

# Brazil goes back to an oligarch

## past — Return to the fazenda and gaucho whip —

*Post Lula, post Dilma Rousseff, power has shifted to powerful landowners aggressively asserting their rights over land they don't use but don't want to lose, and politically motivated violence is up*

Anne Vigna

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*Since Congress removed President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 – in what the left called a ‘parliamentary coup’ – Brazil seems to have reconnected with a past many hoped was consigned to history. It is that of a country run by colonels and bandeirantes, powerful local figures who used violence against all who crossed them: the left, the poor, and the ‘landless’ occupiers of unused land which, according to the constitution, should be redistributed through agrarian reform.*



Brazil will commemorate the 130th anniversary of its abolition of slavery on 13 May, yet a hated symbol of that era, the whip, reappeared on television screens when landowners used them on 22 March against members of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) waiting to see former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's motorcade. Senator Ana Amélia Lemos of the rightwing Partido Progressista expressed unabashed support for these ‘true gauchos who raised their whips’.

Lula, who has been in prison since 7 April, was able to travel throughout Brazil unimpeded during a political career of over 50 years. But this March he encountered blockades organised by armed militias using tractors, stones and rifles to hamper his campaign to mobilise opposition to his 12-year sentence for ‘passive corruption’. The sentence has been

condemned not only by the left, but also by 122 Brazilian legal experts, who have published articles suggesting the charge was based more on the judge's prejudices than hard evidence.

The police investigation into shots fired at Lula's motorcade on 27 March has revealed they came from Leandro Bonotto's fazenda (plantation). Since the 1990s, Bonotto has vehemently opposed the MST and land reclamation by the National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (Incra), a federal government body. The source of the gunshots was not a surprise: associations of big landowners openly advocate violence against the MST.

Gedeão Ferreira, who heads the agriculture federation in Rio Grande do Sul, said when he took office: 'We're going to confront the MST and Incra. The sole aim of their occupations is to deprive rural producers of their properties.' Ferreira denied Incra officials access to his property and was jailed in 2002 for ignoring the law and inciting criminal behaviour. He was released in 2003 by the regional federal court of Porto Alegre (TRF4), the body that convicted Lula on appeal.

### **'Unprecedented in recent history'**

Mauricio Santoro, a political scientist at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, said: 'Brazil is a very violent country, with a record homicide rate, but that hasn't traditionally been The same month that Lula's leftwing city councillor, assassinated in Rio. These in our contemporary

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unlike in Colombia and Mexico, a political phenomenon here. motorcade was fired on, a Marielle Franco, was tragic events are unprecedented history.'

The violence is affecting prominent politicians for the first time, but is not new for social movements, though it has increased sharply. According to the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), set up under the military dictatorship by progressive Catholic bishops, 70 activists were killed in 2017, up from 61 in 2016, the previous record; 52 of those killed last year were involved in the struggle for land.

José Batista Afonso, a CPT lawyer in the state of Pará, said: 'The end of the Workers' Party (PT) government led to a very marked escalation in violence. We've seen the big landowners' associations gear up and become closer to the authorities. This is particularly evident in the state of Pará, where there were 21 killings last year. We haven't seen anything like this for a very long time.'

Among those killed were 10 members of the League of Poor Peasants (LCP), who were tortured and executed after occupying the Santa Lúcia fazenda in the Pau d'Arco area on 24 May 2017. This massacre was the worst since the one at Eldorado dos Carajás in 1996, when the police killed 19 MST members. The investigation in Pau d'Arco has resulted in charges against 29 police officers. Forensic tests revealed that victims suffered multiple fractures, corroborating survivors' allegations of torture. In their statements, police officers claimed they came under fire when they arrived at the fazenda with arrest warrants for the protestors. But two officers confirmed the survivors' version in return for reduced sentences. 'The experts also showed that the campesinos didn't fire. So the police version doesn't stand up,' prosecutor Leonardo Caldas told me.

**'The police have second jobs'**

Conflicts of this sort are typical in Pará: the Santa Lúcia fazenda is owned by the Babinski family, which has 11 properties totalling 40,000 hectares. Social movements say this land was actively cultivated until the death of patriarch Honorato Babinski. The occupation of Santa Lúcia began in 2013, after 5,694 hectares fell into disuse. Babinski's heir, Honorato Jnr, 25, who lives in Rio and describes himself as an actor, demanded that authorities expel the occupiers. He provided a judge with documentation supposedly proving the fazenda's activities, showing the purchase of cattle and bovine vaccination certificates, though dated a month later than required.

Babinski managed to have the peasants evicted, though they returned three times. 'The inquiry must now determine who ordered this crime,' said Caldas. 'But as often in Pará, the police officers have second jobs as security guards for the fazendeiros [big landowners].' He is pessimistic about what the inquiry will conclude.

