

Brazil's Evolving Police State: Political Coercion and Repression

One Step Further Into the Criminalization of the Radical Left

By [Socialist Project](#)

Global Research, February 20, 2014

[Socialist Project](#)

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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If 2013 put popular protests back into the historical map of Brazil, 2014 is certainly prone to be even more essential for asserting the lasting power of contestation by the radical Left. It was already a special year because of major elections for legislative and executive positions, including the presidential office, and due to the international attention expected during the FIFA World Cup. While the government would have liked to handle these in a business as usual manner, the disruptive power of protests and the revived opposition by the radical Left to the Right, as well as the [Workers' Party](#) (PT) less than radical stance, have changed the State's management of society. In anticipation of the games and elections, social dissidence, particularly in urban spaces, has turned into a matter of national security.

The anti-terrorism bill of 2013 (PL 499/2013)^[1] was being rushed through the Senate under the sponsorship of Senator Romero Jucá (from PMDB, PT's government ally), only to be delayed at the last minute when the government was pressured by the radical Left and civil society concerned that the bill would criminalize the wave of protests occurring since June.^[2] The rush, according to Senator Jorge Viana (PT), one of the bill's supporters, was due to the essential need of having an anti-terrorism law in Brazil in light of the sports mega-events of 2014 and 2016. The death of videographer Santiago Andrade, killed by a rocket allegedly set off by two protesters on February 6th has also fuelled the debate on how the government and the police are to deal with the protests and demonstrations that have become part of the Brazilian routine since last year. Although Andrade is the first to die in a direct connection to protesters, his is not the only death associated with episodes of violence during the protests. Eleven other people died from causes ranging from tear gas to an alleged murder.^[3] The use of the one death that could conveniently justify the excessive and indiscriminate use of police force in the past to further empower it in the future with the pretext of fighting terrorism is, at minimum, suspicious.

Criminalizing the Radical Left

The attempts to criminalize social movements are nothing new. The Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST), among other movements historically condemned by the Right, are familiar with media attacks and the continuous efforts to criminalize their activities, especially the practice of occupations, and to vilify main spokespersons or individual members of the movements. This has translated in major

“news” stories accusing the movements of all sorts of crimes and of extremist associations (i.e. claims of association if Colombia’s FARC seem to do the trick), as well as haphazard and violent action by the military police and the state in their handling of occupations. João Pedro Stédile, from MST’s national coordination, has been personally attacked by mainstream media on several occasions. Arbitrary arrests and police violence against members of MTST are also a common occurrence whenever the judiciary allows police intervention against occupations. With the growth and diversification of the groups involved in protests and occupations since 2013, we can see an attempt toward the general criminalization of demonstrations of dissidence and discontent that expands the usual tactics already used against social movements. The combination of media attacks, police brutality, and the rearrangement of the legal system to deal with criminal activity related to protests and social movements (organized or autonomous) suggests an incremental coordinated effort between the government and mainstream corporate media in Brazil to extend the criminalization of social movements to all groups and individuals who visibly demonstrate their opposition to the status quo.

The anti-terrorism bill currently defines terrorism broadly, one of the main concerns put forward by its critics. Further, occupations of public buildings, such as State Legislatures, that result in damage could also be framed as terrorism. A few other provisions under the anti-terrorism bill also require special attention in the current context. One consists of harsher penalties for “terrorist” crimes committed in large crowds and with the use of explosives. According to Senator Viana, if the law had already been sanctioned, the protesters responsible for the rocket explosion that hit and killed Andrade could be framed as terrorists.[\[4\]](#) While Andrade’s death is unfortunate, it is being used by the current government to boost support for a bill that would give foundation to increased surveillance of protesters and restrictions to the right to protest, assemble, and access certain public city areas and events. These are not only steps to criminalize social movement and Left activity, but also consist of an overall assault on the democratic right to public spaces as a long-term strategy to silence opposing voices in the city.

The provision pertaining to the financing of terrorist acts, whether these acts are realized or not, is of special concern given the heightened negative attention given to Black Bloc activities by the media and the State. Black Bloc tactics, until recently largely unfamiliar to the Brazilian context, became very present after the June protests and continue to be. While in June the mainstream media saw its credibility plunge by calling protesters fighting against the public fare increases (led by Movimento Passe Livre – Free Pass Movement) vandals and criminals, it soon found in the individuals dressed in black, wearing masks, and engaging in civil disobedience their desired scapegoats. The tactics became characterized as organized and planned, and ever since there have been attempts to identify the leaders of the “Black Bloc group.”

