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Brazil: Who killed Marielle Franco? Arrests lay bare nexus of politicians, police and paramilitaries

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Brazilians shocked to find the man charged with investigating the city councillor's assassination was one of its alleged engineers

The former head of the Rio civil police, Rivaldo Barbosa, left, is escorted by a police officer upon arrival at the federal police headquarters in Rio de Janeiro on Sunday. Photograph: Daniel Ramalho/AFP/Getty Images

More than a decade has passed since Rio's homicide chief sat down for an interview with the city's bestselling magazine to boast of a dramatic drop in murders.

"There's no such thing as a perfect crime," proclaimed Rivaldo Barbosa, whom the publication described as an industrious, church-going former air force sergeant who had instructed detectives to solve 10 murders a month. "[Killers] will always leave clues," he said. "It's our duty to find the evidence and arrest the culprits."

Few who read that glowing 2013 profile of "Rio's Sherlock" would have anticipated the plot twist to come.

At around 6am on Sunday, there was a knock at the door of Barbosa's luxury lakeside apartment in west Rio, not far from the homicide squad he once ran. Outside stood a cluster of federal police officers investigating one of the most shocking and high-profile murders in Rio's history - the 2018 shooting of the Rio councillor Marielle Franco and her driver Anderson Gomes. Their arrest warrant carried Barbosa's name.

Barbosa had taken over as Rio's chief of police 24 hours before the assassination, using his inaugural speech to declare war on corruption. As top cop in Brazil's most famous city, his first and most urgent task was finding Franco's killers.

There was just one problem. Police now claim Barbosa was one of the "architects" of the crime alongside two influential politicians, the brothers Chiquinho and Domingos Brazão. "It's clear the crime was masterminded by the two brothers and meticulously planned by Rivaldo," alleges a federal police report which formed the basis for Barbosa's stunning arrest.

Calling for the trio's immediate imprisonment, the document claimed they were at the pinnacle of "a violent horde" which had shown "utter contempt for human life and the rule of law". By Sunday afternoon the Brazão brothers and Barbosa were being flown to a high-security prison in the capital, Brasília, in handcuffs.

"If he really was part of this, he's a psychopath," Marcelo Freixo, a prominent Rio politician who was Franco's friend and mentor, said of the disgraced investigator as he digested the news on Monday morning.

"Rio de Janeiro is complex - we know there's corruption in the police just as there's corruption in politics. I knew there was corruption in the homicide squad," Freixo added. "But to imagine that he was part of planning the crime? I never imagined it. Not me, not anyone."

The Rio de Janeiro councilwoman Marielle Franco smiles for a photo in Cinelandia square in January 2018. Photograph: Ellis Rua/AP

Sunday's astonishing development has turned a spotlight on Rio's brutish mafia underworld, where experts say besuited politicians and corrupt police investigators collude with highly trained assassins such as the one who murdered Franco and Gomes.

"This investigation is a sort of X-ray of how these organized crime paramilitary groups operate in Rio de Janeiro. And how there is, let's say, an intertwining with certain political and public organs that really is very worrying," Brazil's justice minister, Ricardo Lewandowski, said on Sunday as he celebrated the arrests.

Other observers were more direct. Speaking on Brazilian TV, the former security minister Raul Jungmann compared Rio's corruption-riddled condition to life-threatening blood poisoning. "It's like a kind of sepsis ... and this must be interrupted with the help of the federal government and society itself," Jungmann said.

"The state is permeated by organised crime," said Carolina Grillo, a security specialist from Rio's Fluminense Federal University. "This case shows us that the presence of organised crime in Rio state's public institutions is so powerful that it's possible for a police officer to promise impunity to his accomplices."

The 479-page federal police report into Franco's murder, reviewed by the Guardian, paints a complex and alarming portrait of how powerful organised crime bosses and members of paramilitary mafia groups known as militias have successfully contaminated Rio's institutions and police force in recent decades.

"The militias are a cancer and it spreads and it metastasizes," said Freixo, who made a name as Rio's most determined anti-mafia campaigner while spearheading a 2008 parliamentary inquiry into such groups. Rio's heavily armed militias are now said to control an area almost the size of Birmingham, the UK's second biggest city, where more than 1.7 million people live.

The Franco report is also packed with sordid details of bloodletting and betrayal and features a stranger-than-fiction cast of ruffians and crooks with nicknames including Big Mac, Big Flea, Bob the Bomb, Renato the Problem, One Leg and even a criminal lawyer (shot dead one month after Franco) called Doctor Cock.

At its heart, however, the federal police account of Franco's slaying is an age-old tale of impunity, arrogance and greed.

Investigators claim that the Brazão brothers - the leading members of a powerful political clan which has long faced accusations of links to organised crime and corruption - began plotting Franco's murder in the second half of 2017 after becoming frustrated by her attempts to disrupt lucrative housing development plans on Rio's militia-dominated west side, where they had built their political careers.

