

The Militarization of Police in Favelas: Effects of an Underlying Authoritarian Regime on the Brazilian Political System

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ABSTRACT

In Brazil, the political system has had a major influence on Brazilian culture and social norms. In order to address Brazilian racism, it is necessary to analyze the institutions in which racism is allowed to prevail, including political systems/state apparatus. While the official military regime is said to be over, it should be noted that the military regime never completely disappeared; rather it became “invisible” due to Brazil’s government perpetuating the belief the country is a “racial paradise.” Despite this, the prevalence of the military regime is still recognized in Afro-Brazilian communities through the physical presence of the military police. The residue of the official military regime in Brazil’s history has trickled down to affect Afro-Brazilian citizens today at the local level with the militarization of policing practices in favelas, predominantly Afro-Brazilian urban communities. This article will examine the aftermath of Brazil’s authoritarian regime from the 1960s to 1980s, and its effects in creating racialized practices of “protecting the state” via the militarization of police in Afro-Brazilian favelas.

Keywords: Afro-Brazilian, authoritarianism, democracy, police brutality, favelas, racism, necropolitics

Introduction

On January 1, 2019, Jair Bolsonaro was inaugurated as president of Brazil, resulting in the government’s drastic shift toward right-wing ideology and policies. This threatened the progressive turn that Brazilian society had begun to make with former leftist presidents such as Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva (2003–2010) and Dilma Rouseff (2011–2016). President Bolsonaro did not shy away from making misogynist, homophobic, and racist remarks throughout his campaign and the first year of his presidency. He also gained support from other right-wing leaders across the globe, including US President Donald Trump (Lempp 2019). Prior to his presidential election, Bolsonaro regularly praised Brazil’s previous authoritarian regime of 1964–1985 and aligned himself with political ideologies that reflected this, including the idea that Brazil is a “racial democracy,” as well as the notion that Brazil should be recognized as a “mestizo (mixed-race) nation” (Lempp 2019, 3).

Although Afro-Brazilians make up the majority of the population in Brazil, they are significantly impacted by racial democracy ideology and authoritarian regimes, which cause many issues that affect this particular group, such as police brutality, to be ignored by many right-wing Brazilian elites such as Bolsonaro. The idea of racial democracy suggests that Brazil is a “paradise” where races have been blended via miscegenation and interracial relationships to the point that all Brazilians belong to a mixed race, and therefore racial inequality, and largely,

social inequality, do not exist. Racial democracy ideology perpetuates the notion that racial groups should assimilate to become a singular Brazilian race in order to be integrated into society, which would supposedly lead to amicable race relations. However, assimilation strategies are often coercive and significantly onerous in relation to non-white racial groups such as Afro-Brazilians, essentially sweeping issues that specifically affect them under the rug.

As demonstrated by Brazil's current right-wing turn, authoritarianism has not yet been eradicated. After the 1964 coup, Brazil became a military regime run by right-wing elites, who continuously used repressive strategies to control the general public and stay in power. In 2019, President Bolsonaro signed into law an anti-crime bill that expanded Brazil's penal code to place an emphasis on tackling organized crime, such as drug gangs (Mello 2019). However, many critics of the bill fear that this will actually lead to an increase in police violence against civilians. In an illustrative case, a woman received a call on May 17, 2019 from a family member stating that there had "been an accident with Brayan," her nephew whom she had been taking care of (Stargardter 2019). Once she arrived at the scene in the Rio favela where she and her family lived, she found her 19-year-old nephew lying in the street, shot dead. This scene was near a street stall where a police drug raid had just taken place. Police found no evidence that Brayan had been involved in any illegal activity and concluded that he was killed by "being in the wrong place at the wrong time" (Stargardter 2019). New authoritarian anti-crime laws may result in more cases like Brayan's, where police forces enact violence in favelas using military-style practices.

