

## Public security in a violent country

Segurança pública num país violento

Seguridad pública en un país violento

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This paper reflects on current public security issues in Brazil, based on a specific situation of social upheaval caused by a strike by the Military Police in the State of Espírito Santo. The strike took place in February 2017 and can be approached as a “case”, given the complexity required to reach a (provisional) solution. The movement brought the Military Police in Espírito Santo to a complete standstill for 21 days before the situation normalized.

In order to circumvent Brazil’s constitutional ban on police strikes, the strikers’ strategy was to send their wives, mothers, and daughters to stand in front of the barracks gates, thus preventing any potential strikebreakers from leaving on missions. Although strikes by the Military Police are prohibited by Brazilian *Constitution*, they are not new to the country. In Rio de Janeiro State, also in February 2017, and as a spinoff of the events in Espírito Santo, a movement broke out with a similar format but was soon quelled. However, the Civilian Police in Rio have announced a state of preparedness for strike, although they are still performing all their duties. In Pernambuco State there was a menacing demonstration by the Military Police in downtown Recife in early December 2016, but the State government took the initiative of negotiating with the movement, promising to increase wages and pay overdue bonuses, thereby aborting a strike that had already been scheduled. In April 2014, the Military Police in the State of Bahia went on a 42-hour strike, and in 2012 they joined firefighters and crossed their arms for 12 days on the eve of Carnival (a high-profile event, including a huge influx of tourists).

All the movements adopted the same ritual: participation by family members, police trade unions, retired officers, and political leaders. And the reply by the State government was also routinely synchronized: declaring the strikers’ movement illegal, threatening strikers with sanctions, including discharging them from the force, recourse to the Armed Forces and National Security Forces, the Federal government’s involvement, civil society organizations, and increasingly the Office of the Public Prosecutor and the Supreme Court. Only a few of the demands have been met, and the reasons for the rebellions express a persistent undercurrent of dissatisfaction and insubordination: menial wages for the lower ranks and oppressive working conditions and equipment (vehicles and weapons) far short of the requirements for confrontations with armed criminal groups.

The results are also terrible, as shown in Espírito Santo, where violent deaths increased from an average of four per day to 18 during the upheaval. The same was true in Bahia State during the police strike in 2014: homicides increased from an average of six per day to 35 in Greater Metropolitan

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Salvador. And in Pernambuco, even though the strike was short-lived and limited to an open and public demonstration, there were reports of looting, robberies, gang theft, and vandalism in various neighborhoods of Greater Recife. Stores, banks, shopping centers, post offices, and other services closed their doors. The rapid and alarming increase in homicides, the most powerful indicator of social violence in the world, is merely the cruelest face of this tragedy. The situation involves enormous economic, social, political, and routine daily damage to citizens, as shown in the case of Espírito Santo: looting stores, shutdown of public transportation, an increase in street crimes and armed assault, factories, commerce, and services locked down, loss of schooldays, precarious health services, and extra government expenses to support the Armed Forces and National Security Force, among others. The rise in pervasive social fear and a feeling of weakness and powerlessness on the part of public authority to provide security all lead the population (in the most undesirable way possible) to realize the importance of security policy for society's daily workings.

Reversing Hannah Arendt's expression in her book *On Violence* <sup>1</sup>, we would say that the police strikes in Brazil "dramatize the situation of public insecurity in a violent country". Thus, cases like the strike in Espírito Santo call for in-depth analysis of these public security agents, their power, their living and working conditions, and questions about how they are needed.

(i) The first observation concerns investment. Brazil's prevailing climate of social violence puts public security at the top of the country's political agenda, not only for the states, but for the federal government. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Justice currently earmarks 81% of its budget for the Federal Police and Federal Highway Police, and a pitiful 3% to the National Public Security Fund. Since the fund was created in 2002, the Ministry of Justice has cut its budget by 48%. Even though the government recently changed the name to "Ministry of Justice and Public Security", this formality's practical implications need to be monitored to determine to what extent it adds something substantial to the investments in planning, intelligence, technology, and backup for public security agents in the states.

Importantly, according to data from the Brazilian Yearbook on Public Security in 2016 <sup>2</sup>, there has been an increase in funding for security in recent years, especially from the states and municipalities. In 2015, BRL 76.3 billion (approximately USD 25 billion) was spent on security, or about 1.38% of the GDP. From 2002 to 2015, there was a 62% increase in spending on security, and municipalities gradually entered the equation, although the largest share is still borne by the states. There are now nearly 700,000 municipal police troops and guards in Brazil.

