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Brazil

Those who are fighting back are in danger

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Brazilian feminist activist Taliria Petrone talks to Sebastien Brulez about the struggle today against the reactionary government of Jair Bolsonaro and the political assassination of her comrade Marielle Franco last year

Taliria Petrone, 34, is a militant Brazilian activist, fighting for the anti-colonialist, feminist, and anti-capitalist cause. Recently elected to the federal parliament as a representative of the Socialism and Freedom Party (Partido Socialismo e Liberdade, PSOL), Petrone was a comrade of Marielle Franco, the Rio de Janeiro PSOL city councillor, who was assassinated alongside her driver Anderson Gomes on March 14 2018. We met Petrone while she was visiting Europe.

What does it mean to be a black woman engaged in politics and to be an elected parliamentarian in Brazil today?

Politics is a no-go zone for us because it is about two things that have been denied to us throughout history. Politics is power and power has never belonged to us black women.

Politics is also about occupying public space and, historically, public space has not been open to us black women.

This is in the context of a country which was one of the last to abolish slavery and which has developed a patriarchal and religious fundamentalist logic which are components of colonialism. And we're not talking about a chapter of history that's closed. This is modern history.

Even today, the fact that we are occupying space within political institutions, within parliament, really shocks some people. For those of us fighting for the cause, it hurts to have our right to be there constantly questioned.

But it's so important that we do occupy these spaces. It allows us to bring our everyday lived experiences to parliament.

Since the political assassination of Marielle [Franco], it's more urgent than ever that black women are in parliament.

Marielle was a black woman, a lesbian, she came from the favelas [the slums], she was a socialist and a mother.

She brought all of that to parliament and she was the victim of a state-sponsored political crime. That's frightening for us but it also makes us more determined that we must and we will continue to occupy these spaces of power.

Because we black women are the majority of the population here in Brazil. And because we want to do something different with power: we want to collectivise it, make it more horizontal, give it to the majority of the population.

What's changed since Bolsonaro came to power?

Brazilian democracy is very young "a work in progress. Democracy never truly reached the favelas, the poorest parts of the country.

Those who are fighting back are in danger

However, the election of [Jair] Bolsonaro is a threat to this democracy that we were hoping to build on from the grassroots.

Bolsonaro was elected with his rhetoric of "I'd rather have a dead son than a gay son," while making excuses for torture that took place under Brazil's dictatorship, and propagating a discourse of hatred.

The Brazilian people saw him as anti the system when in fact he is the definition of the system. It's now up to the left to go back to the poor suburbs to challenge this discourse.

Bolsonaro's government is characterised by three really worrying characteristics: It's a neoliberal government; it's extremely authoritarian – it includes more military men than at any other time since the dictatorship; and it combines these two characteristics with a moral code rooted in religious fundamentalism.

In the first two months of this government we've seen attacks on three different fronts: the 20-year freeze on investment in health, education and social security; a programme of privatisation and weakening of labour laws; and the intention to do away with pensions (by increasing the pension age and moving towards a system of private pension schemes).

In order to support this expansion of capital and the private sector, with minimal state protection of rights, Bolsonaro expanded the repressive state.

Every single day in Brazil, 153 people are murdered. That's the equivalent of a Boeing 737 crashing every day. Of those who are murdered, at least a third are assassinated by the state. Every year, 30,000 young people are murdered, 77 per cent of whom are black. The famous "war on drugs" is used as an excuse for genocide against the black population of Brazil.

Our country also has the third-largest prison population in the world, with more than 700,000 prisoners, of whom 40 per cent are still awaiting sentencing and 70 per cent are black.

Bolsonaro's government's proposals can only make this situation worse. The new "anti-crime" package put forward by the politician Sergio Moro proposes the legalisation of assassinations carried out by the police – inquiries will no longer be required.

The government is also proposing a new regime of "maximum security" incarceration (up to 720 days of solitary confinement will be permitted) for leaders of "cuadras" [gangs] which can take effect before sentencing. Any militant activist could be subjected to this.

Finally, there's the toughening of anti-terrorism laws. In Brazil there is no terrorism but social movements are considered to be terrorist organisations.

All this in a country where the son of the president, now a senator, had relatives of paramilitaries in his cabinet for 10 years. All this in a country which kills more human rights defenders than any other country in the world.

There are also lots of environmental activists who are victims...

Yes, the majority of those assassinated are linked to the struggle for environmental justice, for the Earth and for the

land.

And Bolsonaro has picked which side he's on: he's on the side of agribusiness. Recently 86 "agritoxic" pesticides have been authorised even though they are prohibited in Europe and the United States.

The Minister for Agriculture is a representative of agribusiness. Bolsonaro has moved FUNAI, the organisation responsible for policies relating to indigenous people, into the Ministry of Agriculture. And a representative of the mining sector now leads the Ministry for the Environment – a man who was even accused of altering plans in order to benefit mining interests.

It's just as Bolsonaro said during his election campaign, "There will no longer be any land for indigenous people."

He plans to relax environmental regulations and he's closed CONSEA (the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security) which supported agroecology and organic farming and opposed agribusiness. Bolsonaro's environmental policies are a disaster which will mean more tragedies like the Mariana and Brumadinho dam disasters, where more than 300 people died, will happen again in the future.

The men and women fighting against all of this are in danger, not least because of the relaxation of gun laws. Landowners can shoot and kill, for instance if their land is occupied by indigenous people.

How can we in Europe show our solidarity with those fighting back in Brazil?

Brazilian democracy is in danger and international solidarity is incredibly important. It allows us to continue fighting back.

It's important that our government's actions are exposed to scrutiny and that they are denounced by international organisations.

For as long as Marielle Franco's assassination goes unpunished, there cannot be democracy in Brazil. It's important to make our resistance international.

There are so many activists, and activists who are fighting back, who even now are taking to the streets, going on strike, mothers of young people who have been killed are in the streets demanding justice. The struggle continues and it must be international!

This article originally appeared in French at www.gaucheanticapitaliste.org. It was translated from French by Scarlet Harris for the [Morning Star](#).

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