Authoritative mechanisms have been hidden under notions of Brazil achieving racial harmony, marking the nation as a "racial paradise" while Afro-Brazilians continue to be disregarded as second-class citizens (Caldwell 2007, 3). Although many Brazilian elites claim to believe in the notion of racial democracy, a person's "blackness" is seen as a threat to right-wing notions of Brazil having achieved racial harmony through the unification of a singular, Brazilian race. This fiction essentially implies that characteristics of blackness should be "whitened" in order for Brazil to be united. This idea also insinuates that the needs of certain groups, such as Afro-Brazilians, are not factors that should be considered when developing a unified nation. The militarization of police and police brutality are interconnected and should not be thought of as separate issues. These acts of state-sanctioned police violence against Afro-Brazilians represent the continuing presence of authoritarianism in Brazil's political system. This article therefore examines the effects of a lasting presence of authoritarianism in the Brazilian state via racialized practices of police violence against Afro-Brazilians and militaristic practices of repressive policing in favelas.

The Authoritarian Regime and the Transition to Democracy

Brazil endured an authoritarian military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. During this time, the military was allowed much more power and influence regarding policymaking and policy enforcement (Skidmore 1990, 15). The Brazilian military gained a foothold in essentially all realms of the Brazilian state. This occupation even included civil institutions such as local police forces. This style of political reign lasted for twenty-one years, until the democratic election of President José Sarney de Araújo Costa in 1985 (Skidmore 1990, 15). However, although Brazil had gained a duly elected president, it did not lose its military-style politics, which were now embedded within the Brazilian state.

When political systems undergo transition, an opening is created where old forms of politics can be eradicated or amended. However, such openings are rare and only infrequently lead to

true governmental and societal change. From 1985–1990, Brazil experienced an “abertura” period, in which its political system attempted to transition from the authoritarian military regime to a democracy (Rochon and Mitchell 1989, 307). During this time, the official military regime was declared to have come to an end, but the military and authoritarian elites manipulated this transition period to benefit themselves. They created an electoral process that enabled elections to appear to be democratic, but in fact allowed for elites to have control over Brazil’s electoral process (Rochon and Mitchell 1989, 308). For elites, the purpose of the abertura period was to create a system that resembled democracy to appease Brazilian citizens, but that still allowed them to maintain the power they had during the former authoritarian regime. Elites used this “transition opening” to further their agendas by using their high-status positions to perpetuate political practices that benefitted them the most. In this case, keeping democratic institutions in a frail state was the best way for elites to continue to hold authoritative power over the Brazilian state. These political arrangements were naturalized during this transition phase and continue to condition both current and future political systems and possibilities.

In a democratic society, representatives of the government serve as buffers between the state and civilian populations. For Afro-Brazilians, the exercise of state authority is manifested by the judiciary and the street-level behavior of police (Mitchell and Wood 1998, 1005), who are officially representatives of the Brazilian state. Policing practices that are enacted by civil and military police forces in favelas are essentially undemocratic, authoritarian methods of policing Afro-Brazilians. These mechanisms are inconsistent with a respect for the human rights of Afro-Brazilian citizens.

Afro-Brazilians and an Undemocratic Justice System

The ways in which the term “citizenship” is defined ultimately depend on what type of society and political community a country would like for its citizens to have (Mouffe 1992, 70). In an authoritarian military regime, power, which is determined by access to resources such as money, education, and political influence, is held solely by dictators and their immediate subordinates. In Brazil, many elites restrain access to political rights, thereby truncating the political power of Afro-Brazilians. This is accomplished by Brazilian elites having influence over governmental policies that hinder Afro-Brazilians’ representation in politics. Democratic citizenship differs in the sense that citizens are typically allowed to actively self-advocate for policies that will benefit them and their communities and promote equitable distribution of resources and power (Mouffe 1992, 71). This distinction contrasts with authoritarian subjugation, where government has a monopoly over the creation of policies that only serve to allow for autocratic leaders to maintain power and control over citizens. A democracy is intended to encompass a broader portion of the public, which assumes that there must be active participation of citizens in the distribution of resources (Mouffe 1992, 71). In this sense, citizenship is always being negotiated, as citizens participate in democratic practices to change their rights and obligations. This definition of citizenship has proven to be problematic for Afro-Brazilians, who are negatively affected by judicial and policing institutions. This continuous struggle for citizenship destabilizes power dynamics between Afro-Brazilians, as their citizenship powers are being stripped away, and those who are involved in taking their power, namely law enforcement and judicial institutions.

