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Brazil: Who Killed Marielle Franco? - “Não nos calarão!”, “They will not silence us!”

Wednesday 21 March 2018, by [MAHONY Ella](#) (Date first published: 20 March 2018).

Last week, Brazilian socialist Marielle Franco was assassinated on the streets of Rio. The questions surrounding her death are dangerous ones for Brazil’s reactionary right.

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“Who killed Marielle Franco?”. That is the question splayed across banners, spray-painted on walls, Sharpied onto signs, and shared on WhatsApp and Facebook across Brazil. It’s posed as a sincere question — a demand for a real investigation and justice — but also as an accusation. No one has a name or a photo, but everyone knows, broadly, who killed Marielle Franco. And that knowledge will reverberate through Brazilian politics for months and years to come.

An Execution

Last week, on the evening of Wednesday, March 14, Franco, a city councilor for Brazil’s Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), was in a car driving down Rio de Janeiro’s Rua Joaquim when a Cobalt-model car pulled up beside her and fired thirteen bullets into the vehicle. The bullets killed her and her driver, Anderson Gomes. Franco’s press secretary, who was in the backseat with her, survived.

All of the available evidence points to Franco’s death being a political execution, and a well-planned one at that. Earlier that evening, Franco had attended an event in Rio’s Lapa neighborhood called “Black Women Changing Power Structures.” When she arrived at the “Black Women’s House” that was hosting the event, the Cobalt that would later pursue her was already stationed outside. As she entered the house, a man got out of the car, made a call on his cellphone, and got back in to wait.

Two hours later, Franco, Gomes, and the press secretary left, and the Cobalt followed behind. New reports also indicate that as Gomes drove, a second car joined the chase. Despite the fact that Franco was obscured behind tinted windows, they fired directly into the backseat where she was sitting. According to Rio’s Homicide Division, the shooters were experienced and “knew what they were doing.” They made no attempt to take anything from the car, dispelling the notion of a robbery.

On Friday, suspicions about the source of the murder deepened when reports emerged that the bullets that killed Franco and Gomes were from an allotment sold to Brazil’s Federal Police in 2006. The same allotment had been used in a 2015 police operation in São Paulo that killed seventeen people, earning the distinction of the worst slaughter in the history of São Paulo state. Three military police and one civil guard were convicted in the killings.

Against the backdrop of Franco's life and politics, the suspicion is unavoidable that this was a political assassination carried out by elements of the police.

“Stop Killing Us!”

Franco's website opens with the sentence: “My name is Marielle Franco. I am a woman, I am black, I am a mother and I am a child of the Maré favela.” In this sentence one can find the essence of Franco's political life and the renovation of grassroots politics she sparked in Rio de Janeiro.

Born and raised in the Maré favela in the city's North Zone, Franco began working at the age of eleven years to pay for her education. During her youth, a close friend of hers was killed by a stray bullet, the result of crossfire between police and traffickers. That moment set her political life in motion, making her into a passionate campaigner for the demilitarization of Rio de Janeiro's police and for the human rights of black Brazilians and favela residents.

While working and raising a daughter as a single mother, she pursued bachelor's and master's degrees, ultimately defending a dissertation that criticized police “pacification” campaigns in Rio's largest favelas. “The police state,” she wrote, is “aimed at the repression and control of the poor. The most emblematic mark of this picture is the militaristic siege of the favelas and a growing process of incarceration.” The campaigns, she argued, worked to “contain the dissatisfied or ‘excluded’ of this process, the majority of them poor, and increasingly relegated to the city's ghettos and in prisons.”

She took her increasingly assertive politics to the offices of PSOL state representative Marcelo Freixo, a figure known for leading explosive investigations into links between politicians and Rio's trafficker-militias. The inquiries, which were later portrayed in Brazil's highest-grossing film in history, *Elite Squad 2*, earned him numerous death threats that periodically forced him into temporary exile in Europe. After ten years working for Freixo, Franco was elected to the city council in 2017 on PSOL's ticket, becoming Rio's fifth-highest vote-getter.

Franco's election served as a turning point for left politics in the city. It is nearly unheard of for a poor, black woman from the favelas to appear in the elite spaces of Brazil's political institutions, and practically every homage to her has emphasized the challenge her presence represented to the wealthy, connected white men who dominate the city council. She also advanced a trenchant critique of the institutional Left's failures to reckon with the police state and its role in repressing the poor, the young, and the black of Brazil's favelas, and began a process of revitalizing those groups' participation in and ownership of the Left's trajectory.

In the immediate aftermath of Franco's murder, many were quick to assume that her activities over the weekend had provoked the assassination. In the days leading up to the murder, she wrote a series of online posts specifically criticizing the 41st Battalion of Rio's Military Police, known as the city's most lethal, which had carried out an aggressive operation in the Acari favela that Saturday. “We are all Acari!” Franco posted over the weekend; “Stop killing us. Favela lives matter.”

Yet this was far from Franco's only challenge to the status quo. In mid-February, Brazil's illegitimately installed president Michel Temer ordered the country's military to take over security operations in Rio de Janeiro, ostensibly in response to a spike in violence during Carnival. What's more likely is that Temer wanted to shore up his single-digit approval ratings and distract from his embarrassing failure to pass a nasty pension reform bill. Naturally, Franco vehemently opposed the military intervention, and on February 28, she became head of a commission tasked with monitoring potential abuses associated with it.

