

Families with slave-owning origins have maintained power in Brazil for 200 years

Thursday 5 December 2024, by [AUDI Amanda](#), [CORREIA Mariama](#), [FONSECA Bruno](#), [MUNIZ Bianca](#) (Date first published: 2 December 2024).

Half of Brazilian presidents since the end of the dictatorship, almost half of the current governors of Brazilian states and a fifth of the country's senators in office have in common the fact that they have direct ancestors who owned slaves, used slave labor or acted to contain revolts by black and poor people.

The 33 politicians with ancestors linked to slavery

By Bianca Muniz, Bruno Fonseca and Mariama Correia

Former presidents of Brazil, senators of the Republic and governors of Brazilian states. All these important positions have something in common: they were and are occupied by people who are descendants of men and women who had some relationship with people enslaved in the country.

This is the main conclusion of the [Escravidores Project](#), an unprecedented investigation carried out by Agência Pública that mapped the ancestors of more than one hundred Brazilian authorities from the Executive and Legislative branches to identify whether there were cases of the use of slave labor.

The result of the mapping is that, of the 116 investigated, at least 33 had ancestors who had relations with enslaved people. Many of the politicians did not even know their ancestors or maintain a close relationship with their lineage.

Of the eight presidents of the Republic after the end of the dictatorship in 1964, half are on this list: José Sarney, Fernando Collor, Itamar Franco and Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

Of the 81 senators, 16, one fifth, also fall into this situation. They are: Augusta Brito (PT-CE), Carlos Portinho (PL-RJ), Carlos Viana (Podemos-MG), Cid Ferreira Gomes (PSB-CE), Ciro Nogueira (PP-PI), Efraim Filho (União-PB), Fernando Dueire (MDB-PE), Jader Barbalho (MDB-PA), Jayme Campos (União-MT), Luis Carlos Heinze (PP-RS), Marcos do Val (Podemos-ES), Marcos Pontes (PL-SP), Rogério Marinho (PL-RN), Soraya Thronicke (Podemos-MS), Tereza Cristina (PP-MS) and Veneziano Vital do Rêgo (MDB-PP).

Of the 27 governors, almost half, 13, were also included in the survey:

Enslaved on plantations, in homes and in commerce

There are several links between the ancestors of Brazilian authorities and slavery. For example, the great-great-grandfather of former President [Fernando Henrique Cardoso](#) was Colonel José Manoel da Silva e Oliveira, born around 1771 in Minas Gerais. The military man was an important figure in commanding the exploration of gold in the former captaincies of Minas and Goiás. According to

historical records, in one of these ventures to try to find new mining points, he used enslaved people, who died tragically along the way due to disease.

The investigation found several cases of ancestors of current politicians who allegedly used enslaved people on farms, in the planting and harvesting of sugar cane, for cotton production and on tobacco farms, in Recôncavo Baiano.

There are also cases of enslaved people who lived in their masters' houses, accompanying and caring for the elderly, as mentioned in wills, and others who traveled in the company of their enslavers. We also found records of the purchase and sale of enslaved people and even the rental of these people.

"It wasn't just the large landowners who had slaves, but [also] merchants, people with small properties who often had plantation properties just for their own consumption or at most for local sale, but not necessarily for export and who had one or two slaves there who did this work", comments historian and social educator Joana Rezende.

"Many people had slaves who, for example, they rented out to other people, to other properties [...] There were these various ways of, let's say, using a slave, not just for planting, not just in the fields", he adds.

How the investigation was carried out

To reach these conclusions, Pública defined a research methodology with genealogy researchers from the Center for Paraná Studies at the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR), coordinated by sociologist and professor Ricardo Oliveira. According to the researcher, these power and kinship structures are a genealogical phenomenon, so that "transmissions of inheritances, income, assets, education occur, and these topics are decisive for understanding the *status quo*."

