizers) and both created and trivialized a dual illegal market, a by-product of the game's criminalization in law but not in practice. This notion of the illegal as banal, Misse believes, was transferred subsequently to marijuana and eventually cocaine. It was accompanied by growing impunity, which stemmed from widespread nonrecognition of the game's prohibition (Misse 2006, 199–200). Not only did *jogo do bicho* establish a functioning model of illicit relationships replicated by the illegal drug industry; it also blurs distinctions between what constitutes criminal and socially acceptable behavior, at the center of a series of ambiguous legal and criminal situations. *Jogo do bicho*, drug trafficking, and political corruption all depend on clandestine relationships and the illegal sale of state services. This late twentieth-century foundational matrix paved the way for the arrival of the militia at the beginning of the twenty-first.

The 1960s were tumultuous in Rio de Janeiro. The national capital was transferred to Brasília, and for the following fifteen years the city became known as the state of Guanabara, before its rebirth as the capital of Rio de Janeiro state in 1975. During these years, *jogo do bicho* thrived. While the city attempted to come to terms with lost revenue and stature, the illegal lottery bosses grew more powerful. They financed public works and lined political pockets. They weathered

crackdowns. A few prominent bankers began to emerge as major players. Most famous was the charismatic Castor de Andrade. This private school–educated law graduate, a “gentleman” from a traditional suburban family, expanded his practice to new dimensions, acquiring metalworks, gas stations, and a fish-processing factory. He made connections with the Sicilian Cosa Nostra and even steered his local football team, the humble Bangu Athletic Club, to victory in the 1966 state championships. Under the 1964–1985 dictatorship, Castor and his friends formed an alliance with the junta. The bankers, known locally as *bicheiros,* learned from the military and centralized their operations.

Links between *jogo do bicho* and state repression against the left and the working class were further cemented throughout the 1970s. Middle-ranking members of the military intelligence apparatus migrated from the dictatorship to the *jogo do bicho* infrastructure. One man who capitalized on this moment was Captain Ailton Guimarães. Guimarães came to prominence in 1969 as part of a team that killed an 18-year-old dissident named Eremias Delizoicov. Before Delizoicov died —shot 33 times— he managed to wound two of his would-be captors, including Guimarães, who he shot in the leg. For his efforts, Guimarães won the Medalha do Pacificador, a tribute meted out to regime darlings.

During these years, criminality among military agents was common. Guimarães drifted from antisubversive activities to contraband, specifically extortion of smugglers. Eventually he was denounced, investigated, captured, and even tortured by his own colleagues. His reputation as an incorruptible agent of repression in tatters, Guimarães introduced his network of crooked officials to major players in the *jogo do bicho*.

The dirty war, carnival, and politics

Jogo do bicho has long influenced both Rio politics and the city’s carnival. The Sessim David clan has controlled politics in Rio’s outlying Nilópolis, a sprawling satellite city in the Baixada Fluminense, for more than four decades (Bezerra 2010). Anísio Abrãao David is patron of Beija-Flor (hummingbird) samba school. Samba schools are social and cultural collectives that parade in official competition at carnival. The schools, which began in the 1930s and 1940s, grew out of poverty. The schools needed discipline, hierarchy, organization, and funding and could not survive without external intervention.

The shrewd *bicheiros* were quick to perceive the potential of such idiosyncratic organizations. Patronage of schools provided them with a formidable social structure for negotiating strategic partnerships on their own terms and a means of exploiting the universal popularity of carnival to camouflage their interests. They used the schools to form all manner of relationships in their favor, both “upward” with groups such as politicians, the media, and businesses, and “downward” to garner popular support and a potential electoral base (Chinelli and Da Silva 1993, 219–220). Patronage also allowed *jogo do bicho* bankers to portray themselves as social entrepreneurs with a genuine interest in supporting and developing the poor. When in the early 1980s Anísio, Castor de Andrade, and Guimarães cofounded a managing committee along the lines of a mafia-style Cupola for *jogo do bicho*, they simultaneously secured total control of Rio’s official carnival parade when they founded LIESA, the independent league of samba schools. LIESA still runs the parade today.

While his “cousins,” the Sessim David family, went into politics, providing him with extra protection when necessary, Anísio used the samba school both to eulogize and to build partnerships with the military regime. In 1973, 1974, and 1975, Beija-Flor celebrated carnival in the form of direct tributes to the junta and generals partied in Nilópolis. The sambas were pure propaganda, earning Beija-Flor the nickname “the Official School of the Dictatorship.”

Canny Anísio, using political clout, made sure that the Arena, the junta’s party, always won elections in Nilópolis. Military intelligence conducted a campaign against rival mayors and councilors in the region, accusing them of corruption and clearing the way for the Sessim and Abrãao clans, leaving Anísio free to take over *jogo do bicho*

in the Baixada Fluminense. He reciprocated by finding work for former officials in his businesses, and even at Beija-Flor, where they worked as security enforcers. These employees included torturers who consequently infected life at the samba school with fear and their dirty war ethos (Otávio and Jupiara 2015).

Among them was Paulo Malhães, a retired colonel who gave testimony about his dictatorship activities to the 2014 National Truth Commission established under former president Dilma Rousseff. During 20 hours of interviews, Malhães described in detail how he disposed of the body of Rubens Paiva, a left-leaning civil engineer and politician who "disappeared" in 1971. Malhães also confessed to directing operations at an interrogation center called "the house of death." Lawyers believe that 22 dissidents died under torture there. In April 2014, within weeks of testifying before the truth commission, Malhães was murdered at home in suspicious circumstances.

