

Openly Gay Brazil Congressman Jean Wyllys Leaves Job Amid Death Threats

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RIO DE JANEIRO — An openly gay congressman who frequently clashed with Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro said Thursday he was leaving his job and the country because of mounting death threats.

In an interview published by daily *Folha de S. Paulo*, Congressman Jean Wyllys said he was currently outside of Brazil and had no plans to return. Instead, he said he would work in academia but did not say where.

Wyllys, who was re-elected in October and set to begin a third term in February, said death threats against him had increased significantly since Rio de Janeiro councilwoman Marielle Franco was shot and killed along with her driver in March. Franco was a friend and ally of Wyllys.

Many in Latin America's largest nation saw Franco, who was black, lesbian and hailed from one of Rio de Janeiro's most violent slums, as a symbol of hope for her strong advocacy for LGBT rights and outspoken criticism of police brutality in poor neighborhoods. Her death led to large protests in Brazil and in several countries.

Ten months later, no one has been arrested for her murder.

Since then, Wyllys, who represents Rio de Janeiro, has used a security detail.

"How is it that I'm going to live four years of my life inside an armored car and with bodyguards?" he said.

In a tweet that posted a link to the *Folha de S. Paulo* article, Wyllys said: "Preserving a threatened life is also a strategy to fight for better days."

Contacted by The Associated Press, an aide said Wyllys would not be making any further comment and declined to disclose the congressman's location.

Wyllys' announcement quickly became the leading story in Brazilian media, underscoring a politically charged climate and prompting discussions about public security, one of Brazil's long-standing problems.

"The departure of Wyllys shows that the exercising of democracy in Brazil can be dangerous," said Mauricio Santoro, a political science professor at the State University of Rio de Janeiro. "As shown by the crime, still unresolved, against Marielle Franco and now the threats against Wyllys, (the state) can't guarantee the security of its own agents."

Wyllys' post will be filled by David Miranda, a Rio de Janeiro councilman from the same leftist Socialism and Liberty Party.

Wyllys rose to fame several years ago after becoming a finalist on the reality show "Big Brother Brasil," causing a lot of controversy in deeply conservative country as an openly gay contestant. He

combined that notoriety with political activism, and in 2010 won a seat in Congress.

Wyllys was frequently at odds with Bolsonaro, a congressman for 28 years with a long history of homophobic, racist and sexist comments.

In arguably their most public clash, Wyllys spit on Bolsonaro on the floor of the lower House of Deputies during the 2016 impeachment process of then-President Dilma Rousseff. Bolsonaro, a former army captain, voted for Rousseff's impeachment while giving tribute to a former colonel who tortured Rousseff when she was jailed as a guerrilla fighter during the dictatorship.

In the hours after *Folha* published its story, Bolsonaro, set to return from the economic forum in Davos, put out a series of tweets that many interpreted as cheering Wyllys' departure. They included icons of a hand giving a thumb's up, a Brazilian flag and an icon of a plane.

"Fake News!" Bolsonaro wrote, posting a tweet of *O Globo* daily that framed his messages as celebratory. "I was referring to mission completed, productive meetings with heads of state and return to the country I love."

In the interview, Wyllys said his decision to leave wasn't because of Bolsonaro's rise, but rather the climate of heated rhetoric and intensifying violence toward members of the LGBT community in the wake of last year's campaigns.

Wyllys said that former Uruguayan President Jose Mujica, learning of the death threats, told him: "Be careful, man. Martyrs are not heroes."

"It's exactly that," said Wyllys. "I don't want to sacrifice myself."

The Associated Press

P.S.

• The New York Times, Jan. 24, 2019:
<https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2019/01/24/world/americas/ap-lt-brazil-congressman-death-threats.html>