He mentions that wealthy families in the 21st century are largely formed by the same wealthy family groups of the 20th century - a structure that originated through marriages and alliances in the imperial and colonial periods. "With this, there is a hard core of social continuity of the ruling class," he concludes.

When investigating the period of slavery and the traditional ruling class, the researcher comments that the presence in power of people with ancestors who were slave owners is linked to an agrarian structure, with large slave-owning farmers who emerged with the distribution of the first sesmarias. And, to investigate these relationships, genealogy uses documents that emerged with the republican period (civil, marriage, birth and death records), and, before that, in the 19th century, the church controlled demographics with baptism and marriage records, among others.

From there, we investigated around 500 documents, including parish and registry office records, old newspapers in newspaper libraries and public archives, and academic works from several Brazilian universities. In total, more than 200 family relationships were documented.

All 33 politicians whose ancestors were allegedly linked to slavery were contacted by Pública and had time to assess the genealogy and documents presented and respond to the report.

The methodology can be read [here](#).

It is important to note that the other politicians who were not included in the group of 33 may have had relatives involved in slavery. The lack of documents and the difficulty in accessing historical records prevent us from accurately identifying all the slave-owning connections in the genealogy of

the authorities.

The investigation is inspired by similar initiatives carried out in the United States by [Reuters](#), which revealed that more than 110 members of the American political elite are descendants of slave owners, and in the United Kingdom by the [Guardian](#), whose board funded research into the links of the newspaper's founder and his financiers with the slave trade.

The Slave Makers Project wants to continue investigating these connections. Our goal is to also investigate the Judiciary and other authorities in the Executive and Legislative branches, such as members of Congress.

The Brazilian State's debt due to slavery

Slavery was used in the colonization of Brazil from the beginning of economic activities, generating wealth for the Portuguese and, later, for the owners of slaves born here. As Danilo Marques, PhD in History and professor at the Federal University of Alagoas (Ufal), points out, there are records of trafficking in enslaved people as early as the first century of colonization in Brazil and, with that, also stories of the resistance of these people.

"We have the first slave ships dating back to the 1550s, the beginning of the sugar mills in the Northeast, as the final destination for these Africans who would be enslaved. Therefore, there is the first information about quilombos around 1570, in Bahia, a slave revolt in Porto Calvo [Alagoas] around 1590, which would probably be the beginning of the Palmares quilombo", he comments.

Doctor of history and professor at the University of São Paulo (USP), Alain El Youssef, emphasizes that slavery is not a practice that was created with imperialism in the Americas, but it was here that it took on the contours of a commercial activity, which made the economic gears of colonial production turn, but was also in itself a source of profit for those who trafficked these people.

"For example, there was slavery in Africa, as there was in many other continents, in many other societies. The issue is that this slavery was not commercial, as we are used to seeing in the colonization process of Brazil, and later in the 19th century, when Brazil was already an independent country. In other words, no one enslaved a person in African societies to sell them. What there was, in fact, was slavery that was a remnant, which was the result of conflicts between two or more communities," he comments.

For Valéria Gomes Costa, a PhD in history and professor of history at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE), slavery – and the way it was abolished, without compensation or rights for the enslaved – left a debt with the descendants of people deprived of their freedom. "The republican State has an immense and unpayable debt to the black population. It promised and failed to deliver on its promises, with citizenship, decent housing, education, and health," she says.

Reparation initiatives that hold the State and institutions linked to the Brazilian government accountable are already becoming a reality in Brazil. One recent case involves Banco do Brasil, whose financing links to the trafficking of slaves were exposed by a group of investigators last year. The investigation has already led to the opening of a [civil inquiry](#) against the institution.

Historian Joana Rezende argues that this reparation must also take place in the form of preservation, investigation and dissemination of records that document slavery in Brazil, which must be accompanied by a reflection on how people without freedom were portrayed.