One example is activist Elisa Quadros (known as Sininho), who has been attacked and investigated by the media while it attempts to uncover illicit links between Sininho, the “Black Blocs,” and politicians and party militants from the Left at all costs. The media suggests that Sininho can be the key to understanding how the “Black blocs” are financed and trained and by whom. Parties from the radical Left, such as PSOL and PSTU are the targets of such media spreads, as shown in a bizarre series of articles filled with hearsay reports about how the protesters responsible for Andrade’s death were allegedly paid by Left parties to protest and even somehow connected to State Congressman Marcelo Freixo from PSOL in Rio de Janeiro.

If the anti-terrorism bill passes, attempts to link “Black Bloc terrorism” during protests with the radical Left will effectively result in delegitimizing and undercutting the Left’s ability and right to protest and organize against capitalism and the neoliberal hold of the state by reframing the opposition as terrorists. Normally, attempts by the Right to attack political parties from the radical Left directly scream of partisanship and hegemonic renewal. By formalizing the criminalization of social movements through targeting Black Bloc activities, the possibility of devising connections between the Left and the financing and organizing of illegal acts represents an opportunity to support groundless attacks with legal legitimacy to affect public opinion and political consciousness. As of now, no new text or amendments to the anti-terrorism bill have been presented.

Meanwhile, Senator Armando Monteiro (PTB) urged the Senate to quickly move to another bill designed to establish harsher penalties to crimes of vandalism, targeting the tactic of causing damage to private and public property employed by protesters and Black Bloc alike. This bill, written in response to the recent protests, potentially criminalizes those involved in the direct or indirect organization of events where acts of vandalism happen, including through online communications.^[5] This qualification has the potential of affecting and deterring the practice of announcing and promoting protest events through social media, a major vehicle for autonomous and grassroots groups, by expanding liability beyond the agent of the criminal act. Penalties are expected to be one third harsher if the acts of vandalism occur during a “popular demonstration of peaceful and democratic nature,”^[6] which illustrates the moralist schism between so-called peaceful protesters and radical ones that was prominent during the major protests.

In Rio de Janeiro, the Secretary of Public Security José Beltrame has pushed the introduction of a bill in the Senate typifying certain protest acts as public disorder as a way to “organize” and manage the protests.^[7] It imposes rules for public demonstrations and limits individual behaviour during protest, such as wearing masks or any artifacts that could be deemed harmful. The rules do not apply to police personnel, who have shown up to protest duty with covered faces and uniforms lacking nametags or other personal identification.

Calls for Demilitarizing the Police More Urgent Than Ever

It is no surprise why a military document from late 2013 by Minister of Defense Celso Amorim classifies popular demonstrations and their use of public space for protests, including occupations, as “opponent forces” that represent major threats to public order.^[8] The document suggests the possible employment of the military forces to control and contain protests during the FIFA World Cup this summer, which would formalize suppositions over a possible state of emergency during the mega-event to address public demonstrations of social discontent, considered “urban disturbances” by the military police.

Although the multiplicity of demands and the de-radicalization that took place during the June protests by emphasizing unity over antagonism and national pride over party militancy led to a quick descent into cacophony, cries for the demilitarization of the Brazilian police were loud and clear. Now they seem more prescient than ever as the anti-terrorism bill (as it currently stands), the vandalism bill, and the public disorder bill could give formalized support to the employment of military tactics by the police and the army against protesters, supporters, and militants and politicians from radical Left parties. National and urban security is being invoked to justify the overt use of coercion by the State and the effective repression of radical voices and acts.

In addition to criminalizing the opposition, these bills and the State support for military repression on the streets contribute to a setting of fear over speaking up against neoliberal policies, FIFA's influence and the pacification of the country in preparation for mega-events, police sanctioned violence in poor communities, and the general disregard for marginalized populations, among other issues. The result is further depoliticization of social groups who would rather abide by the status quo than risk threat of personal harm in the hands of the police and the judiciary. Even in cases where terrorism convictions may not be possible, the process of criminalization of acts deemed similar to terrorist acts can lead to intrusive investigations and serious moral damages to individuals who voice and act in opposition to the interests of the capitalist State in Brazil. The spread of fear associated with the new bills can discourage participation at a crucial time for the Brazilian radical Left, as it attempts to reorganize itself, establish dialogue, and turn away from the fragmented vision noted during last year's protests to gain strength for the elections and in the long-run.

The still strong control of the news by corporate media in Brazil, despite the rise of alternative media collectives that are more popular with already radicalized groups, guarantees this depoliticization by backing up the State and capital in spreading discord and suspicion about the Left and in the Left. This not only benefits the status quo but is also convenient for maintaining certain parties and individuals in power after the elections in October. Therefore, it is easy to see why the groups calling for the demilitarization of the police are also calling for the democratization of the Brazilian media.

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