Congressman Chiquinho Brazão in 2013. Photograph: Bruna Prado/AP

“Marielle Franco was killed because she was seen as a potential threat to the interests of Domingos and Chiquinho Brazão,” the report claims, adding that the “serious” and “combative” political activities of Franco’s Socialist and Freedom party (Psol) were also a factor.

The Brazão brothers allegedly asked a paramilitary contact nicknamed Macalé to arrange a surreptitious meeting with Ronnie Lessa, a special forces police operative turned “notorious hitman”, and offered him a chunk of land reputedly worth millions in exchange for carrying out the murder.

Lessa, who lost his left leg in a 2009 bomb attack and was once described by a former colleague as a “killing machine”, “readily accepted”, police claim. “He saw a good business opportunity to shake off his image as a mere hitman.”

In September 2017, Macalé – who was later murdered himself – gave the shooter a gun. “He was pleasantly surprised ... [that it was] a [Heckler & Koch] MP5, a German sub-machine gun Lessa was fond of given that he had used this kind of weapon while working at Rio’s military police special forces battalion,” says the report, which is based largely on testimony given by Lessa as part of a plea deal.

On the night of 14 March 2018, Lessa put that weapon to work, according to his own confession, spraying Franco’s car with bullets as she travelled home from an event.

Amid a major international outcry, Rio’s new police chief promised justice. “We are going to do everything in our power to respond to this barbaric crime,” Barbosa promised the families of the victims, who believed they had found an ally in the chief of police.

“There was no reason not to trust him,” said Freixo who, like Franco, had known Barbosa for years.

Domingos Brazão exits a federal police aircraft upon arrival in Brasília on Sunday. Photograph: Evaristo Sa/AFP/Getty Images

In fact, federal police claim Barbosa was involved in that “barbaric crime” from the start, having turned the homicide squad into an illegal “business” which deliberately scuppered criminal investigations – for a fee. A succession of inquiries were sabotaged in order to shield the mafiosos behind the bloodshed. Barbosa allegedly became far richer than his official salary would allow. “Rivaldo Barbosa set up a veritable criminal organisation in the bowels of Rio’s civil police,” said the federal police report, alleging that Domingos Brazão had once boasted: “Rivaldo is ours.”

Lessa claimed that when the Brazão brothers asked the homicide chief to help execute and cover up their plan, Barbosa made only one demand: that Franco not be murdered while travelling to or from city hall. That would suggest a politically motivated crime and draw federal police investigators into a case Barbosa allegedly hoped to control and derail.

Representatives of the three accused have rejected claims of their involvement in the murders.

Barbosa’s lawyer, Alexandre Dumans, denied his client was close to the Brazão brothers or had been involved in any conspiracy.

“He’s a good man. He isn’t some sort of crook or outlaw and I do not believe that he took part in the planning [of this crime] as the informer Ronnie Lessa claims,” Dumans said, adding: “He’s a religious man, a university professor who has built a career over decades.” On Sunday night the

university where Barbosa lectured announced he had been sacked as a result of its commitment to the principles of “ethics, correctness and non-violence”.

After the Brazão brothers’ arrest on Sunday, their lawyer Ubiratan Guedes denied his clients were involved in the murder and said they had no connection to Franco.

During previously unreleased footage from a 2019 documentary, Domingos Brazão claimed: “I’ve never ordered anyone’s murder – not Marielle Franco, not anyone.”

“Here in my house, I’ve not killed so much as a chicken. I haven’t killed a duck,” added Brazão, who is now 59 and an adviser to Rio’s court of auditors.

Monica Benicio, widow of Marielle Franco, leaves federal police facilities in Rio de Janeiro on Sunday. Photograph: Andre Coelho/EPA

On the eve of his arrest Chiquinho Brazão, who is a federal congressman, issued a statement denying wrongdoing and claiming he had enjoyed “friendly and pleasant” relations with Franco when they served together in Rio’s city hall. On Sunday night the 62-year-old was expelled from his conservative party, União Brasil.

Freixo said he believed Franco’s killers were convinced they would never be caught. “In their minds, they’d killed a black woman from the favela and there wouldn’t be any problems at all,” he said. “Only it boomeranged.”

Tom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro

Constance Malleret contributed reporting

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/26/marielle-franco-assassination-brazil-rio-police-arrests>

Marielle Franco: two politicians and ex-police chief arrested over Brazil murder

The Rio de Janeiro councillor and her driver were assassinated in 2018, sparking an international outcry

Marielle Franco earned a reputation as a courageous defender of Brazil’s minorities and a campaigner against police violence. Photograph: Mario Vasconcellos/AFP/Getty Images

Two powerful politicians and Rio de Janeiro’s former chief of police have been arrested as part of a federal police operation targeting the suspected masterminds of the 2018 assassination of [Rio councillor Marielle Franco](#).

The operation – named Murder, Inc – was launched at the crack of dawn on Sunday and came just over six years after the shooting of Franco and her driver, Anderson Gomes, caused an [international outcry](#).

Brazilian media reports said three prominent figures were arrested: the federal congressman, Chiquinho Brazão; his brother, the former state congressman, Domingos Brazão, who is an adviser to Rio's court of auditors; and the former head of Rio's civil police, Rivaldo Barbosa.