"A large part of the documents we have from this period are institutional documents, from notary offices, legal and legislative processes, and even newspapers. We are talking about a time when

enslaved people would hardly have had access to produce these documents or be represented as active characters. Often, our understanding of the life and experience of enslaved people is mediated by a notary, a politician, or some representative who did not necessarily present that person as a person, especially because they were not seen that way," he ponders.

The historian argues that this work of rescue and critical reflection on the slavery period should be a public policy of the Brazilian State. "It is up to the government, not only through the national archives, the preservation of archives, the policies of rescue of documentation, but also through the incentive to research, with specific lines aimed at recovering this memory", she states.

Families believed to have slave-owning origins have maintained regional power for 200 years

By Amanda Audi.

At least six authorities listed in the Agência Pública survey on descendants of slave owners during Brazil's colonial and imperial periods are members of family clans that, even today, control and politically influence their regions.

Governor Raquel Lyra (PSDB - Pernambuco) and senators Cid Gomes (PSB - Ceará), Ciro Nogueira (PP - Piauí), Efraim Filho (União Brasil - Paraíba), Tereza Cristina (PP - Mato Grosso do Sul) and Veneziano Vital do Rêgo (MDB - Paraíba) come from old families with representatives in local and national politics.

We based our work on records in notary offices, newspapers and academic research that show that some of the ancestors of today's politicians were owners of enslaved people – which contributed to the increase in their assets.

These are their stories.

One of the darkest episodes in the history of Brazilian slavery, according [to](#) writer Laurentino Gomes, who wrote the trilogy *Escravidão*, took place on a farm in Remígio, a city in the Campina Grande region of Paraíba. Anyone who passes by there, amid the peaceful fields typical of the semiarid region, probably does not suspect that the ruins, which are over 200 years old and are now open to visitors, were once home to a system of systematic reproduction of enslaved people for sale – as if they were animals.

The owner of the property and person responsible for the human trade is an ancestor of one of the most powerful families in the state, Vital do Rêgo.

The story begins in the early 19th century, when the Portuguese Francisco Jorge Torres arrived in Brazil and began the business of producing and selling people. In addition to the farm, he built a large house in the center of Areia, a neighboring city, where he kept a slave quarters almost larger than the main house. Of the 19 rooms, 12 were [for slaves](#).

The enslaved women who lived on the property were forced to sleep with some enslaved men who were "handpicked breeders," according to historian Raimundo Melo in an interview with [Bom Dia Paraíba](#). They became pregnant and, when they were about to give birth, they were taken to the farm, where there was the so-called "maternity ward for black women."

There, other older slaves helped with the birth and baby care. The mothers were allowed to keep

their babies for only the first few days, after which they were taken back to the city, where they became pregnant again. The babies were cared for “so that they would grow up strong and then be sold in local businesses,” Melo continues. Torres is said to have sold [at least](#) a hundred slaves.

“Under the laws of slavery, the master was responsible for controlling the physical reproduction of the captives, whose children did not belong to them. Sexuality itself, therefore, was under the control of the lord. There are reports of newborn babies being sold at auction or offered in newspaper advertisements. In Brazil, there is little documentation about the reproduction of slaves for sale, unlike in the United States, where this practice is well documented,” said writer Laurentino Gomes in a [video](#) recorded when he was visiting the farm in Remígio.

Researcher Eleonora Félix [found](#) some registry records of transactions related to Torres’ slaves. There is a note of the sale of a 23-year-old man: “João, single, was sold by Francisco Jorge Torres for the price of 620,000 reais”. This would be approximately 91 thousand reais in today’s values, according to the calculation used by Laurentino Gomes in the book *1822*, which considered that one pound sterling was worth around 5 thousand réis.

The merchant also recorded that he had “given a letter of freedom to his slave Maria Angola” in 1855, in “observance of her good services”, but on the condition that she remain with him for as long as he lived. As a result, Maria Angola was freed only a year and a half later, when she was already 50 years old.

In one of the rooms of the Torres mansion in Areia, which is now open to the public, there is a tribute with the names of the 18 enslaved people of Maria Franca Torres, daughter of the patriarch, who [were included in his inventory](#), registered in 1871. The enslaved people were between 1 and 54 years old. Six were children under 10 years old.