The realities of citizenship in Brazil are revealed in the discretionary prerogatives open to the criminal justice system, whose function changes depending on the skin color and social class of the individuals with which it interacts. In Brazil, the facts of a particular case are regarded as true or not based on the judge’s discretion in the courts. The judge must analyze the facts that the

police found within the context of the information gathered from the parties and circumstances involved. This situation can lead to mistreatment of defendants through ignoring the rights of the accused in order to protect the interests of the state (police institutions). According to Mitchell and Wood, the manner in which the “facts of the case” are determined in Brazilian courts results in a system where judges lend “substantial credence to the physical and emotional demeanor of the accused, making determinations that are highly responsive to the defendant’s comportment and appearance of truthfulness” (1998, 1007). Historically, Brazil’s legal system has been particularly biased against certain criminal defendants, usually the poor and nonwhites.

The ways in which the term “criminal” is defined depends largely on the desires and beliefs of Brazilian elites. As Caldeira (1996) states, “At the most general level, people of all classes stereotypically associate criminals with the poor, with black people, with migrants from the northeast of Brazil, with sons of single mothers, with consumers of drugs, with promiscuity, and with cortifos (tenements) and favelas (shantytowns)” (as quoted in Mitchell and Wood 1998, 1007). As blackness is seen as a threat to a unified white Brazilian nation, the term “criminal” is commonly associated with blackness and ultimately with Afro-Brazilians. This direct correlation between criminality and dark skin color leaves Afro-Brazilians vulnerable to official repression. Blackness, in other words, is seen as criminal, and this connotation renders Afro-Brazilians more susceptible to state-sanctioned acts of violence.

Policing Practices and Police Brutality

Brazilian police behavior is influenced by an authoritarian political framework that uses military tactics to control the public and employs symbolic and physical forms of violence to exert control over a particular population. Even after the creation of the new Brazilian Constitution of 1988, when “police forces came under the control of state governors (rather than the army), their internal structure, daily protocol, and relationship with civil society continued much the same” (Garmany 2014, 1242). Although Brazil returned to democracy in the late 1980s, the institutional practices established under the dictatorship, including its militaristic structure, officer training programs, and the freedom to act without accountability, have not yet been reformed.

On May 5, 2019, footage of current right-wing Rio governor Wilson Witzel circulated across Brazil, showing him riding in a police helicopter as it flew over a favela in the southern Rio de Janeiro city of Angra dos Reis, with the sound of gunfire in the background. In the video, Witzel states,

Hello people, we are starting today, in Angra dos Reis, along with the mayor Fernando Jordão, an operation, with CORE (Civil Police special forces), with the Military Police, and the Civil Police to end once and for all this banditry that is terrorizing our marvelous city of Angra do Reis. We are starting our operation today. We are ending this mess. We are going to put our house in order. Let’s go! (Mier 2019).

This incident displays a direct abuse of power and the interconnectedness of the military and state. The state uses military-style tactics in the form of policing practices to over-surveil and commit violent acts against Afro-Brazilians. Even in today’s supposed democratic Brazilian state, right-wing extremist governor Witzel and politicians like him use authoritarian tactics, through military and civil police forces, to perpetuate violence and racist narratives against Afro-Brazilians that serve to allow right-wing politicians such as themselves to maintain power.

This emergence of right-wing forces, including Bolsonaro's presidential candidacy and election, has sparked an increase in violence across Brazil, particularly against Afro-Brazilians, with civil and military police forces killing 5,144 people in 2017 (Roth 2019). These rates had increased about 20 percent since 2016 and reveal a trend in the rise of state violence in Brazil (Roth 2019). However, it should be noted that these numbers are based on reported statistical data. They do not account for the many unsolved murders and unreported cases of violence that are perpetuated against the Brazilian population by civil, military, and federal police forces.