In 2018 then senator Flávio Bolsonaro, the Brazilian president's eldest son, canvassed for votes in Nilópolis alongside Anísio David's brother Farid, mayor of Nilópolis, and Simão Sessim, Anísio's cousin. Simão Sessim held a congressional seat in Brasília for 40 years. After failing to win reelection in 2018, Sessim was appointed official representative for Rio's state government in Brasília.

The *jogo do bicho* and illegal police death squads have long dominated politics and conducted lethal social cleansing campaigns against undesirables and opponents in the Baixada Fluminense and beyond. This model - a fusion of necropolitics (Mbembe 2019), territorial control, organized crime, and traditional politics - — has been appropriated by the militia, thought to operate today in more than half of Rio de Janeiro's neighborhoods.

Militias, the Crime Office, and Marielle Franco

When Castor de Andrade died of a heart attack during a card game in 1997, his death sparked a family dispute and lethal power struggle. Castor had a son, Paulinho, involved in the family business. Paulinho had a playboy reputation and was nowhere near as popular as his father. When Castor died, his gambling operation in Rio's sprawling West Zone was supposed to pass to his more business-minded nephew, Rogério. When Paulinho refused to hand the operation over, Rogério allegedly had him killed. The murder triggered a war over the family empire. Castor's son-in-law stepped into the fray. Rogério traveled with a large security detail and seemed untouchable. But in 2010 enemies nearly got him with a daytime car bomb that unleashed panic in the West Zone's affluent Barra neighborhood. Rogério survived the attack. His 17-year-old son Diogo, who had taken the wheel that morning, died on the spot.

The assassination attempt involved men close to Rogério. These included his own head of security, a sergeant in the fire brigade who, a few months later and reportedly on Rogério's orders, was shot and killed while riding his Harley-Davidson. At the time of the car bomb, federal police estimated monthly turnover for the West Zone electronic gambling business at $5 million a month. Organizers forced bar and bakery owners to install virtual poker units on their premises. The venomous de Andrade family dispute even divided Rio's civil police force, with different groups of police aligning themselves to either side.

These years saw the fortification and further emergence of the militias across the West Zone. Without the firm hand of Castor, the "gentleman" godfather who had reigned absolute for decades, quarrelling *bicheiros*, police factions, and militias transformed western Rio de Janeiro into a war zone. A high-profile player in this conflict was ex-policeman Ronnie Lessa, who had retired after losing a leg in a car bomb attack in 2009. The bomb had detonated underneath his personal vehicle as he drove home from work. At the

time of the car bomb incident, Lessa reportedly worked as hired gun for Rogério Andrade. Detectives believed that whoever bombed Lessa also planted the explosive that killed Rogério's son a year later.

In 2023, Ronnie Lessa is in custody, accused of firing the bullets that killed Marielle Franco in 2018. Somewhat extraordinarily, before his arrest, Lessa lived in Barra Villas, the same gated community as Jair Bolsonaro. Lessa and his alleged accomplice met there the night they are thought to have killed Franco. Bolsonaro has denied ever knowing Ronnie Lessa.

Lessa was much more than a mere gunman. He was a militia leader who operated several drinking-water distribution networks across the city. The 2019 seizure of 117 machine guns at his friend's house exposed him as one of Rio's leading arms traffickers. He also ran illegal bingo activity in Rio's upscale Barra district. In October 2018 he was recorded negotiating the return of electronic gambling machines seized in a raid with one of Barra's highest-ranking civil policeman. As a retired policeman, Lessa also received a monthly state pension. As a gunman, prosecutors believe he belonged to the Crime Office, a group of former police who worked as assassins, principally for *jogo do bicho*.

In February 2020, a huge police operation involving detectives from Rio tracked and killed another suspected member of the Crime Office, Adriano da Nóbrega, in the northeastern state of Bahia. The former military police sharpshooter had long-standing links to both the Bolsonaro family and *jogo do bicho* in Rio de Janeiro. He is alleged to have controlled militia operations in large swathes of Rio's west zone. He was very close to Flávio Bolsonaro and appears to have participated in a corruption scheme run out of Flávio's parliamentary office when he was a Rio state politician. Flávio employed members of Adriano's family and even admitted that Nóbrega gave him shooting lessons.

Recent revelations concerning Marielle Franco's assassination come from a taped confession made under oath and released to the press in June 2023. Here, Elcio de Queiroz —the former military policeman accused of driving the vehicle from where Ronnie Lessa allegedly fired the shots that killed Franco— reportedly informed police investigators that Bernardo Bello, a leading Rio de Janeiro *bicheiro*, supplied the murder weapon and car. Bello, arrested in Colombia in 2022 and currently on the run in Brazil, was a close associate of Adriano da Nóbrega and is thought to be the godson of Captain Guimarães, the former military regime torturer and founding member of the *jogo do bicho* Cupola. In 2017, Guimarães appointed Bello president of Vila Isabel, his samba school.

Conclusion

Brazilian rightwing politics has roots in paramilitary violence and crime in Rio de Janeiro. This paramilitarism is historically seeded in an alliance that developed during the military regime between security officials and organized crime in Rio. Today that violence has reemerged on the national stage through the Bolsonaro family and their tapping into a right-wing populist nostalgia for violent, dictatorship-era policies. For four years, a military-dictatorship-supporting, far-right president with well-documented links to Rio's mafias governed Brazil. To better understand the Bolsonaro family's influence and power, it is crucial to acknowledge the history and impact of state-embedded organized crime on Brazilian democracy. Marielle Franco's life and work challenged all those interests. Her death was a tragedy, and countless Brazilians have mobilized to defend her legacy. Current president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has appointed her sister, Anielle Franco, federal minister for racial equality.

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