The mansion displays reproductions of raffle tickets whose prize was the purchase of the freedom of slaves. For Areia, despite harboring the horror of [“slave production”](#), was also one of the first Brazilian cities to have a strong abolitionist movement – so much so that it freed its slaves [days before](#) the enactment of the Lei Áurea (Golden Law) of 1888.

Torres was the first of a family branch that has been one of the most influential in Paraíba for centuries. He is the fifth grandfather of today’s Senator Veneziano Vital do Rêgo. Veneziano, in turn, is the son of former Senator Nilda Gondim and former Congressman Antônio Vital do Rêgo, brother of the Minister of the Federal Court of Auditors (TCU) Vital do Rêgo Filho, grandson of former Governor Pedro Gondim and great-nephew of former Governor, former Federal Congressman and former Senator Argemiro de Figueiredo.

Senator Cid Gomes and his brother Ciro Gomes, former minister, former deputy and four-time presidential candidate, have a long history with the city of Sobral, in Ceará – which is now presided over by another of their brothers, Ivo Gomes.

“The undersigned ran away from Sobral, a mulatto slave, named Delmiro, with the following characteristics: age 22 years, short stature, full body, curly reddish hair, large eyes, closed eyebrows, thick and somewhat upturned nose, regular mouth, missing two teeth in the front, little beard, round face, little hair on the chest, large feet, has a small scar on the nose, on one side of the head there is a large gap that the hair covers, and several scars on the back”, says the advertisement.

When asked by Agência Pública about his relationship, Cid Gomes stated: “I abhor slavery. Humanity should never have done this in history. For a human to own another human violates every human,

ethical and moral principle. This is the most horrible thing that exists. I have no idea if he is my great-great-grandfather and I never knew about it.”

Raquel Lyra is the daughter of João Lyra Neto, former governor of Pernambuco – he was Eduardo Campos’ vice-governor and took over the position when he resigned to run for president – and former mayor of Caruaru. Her grandfather was also mayor of Caruaru. Her uncle Fernando Lyra was Minister of Justice.

The family’s power is ancient: Captain Manoel Monteiro Paes da Rocha Lira, Raquel’s sixth grandfather, [received](#) a sesmaria (unexplored land to be colonized) from the Portuguese crown in 1816, in the region of Recife. Since then, his descendants have been influential in the region.

José Soares da Silva Lyra, Raquel’s great-great-grandfather, is described as a slave owner in the book *História da Lagoa dos Gatos*, by historian João Pereira Callado. The author mentions that he was “the owner of a portion of these unfortunate people”, in reference to the slaves. “He was one of those good and esteemed masters. After his freedom, all his captives remained with him, in an honorable demonstration of good character”, continues the text.

In another part of the book, the historian says that Raquel’s fifth grandfather, José Paes de Lira, was “also helped by the support of his numerous captives” in selling cotton produced on his property.

Researcher José Eduardo da Silva estimated that Paes de Lira owned 23 people, according to the inventory he left in 1844 in Garanhuns. The slaves accounted for 34% of his assets, according to the study.

Senator and former Minister of Agriculture Tereza Cristina Corrêa da Costa Dias comes from a long line of politicians from Mato Grosso. One of her grandfathers was a senator twice and governor twice. Her great-grandfather was also governor twice. And her great-great-grandfather was Quintino Bocaiuva, the first Minister of Foreign Affairs and Agriculture of the Republic.

Quintino Bocaiuva was one of the most important abolitionists in the history of Brazil. He defended the cause in his newspaper, *O Paiz*, together with Joaquim Nabuco, one of the main voices against slavery.