There are three different sets of police forces in Brazil: civil police, military police, and the federal police force. Military police are responsible for patrolling and preserving order in public spaces, while civil police are charged with detective and criminal investigation work, and federal police look after "the nation's interests, serving as its judiciary police, controlling drug traffic, and guarding the frontiers" (Garmany 2014, 1242). Due to elite leaders of the Brazilian state's encouragement of military-style policing practices, some of the responsibilities and purposes of the three differing police forces have essentially melted together, causing abuses of power on the part of these forces. Afro-Brazilians are subjected to terror tactics in favelas, where civil police often invade looking for "suspected criminals." This approach is very similar to the military practices of soldiers looking for suspected enemies of the state during times of war. This militarization of policing practices causes police to "regard themselves as 'waging war' against criminals" (Mitchell and Wood 1998, 1007). This approach places a higher priority on eliminating the "criminal class" and a lower priority on protecting the rights of citizens (Mitchell and Wood 1998, 1007). State-perpetrated acts of terror serve to reiterate the authoritarian powers of Brazil's government and suppress political activism in Afro-Brazilian communities. As non-white racial narratives are seen as threats to Brazilian racial democracy, along with notions of economic and social inequality, authoritarian elites aim to exert political power and control in Afro-Brazilian communities to instill fear. The main motive for this continued racialized violence is to maintain political superiority and power over the nation.

Latin American police departments frequently lack adequate funding and resources to implement effective policing strategies. Consequently, this scarcity leads to aggressive policing, which quickly deteriorates into a repressive, militarized system of fighting crime (Dammert and Malone 2008, 37). There are varying styles of policing that the civil and military police forces use against Afro-Brazilians. One method of policing favelas involves "zero tolerance." In zero-tolerance strategies, which stress comprehensive, aggressive law enforcement with "no holds barred" (Dammert and Malone 2008, 38), police forces often fight crime with an extreme form of *mano duro* (iron fist): suspected criminals are severely sanctioned, sometimes extra-judicially. By way of this approach, state actors can hold suspects accountable for an alleged crime or offense and carry out punishment without legal process or supervision from the judicial system (Cotta et al. 2016). Punishment is often violent and results in an excessive use of force from state representatives like the military police force.

In contemporary Brazil, death squads often carry out target killings and other acts of violence. Death squads can be described as vigilante groups that either murder for hire or murder for their own interests, mainly stemming from right-wing notions of using physical violence to protect Brazilian citizens from organized crime and drugs, as well as other citizens who are deemed as threats by the state. They are formally separate from the Brazilian state, but members of these groups often are ex-police or military members, and in some cases even off-duty cops who act in their own interests. On September 19, 2007, residents of Bairro da Paz, a low-income neighborhood along Avenida Paralela in Salvador, discovered five young men shot to death in a

ravine, where four of the victims had had their necks tied together with rope. This scene was photographed and appeared on the front page of a local newspaper. At the scene of the crime, investigators found “shell casings exclusively used by the National Armed Forces of the government (*Forças Armadas*), and crack rocks in the victims’ pockets” (Smith 2013, 177). These murders were committed by death squads in order to display their power as vigilantes and their willingness to inflict extralegal penalties on Afro-Brazilians. Photos of the crime scenes and dead bodies circulated around surrounding areas, symbolizing a larger issue of police brutality and state violence in Brazil. Vigilantes imitate the actions of police officers who abuse power and assert authority over the poor and Afro-Brazilians, which serves to strengthen the Brazilian state’s authoritarian governance. The circulation of explicit photos depicting violence and death serves to perpetuate the notion of Afro-Brazilians being “foreign invaders” who hinder the idea of whitening the nation to achieve a “racial paradise” in Brazil. Vigilante groups such as death squads commit these acts of violence as a way to stop Afro-Brazilians from gaining power, as this would essentially dismantle the illusion of a racial paradise (Smith 2013, 178).

According to Christen Smith, “death squads are egregious examples of police related violence in Brazil and the hallmark of police brutality in Bahia” (2013, 179). Although death squads are not exclusively tied to the police, there is a correlation between the emergence of death squads and the excessive use of force by police officers who abuse their powers to assert authority over Afro-Brazilians. These patterns are linked to Brazil’s history of military dictatorship and the lingering legacy of the oppression of citizens through government abuses. Death squads are a physical and symbolic representation of the oppression and control of Afro-Brazilian people, which transforms them into objects, rather than subjects or citizens.