The Brazão brothers have long faced accusations of involvement in organised crime – claims they have denied. During the 1980s, the men were [reportedly](#) known in Rio as the “Irmãos Metralha” (The Beagle Boys) – a reference to the Disney cartoon villains.

As news of the arrests broke, Marcelo Freixo, a prominent leftwing politician who was close to Franco, tweeted: “The arrests today of the Brazão brothers and Rio's former police chief make clear who carried out this killing, who ordered it, and who failed to investigate it.”

Renata Souza, a lawmaker who was also a friend of Franco, called the arrests “a very important step”. “The Brazilian state and justice system owe society an explanation. It has been six years of such pain and sadness and today we are now close to getting the answers that we need,” Souza tweeted.

Franco's family said in a statement: “This is a historic day for Brazilian democracy and an important step forwards in the pursuit of justice. Nothing will bring back our Mari but we are one step closer to the answers we crave.”

“This is a significant triumph of the Brazilian state against organized crime,” the justice minister Ricardo Lewandowski told reporters in the capital, Brasília.

Monica Benicio, widow of Marielle Franco, told reporters the assassination was an attack on democracy. Photograph: Andre Coelho/EPA

Franco, a 38-year-old lawmaker from the Socialism and Freedom party, was gunned down on the night of 14 March 2018 as she returned home from an event. During her short career in politics, the black, gay favela-born activist had earned a reputation as a courageous defender of Brazil's minorities and an outspoken campaigner against police violence.

Six years after the assassination, the hitman who has confessed to pulling the trigger, a former police officer called Ronnie Lessa, is behind bars awaiting trial. However, until now the alleged architects of the crime have remained at large and their motivations remain a mystery.

The question, “*Quem mandou matar Marielle?*” (“Who ordered Marielle's murder?”) has become a rallying cry for the Brazilian left, at protests and on social media, but for years that question has gone unanswered.

The 2022 election of the leftist president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, breathed new life into the apparently stalled quest to catch Franco's killers. Lula vowed to fight “tirelessly” to bring the masterminds to justice and, in a highly symbolic move, made Franco's younger sister, Anielle Franco, his minister for racial equality.

On Sunday, Anielle Franco thanked Lula's government and the federal police for what she called a “great day”.

“God alone knows how much we have dreamed of this day. Today is yet another big step towards us getting the answers to the questions we have asked so many times over the last few years: ‘Who killed Mari and why?’” tweeted Franco.

Sunday's arrests appeared to be the result of a plea bargain Lessa recently struck with investigators,

in which he agreed to name the masterminds in exchange for a reduced sentence and other benefits.

The precise alleged roles of the Brazão brothers – who built their political careers in Rio’s paramilitary dominated west – and the former police chief Barbosa were not immediately clear. However, local reports claimed Lessa had accused Barbosa of green-lighting the murder and assuring the masterminds that they would never be caught.

The revelation that Rio’s top cop may have been involved in one of the most notorious crimes in the city’s history stunned friends and relatives of the murdered politician. Just days after the murder, Barbosa [assured reporters](#): “We will not rest while this crime is not solved.”

Protesters in São Paulo pay tribute to Marielle Franco and Anderson Gomes in March, marking six years since their death. Photograph: Ronaldo

On Sunday morning, he was arrested at his home in a condo in west Rio. The assets of the former police chief’s wife were reportedly frozen as a result of suspicion she had been involved in money laundering.

Anielle Franco broke down in tears as the news of Barbosa’s possible involvement was broken to her live on Brazilian television. “They murdered my sister but we will not crumble ... We are here and here we will remain, championing Marielle’s legacy.”

Franco’s widow, Monica Benício, voiced outrage at the ex-police chief’s alleged involvement. “This is not just a betrayal, it is an attack on democracy itself. And unfortunately it reveals a great deal about politics in Rio de Janeiro and how the underworld is connected to the police,” she told reporters.

Asked if she now feared for her own life given the power of organised crime in Rio, Benício said the pain of the murders had equipped the victims’ families with irrepressible bravery. “Nothing will conquer the fight for justice for Marielle and Anderson,” she vowed.

As police made their arrests early on Sunday, Flávio Dino, Lula’s former justice minister and a supreme court judge, tweeted an excerpt from Psalm 92: “Senseless people do not know, fools do not understand, that though the wicked spring up like grass and all evildoers flourish, they will be destroyed for ever”.

Ubiratan Guedes, a lawyer for the Brazão brothers, denied his clients were involved in the murder and voiced surprise at his arrest. “He did not know Marielle. He had no connection to Marielle and now it’s up to his defence to prove his innocence,” Guedes said of Domingos Brazão. Barbosa’s lawyer [reportedly](#) declined to answer questions as he arrived at the federal police headquarters where Rio’s former police chief was being held.

Tom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro

• The Guardian. Sun 24 Mar 2024 17.24 CET:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/26/marielle-franco-assassination-brazil-rio-police-arrests>

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