Tereza Cristina’s fifth grandfather, Francisco Corrêa da Costa, was described as “an average slave owner” in a [study](#) by Maria Amélia Alves Crivelente, who holds a master’s degree in history from the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT). Corrêa da Costa was president of the province of Mato Grosso, a state deputy and owner of a sugar mill. In another [study](#), the same author mentions that his son Antonio took over his father’s sugar mill and acquired others, multiplying the family’s wealth and also owned dozens of slaves.

“With perspicacity, audacity and experience in living with his father, in 1855 his assets amounted to a considerable patrimony in sesmarias where he cultivated corn, rice and beans, in addition to the sugar mill and brandy, he also had 8,000 head of cattle, beasts, horses, 10 houses in Cuiabá and 194 slaves, 81 of whom were African”, cites the researcher.

Senator Ciro Nogueira’s (PP-PI) paternal grandfather was mayor of Pedro II, his father was a federal deputy twice and an uncle was also a federal deputy. Nogueira was married to former federal deputy Iracema Portella (PP-PI). Their story has been intrinsically linked to the politics of Piauí for over 300 years.

Nogueira’s fifth grandfather, Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Sousa Mendes, boarded a ship leaving Rio de Janeiro on May 7, 1853, along with two slaves, Antonio and Raimundo, according to a record in

the newspaper *O Constitucional*. Sousa Mendes participated as a soldier in the war of independence and in the repression of Balaiada, a revolt by the poor population of Maranhão.

One of Sousa Mendes' sons was Simplício Mendes, who was president of the province of Piauí four times and named the city after him. Another son was a judge of the Supreme Federal Court (STF). Simplício's son, Álvaro de Assis Osório Mendes, was a senator and governor of Piauí.

The family is descended from Valério Correia Rodrigues, a Portuguese man who was one of the first settlers of Piauí, in the mid-18th century. Rodrigues collected dozens of farms and would have owned several slaves, as confirmed by investigators from the Association of Descendants of Valério Coelho, who assembled a family tree from the patriarch.

"Several baptismal records of Valério Coelho's relatives and slaves were found," says the [website](#) that compiles the patriarch's genealogical research. According to the records, Coelho baptized the children of his enslaved women. "On the seventeenth of December of one thousand and seven hundred and seventy-four, on the Paulista farm, I solemnly baptized and anointed Ignacia, daughter of the aforementioned I baptized and et cetra Luiza, daughter of Quiteria, a single black woman from Nascam Angola, a slave of Vallerio Coelho Rodrigues, who lived on the said farm," says one of them.

Ciro Nogueira does not appear as a direct descendant of Valério Coelho in the official records because everything indicates that his great-grandfather, Pedro da Silva Mendes, was not a legitimate son of his great-great-grandfather Álvaro de Assis Osório Mendes. His death certificate even states that his mother was Luiza de França Vilarinho, a "domestic worker".

The senator [was part](#) of the Joint Parliamentary Front for the Eradication of Slave Labor in 2010. Three years earlier, he was one of the parliamentarians who [voted](#) to approve a rule that made it more difficult to combat slave labor – it stipulated that labor inspectors could not indicate employment relationships between employers and employees when they found irregularities.

Son of former Paraíba senator Efraim Moraes and grandson of former state deputies João Feitosa and Inácio Bento de Moraes, senator Efraim Filho has already [recognized](#) that "having a well-known surname in politics helps to open doors".

His great-great-grandfather, Manoel de Araújo Pereira II, appears in a list of slave owners in Santa Luzia do Sabugy, the former name of Santa Luzia, in Paraíba, from 1858 to 1888, according to the [dissertation](#) by Joselito Eulâmpio da Nóbrega, "Comunidade Talhado – um grupo étnico de remanecimento quilombola: um identidade construção de fora?" [Talhado Community – an ethnic group of quilombola remnants: an identity constructed from outside?], about the community with remnants of quilombolas in that city. The record does not mention the number of slaves he would have had.

The report sought out the politicians mentioned to clarify the findings of their genealogies, as we did with all the authorities mentioned in the [Escravidores Project](#), but we did not receive any responses until publication.

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