Smith (2013) has argued that the intentional positioning of dead black bodies in the Brazilian news and media is used to reinforce white supremacy through the practice of necropolitics. Drawing on the work of Achille Mbembe (2003), necropolitics can be defined as “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (as quoted in Smith 2013, 182). The practice of necropolitics is a racialized and normalized practice that is being justified through policing institutions under the notion of “protecting the state,” while simultaneously negatively affecting marginalized groups like Afro-Brazilians. The torturing and disfiguring of racially “other” bodies, including displaying them spectacularly and circulating images of these scenes as keepsakes, represents the role that racial terror has played in defining Brazilian culture (Smith 2013, 182). According to Smith, “Scenes of police terror and death squad executions are intensely visible, deeply racialized, hyper-spectacles of violence” (2013, 182). Smith also argues that this institutionalized form of control and racism through police violence is becoming naturalized in Brazil. Due to this infliction of a kind of psychic violence, such practices and images become ingrained in the minds of Afro-Brazilians, working to perpetuate racism both physically and mentally. This observation suggests that Brazil’s claim of being a racial democracy with amicable race relations is fallacious.

Challenges to Police Reform

There are certain practices that allow for the conditions in which police are allowed to perform violent acts against Afro-Brazilians and maintain power. Some of these practices that demonstrate the continuity of racialized power in Brazil involve resistance acts, where Afro-Brazilians are essentially blamed for resisting authority; this leads to physical action from police, panoptic media framings of danger that depict Afro-Brazilians as dangerous and criminal, and housing geographies of blackness, which confine Afro-Brazilians to specific places that

geographically isolate them from the rest of society (Amar 2014, 306). “Resistance acts” are displays of “self-defense” against the police by alleged suspects in the context of a supposed armed exchange, usually during a raid or invasion of a favela by police (Amar 2014, 306). The justification of these acts of racialized violence under the guise of “self-defense” persists because of the continuing belief that black male youth in favelas embody danger. A “shoot first” policy remains, “legitimate in the public imagination, despite a decade of mounting evidence that the (overwhelmingly black) youth who are killed by police because of ‘resistance acts’ are often shot in the head or neck at close range, from behind, and without any evidence of the youth being armed or posing imminent danger to the officer” (Amar 2014, 306).

The media also aids in the persistence of police brutality. Coverage of BOPE (Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais, or Special Police Operations Battalion) by major television networks like *Globo Network* as the group invades favelas in order to “cleanse” the communities of drug dealers, helps generate feelings of danger among white Brazilians that are allegedly associated with Afro-Brazilians. The media works to create a particular image of “racialized horror, showing live coverage of ‘crime wars,’” where Afro-Brazilians are portrayed as criminals and the police are portrayed as the heroes who fight against them, “with each scene emotionally over-exaggerated by the worried facial expressions of the reporters themselves” (Amar 2014, 307). These media portrayals serve to perpetuate the notion that it is necessary for Afro-Brazilians to receive “punishments” that involve acts of violence and brutality from state agents such as police. It also perpetuates the notion that black communities are separate entities that should be considered as dangerous, poor, and undesirable spaces. These acts of brutality and violence against Afro-Brazilian communities are rationalized as necessary for the protection of the rest of Brazilian society. However, policing practices enacted by officers in Afro-Brazilian communities actually contribute to the racialization of Afro-Brazilians, which in turn negates the notions of Brazil having racial harmony and being a racial paradise and leads to the further isolation of Afro-Brazilian communities. This isolation allows for extreme policing practices like death squads to exist in these communities, without much intervention from the rest of society.

The concept of personal discretion covers up the state’s role in allowing violent policing practices, ensuring that “any challenges to the system are rebuffed as particular instances of the exercise of discretion rather than the more fundamental existence of state power behind the institutions in question” (Garmany 2014, 1244). Police officers perform their duties in the name of bettering Brazilian society and are legitimized and encouraged by the state, as the state legally allows for the use of military-style policing practices against Afro-Brazilian citizens. Their use of personal discretion serves to cover up how state power operates in everyday forms of violence against Afro-Brazilians. It hides the fact that authoritative military-style policing practices are openly supported by the Brazilian state, which uses the police to “maintain order” in Afro-Brazilian communities. Law enforcement is performed in a manner that allows for racialized violence and police brutality against these particular citizens in the name of “protecting the state.” This observation also points to a paradox in the function of Brazilian law enforcement. Police must collaborate with civilians in order to facilitate better governance and maintain order, but they continue to struggle to do so because of the current authoritarian relationship between themselves and civilians, which constitutes their power and legitimacy (Garmany 2014, 1244). This dilemma complicates approaches to policing practices and allows for a space in which police are acting to maintain power, as opposed to serving the public, further contributing to the state’s repressive governance over Brazilian citizens. In order to realize police reform, the ways in which the state operates to exercise power must be challenged.