Additional facts further complicate the murder case. The bullets that killed her and Gomes came not from the military police, to which the 41st Battalion belongs, but from the federal police. And the involvement of two separate cars would seem to indicate a high degree of planning and coordination.

Thanks to all these factors, it will be hard to pinpoint precisely which of Franco's actions her assassins were reacting to. As Glenn Greenwald writes, "What makes it difficult to determine exactly who killed Franco was precisely her bravery; she was a threat to so many violent, corrupt, and powerful factions that the list of possible suspects, with motives to want her dead, is a long one."

But a few things seem clear: that elements of the police are responsible; that they intended to send a message of intimidation and terror to the broader layer of advocates with whom Marielle worked; and that, in light of the attackers' brazenness and professionalism, they are likely protected by members of Rio's political class. It's for this reason that the left is not only asking, "Quem matou a Marielle Franco?" ("Who killed Marielle Franco?"); but also "Quem mandou a morte de Marielle Franco?" — "Who ordered Marielle's death?".

Marielle's Challenge

"Those in PSOL went through this awful fifteen minutes right afterward," recalled Jacobin's contributing editor in Brasilia, Sabrina Fernandes, "when no one knew where a lot of the other city councilors in the region were and everyone was calling everyone." Initially, reactions on Facebook mainly expressed shock, fear, and a feeling of destabilization.

Yet by the next day, massive mobilizations were crystallizing. Thousands gathered last Thursday outside Rio's City Council building, where an emotional scene unfolded as Franco's PSOL comrades, David Miranda and Marcelo Freixo, carried her wooden casket through an anguished crowd. In São Paulo, protests against the assassination collided with a violently repressed public schoolteachers' strike to create an explosive atmosphere. The president was forced to comment on the murder, and as the news hit English-language media, the hashtag #MariellePresente trended internationally on Twitter. On Sunday, nearly two thousand residents of Franco's Maré favela mobilized in her honor.

If there's a small silver lining in this story, it's that those who killed Franco, and those who ordered her death, appear to have overplayed their hand. Franco's murder has touched a nerve in Brazil's consciousness, which recognizes this assassination — and the military intervention under which it occurred — as a dictatorship-era tactic. The massive mobilizations signal a sense among broad layers of Brazilian society that such a tactic must be repudiated in the strongest possible terms and that the left forces that Marielle represented must be defended.

In the face of this response, the Right has attempted to defame Franco and deflect scrutiny from the police and the political forces supporting the military intervention in Rio. Over the weekend, "fake news" stories spread like wildfire through WhatsApp and Brazilian social media, claiming, among other things, that the father of Franco's daughter is a notorious drug trafficker; that a criminal militia was responsible for organizing support for her city council run; that she abused drugs; and that she "defended criminals." (This last assertion is a snide gloss on her heroic work defending the rights of favela residents.) Although these slanders are an insult to Franco's life and legacy, their circulation betrays a note of desperation, provoked by the week's mobilizations, on the part of those who would seek to bury the Left along with Franco.

Meanwhile, Brazil's immense media conglomerates, unable to avoid covering the assassination, have attempted to sanitize Franco's political life, emphasizing the operatic emotional aspects of her death over any serious treatment of her convictions. Heavyweight TV outlet Globo, for instance, aired a

long, detailed feature on Franco and the circumstances of her death. But, as Greenwald writes in the Intercept, “the only segment purporting to describe Marielle’s politics was an extremely banal, condescending discussion of the definition of ‘human rights,’ which [the program] basically reduced to an anodyne, uncontroversial declaration that all humans are born free and should be treated equally; propositions that virtually every Brazilian politician from right to left would happily endorse.” Immediately afterward, the outlet segued to sensational coverage of the brutal killing of a child in a Rio slum, “then immediately went live to one of its reporters in Brasilia, describing how Temer was meeting that very moment with ministers to consider more funding for the military intervention.”

By manipulating widely held outrage over Franco’s murder to drum up support for the very military operation she ardently opposed, the sequence aptly illustrated how closely Brazil’s mainstream media outlets align with the Right’s campaign of outright defamations and lies.

It’s unlikely that such misdirections will prove effective. The evidence pointing to a political assassination and police involvement is too glaring; the facts of Franco’s political life are incontrovertible; and the outraged radical left — especially Brazil’s growing black and LGBT movements and the “mulheres faveladas” (women of the favelas) Franco represented — are too determined to carry on her legacy.

In the past few months, Brazilian politics have reached a state of acute crisis that has fragmented and paralyzed the Left. The Lula conviction has polarized Brazilian society, left the non-Workers Party left with little space to navigate, and opened up the possibility of a successful presidential run by the far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro. The trade unions have failed to fully push back on Temer’s austerity program. And the Brazilian left has few positive examples in the region to look to, with the Latin American countries that once championed the Pink Tide falling into crisis and malaise. All these elements have combined to give this fall’s upcoming presidential elections the feeling of a slow-motion train crash.

Marielle’s assassination has led to renewed calls for unity among Brazil’s left, but that by itself cannot resolve its many internal contradictions. And despite the courageous mobilizations that chanted “Não nos calarão!” — “They will not silence us!” — the poor black youth for whom Marielle advocated still face an increasingly brazen and empowered police force. For the Left that speaks Marielle’s name, the specters of atomization and demobilization continue to loom.

Yet it also appears that Marielle’s assassins were overconfident. They have ended up raising the stakes, both for themselves and for the Left. And it’s possible that instead of liquidating the challenge Marielle represented, they’ve unleashed it.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 03.20.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/03/marielle-franco-brazil-assassination-police>

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