The question is, if budget spending on security has increased, especially in the states and municipalities, why do crime rates fail to improve perceptibly, except in a few states? Why do the police still feel their living and working conditions have not improved?

(ii) A second observation concerns the relationship between society and the police as an institution. Brazil's first police force was created soon after the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in 1809, based on the 18th-century European model <sup>3,4,5</sup>, that is, conceived as a central part of the modern state. The institution's underlying idea is that civilization and democracy function in a balance between the mechanisms of cohesion represented by the institutions of socialization and the coercion represented by the police and court system. In Brazil, however, history shows that since its origins, the police have always been despised by the middle and upper classes and hated by the poor (with the latter invariably the prime target of police action) <sup>6</sup>.

History moves on, but one of the main current complaints by the police is still the same: lack of recognition for the services they provide, either by the population or the public authorities. Such depreciation takes different shapes: low wages (inconsistent with the risk to life and limb the police suffer daily); public prejudice; lack of an institutional channel to express their difficulties, dissatisfaction, and suggestions for improving law enforcement services; stressful working conditions; and shortage of the means to act on their needs <sup>6,7</sup>. The strike thus acts as a burning fuse.

The question is, if Brazilian *Constitution* prohibits the military police from striking, what procedures can they use to negotiate their demands? Why does the Brazilian National Congress, which represents the Brazilian people, fail to address the issue and acknowledge their dignity, ensuring the police the social importance they deserve?

(iii) A third observation concerns social violence and the way public security institutions deal with it. Five-year homicides in Brazil exceeded the number of fatal casualties in the War in Syria. From

January 2011 to December 2015, 279,567 Brazilians were murdered, compared to 256,124 deaths in Syria from March 2011 to November 2015. The logic of police action is like a “war”, with the fight against drugs and crime as the backdrop. The police have the “almost impossible” mission of preventing and investigating crimes and misdemeanors and protecting society. However, they are cornered between rising violence by organized, well-equipped criminal groups and their own precarious working conditions, unequipped for the fight. The problem is not only to supply the police with more guns and squad cars, but to offer them quality training and support for their daily forays in highly inflamed areas, where it is not uncommon for the police to lose fellow troop members and have to double their time on duty, without even any emotional support or rest.

In this clash, the statistics leave no room for doubt: many police die, and many police kill. And the deaths during confrontations fuel the statistics on social violence. According to Lotin <sup>8</sup>, from 2009 to 2015 there were 17,663 deaths in Brazil resulting from police interventions (on and off duty), or an average of 2,523 deaths per year or 210 per month. Such lethal force has received heavy criticism, including the fact that it is selective, striking down mainly young people in poor urban neighborhoods. By way of comparison, in 2015 there were 3,320 deaths at the hands of the police in Brazil, compared to 98 in Honduras and 582 in South Africa. In absolute terms, the Brazilian police are far more lethal than the police in these two countries. The rate in Brazil (1.6/100,000 inhabitants) is similar, but still outstrips Honduras (1.2) in 2014/2015 and South Africa (1.1) in 2015/2016 <sup>9</sup>. Thus, although most Brazilian police strive to perform their Constitutional duty, an ethos of confrontation and bellicosity pervades their practice. At the limit, many become vigilantes and join private militias or death squads, thus further fueling a climate of social upheaval, as suggested by inquiries following the strike in Espírito Santo.

(iv) Finally, some brief remarks on the excess mortality among members of the police themselves. From 2009 to 2015 there was a 35.6% increase in total deaths. On-duty Brazilian police die twice as often as in the United States, and the Brazilian military police die twice as often as the civilian police. Off duty, the mean annual and monthly death counts (260 and 22, respectively) are 2.5 and 2.4 times higher, respectively, than the annual and monthly death counts on duty (103 and 9). This finding, corroborated by the literature <sup>6,7</sup>, indicates that for Brazil’s public security agents the risk of dying is greater when they are outside the protection of their institutional environment and are either recognized by criminals or practicing some form of paid work (moonlighting) as private security guards. The mortality rates among the police are generally much higher than for the population as a whole.

In conclusion, public security in Brazil has become a profoundly important national issue, more than ever before. Dealing with the issue seriously means to include it in the democratic debate for building a minimally civilized nation.

## Contributors

E. R. Souza and M. C. S. Minayo participated in writing and revision of the paper.

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