Looking Forward: Democratizing Police Institutions

Authoritarian governing practices are embedded in the Brazilian state and are perpetuated through agents who represent the state. Authorities such as police officers use repressive practices to inflict terror and violence on Afro-Brazilians. The police forces that patrol favelas are extensions of a state that uses military-style policing practices in the name of “protecting the Brazilian state” to maintain control of favela community members who are predominantly Afro-Brazilian. Transforming the police into a democratic institution continues to be a challenge faced by many newly established democracies, including Brazil. The interconnectedness of Brazil’s government, civil police forces, and military police agencies creates a pernicious system that lacks checks and balances. This situation causes marginalized groups, such as Afro-Brazilians, to suffer political suppression through a lack of representation in politics, police brutality, and racism enacted by multiple sectors of Brazilian society, including civilian-led death squads. Controlling police violence in Brazil is particularly complicated due to the authoritarian legacy embedded in the state’s political practices and the surge in right-wing political ideologies that can be partly traced back to Brazil’s severe economic recession in 2014, which led to President Bolsonaro’s election (Meyer 2018, 2). Part of the explanation for the continuing abuse of authority arises from the lack of state action taken against death squads, and the maintenance of two police forces that surveil Afro-Brazilian communities, the civil and military police. The military police, who are responsible for patrolling the streets in places like favelas, “are responsible for many deaths but have been largely unaccountable to the civil justice system” (Caldeira 2002, 236). Nevertheless, popular support for police who are allowed to kill is a key element in the continuation of police violence, as well as a major obstacle to reform. Surprisingly, this support of police violence conflicts with “an overall negative evaluation of the police, and a high level of victimization of working-class people from the police” in Afro-Brazilian communities (Caldeira 2002, 237). This paradox can be attributed to “a long history of several factors: the disregard for civil rights, distrust of the judicial system, and biased functioning in the form of racial and social inequality within institutions of the Brazilian state” (Caldeira 2002, 237).

In order to enact police reform and reduce the occurrences of police violence against Afro-Brazilians, the Brazilian state must eradicate the existence of death squads and other vigilante groups, as well as the military police force. The idea of a military police force is paradoxical in and of itself. The purpose of the military is to serve and protect Brazil and its citizens from harmful forces. Afro-Brazilians are supposed to be a part of a democratic Brazilian society, particularly since Brazil claims to be a “racial democracy.” If Brazil were truly a political as well as racial democracy, Afro-Brazilians would not be treated as foreign invaders who need to be surveilled and controlled through military force. If military-style policing and the military police force were eradicated, vigilante groups such as death squads would not feel emboldened to enact terror against Afro-Brazilians under the guise of “protecting the state.”

Additionally, it is important to challenge the structure of Brazil’s state, which allows for conditions that encourage police violence. As highlighted throughout this article, Brazil’s current democracy is still flooded with residue from the authoritarian regime of the 1960s. Keeping in mind that Brazil’s democracy is relatively new, efforts should be made to restructure the state in a way that allows Brazil to become a true democracy. For example, Brazil needs to see an increase in the number of Afro-Brazilian politicians, so that they can address and eradicate issues that affect the Afro-Brazilian population, including authoritative political practices that sanction excessive police brutality against them. This would allow for a fair and accurate political

representation of Afro-Brazilians that could lead to an increase in policies that advocate for Afro-Brazilian rights. Brazil's political system should be challenged to increase democratic practices across various matters, including the ways in which the state attempts to control crime. This includes the eradication of policing practices and policies that enable Brazilian state-sanctioned forms of terror and violence against Afro-Brazilians. True reform will require persistent efforts by Brazilian citizens themselves to challenge the political system and advocate for democratic practices across all aspects of society, which is only possible through the recognition and inclusion of Afro-Brazilian citizens.

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