Pará's police also sell their services to mining companies. In Barcarena, the Cainquiama association has repeatedly criticised mining multinational Norsk Hydro for dumping toxic waste. The company operates in 40 countries and is 34.3% owned by the Norwegian state. It claims its aluminium refinery in Barcarena is the world's largest. On 23 February Cainquiama again notified the authorities about clandestine dumping. The company denied this claim, though local health authorities confirmed it. Cainquiama showed the authorities how the clandestine waste was being disposed of, forcing the refinery to cut its output by 50%. On 12 March an association leader, Paulo Sérgio, was assassinated, the second such killing in three months.

**'Under attack'**

Since January Cainquiama has been reporting death threats from members of the military police, one of Brazil's law enforcement agencies. Armando Brasil, Pará's military prosecutor, said: 'I immediately contacted the secretary for security in the state of Pará so he could arrange protection. He told me that that wasn't his job and said that the association's leaders had invaded land.' Brasil believes that 'everyone knows that police officers work for the refinery. The inquiry will need to prove that, but I can't see any other explanation for these killings.'

Three female members of the association have since said they have received death threats; none have been offered protection. An activist exist, but is ineffective: most only telephone support. police protection. MST are under unprecedented occupations was sprayed planes belonging to big south, several of our

*In the south, our activists have been imprisoned on trumped-up charges. Getting them released has turned out to be very complicated*

Ney Strozak

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protection programme does of the 683 people on it receive Only 14 have been put under lawyer Ney Strozake said: 'We attack. In March another of our with toxic substances from landowners in Bahia. In the activists have been imprisoned

On 27 March, again in the state of Pará, Father José Amaro was arrested on charges including sexual harassment, money laundering and land invasion. Amaro had campaigned with US-born nun Dorothy Stang, killed by the henchmen of powerful landowners in 2005. Everyone who knows his work on behalf of the state's poorest has condemned his arrest. 'It's a new tactic intended to prevent the work of these religious activists,' according to CPT director Ruben Siqueira. 'The assassination of Dorothy Stang put a brake on the actions of the big landowners because it attracted

international attention. But destroying a man's reputation may be more effective in stopping his activism than killing him.' Even though all the accusations against Amaro are from big landowners, the judicial authorities have confirmed his provisional detention. Amaro, who has received many death threats, is now in the same prison as Stang's killer in Brazil's most dangerous state for activists. The authorities don't see this as a problem.

## Lunch with the ruralists

*A group of wealthy agribiz owners get to make self-enriching policy affecting millions because they backed the overthrow of Dilma Rousseff.*

The parliamentary 'ruralist' group meets every Tuesday in a villa in a classy district of Brasília, and, according to its PR, 'they have lunch and discuss a different topic every week.' The ruralists form a lobby of powerful landowning parliamentarians, and the results of their discussions later reach Congress or the Planalto (presidential palace).

Alceu Castilho, who monitors Brazil's agrifood industry, said: 'Over lunch they decide how they're going to deal with Indian rights or agrarian reform.' Since Michel Temer became president in 2016, the ruralists have gained

unprecedented power in parliament, because they supplied half the votes in Congress ratifying the removal of former president Dilma Rousseff. Temer's approval rating is so low (only 5%) that he depends on the ruralists to remain in power. They have invited him to lunch several times.



João Henrique Hummel Vieira, executive director of the PensarAgro (Think Agro) institute, which hosts the lunches, said that in two years 'the president has fully satisfied us, it's true. But there are still obstacles to be overcome.' He claims PensarAgro is a non-profit thinktank that brings together Brazil's 40 major 'not-for-profit' agricultural organisations. His institute finances the parliamentary ruralists' activities, puts forward proposals and scrutinises draft legislation.

Among the 'obstacles' Hummel Vieira cited two 'climb-downs' by Temer: the first when the supreme court overturned a decree redefining slave labour on the ruralists' terms — in 2017 the ministry of labour freed 2,264 workers from 165 businesses that kept them in conditions amounting to slavery, many on fazendas (plantations) — and the second when Temer tried to open up to mining the Renca nature reserve, one of Amazonia's biggest, and international pressure forced him to backtrack.

## Ruralist successes

Hummel Vieira and the ruralists have had to be content with Temer fulfilling 13 of the 17 priorities on their agenda. At the top of the list is removing constraints on the agrifood industry's territorial expansion, especially in Amazonia. The ruralists' watchword is 'flexibility', which they apply to the analyses that precede the granting of exploitation permits for mining and farming, and to the obligation to carry out environmental impact assessments.

They also called for a law giving foreign companies unrestricted rights to acquire land, a wish that has been granted. They wanted 'historic restrictions' on their businesses removed, by which they meant rights granted to Indian and quilombola (descended from slaves of African origin) communities, and the state's obligation to carry out agrarian reform to address inequalities of land ownership. They've won a victory: not only has the Temer government proposed a constitutional reform to change laws granting land to Indians and quilombola communities, but it has slashed the budget of essential public bodies, the National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (Incra) and the National Indian Foundation (Funai).

On coming to power, Temer abolished the rural development ministry, with its policies favourable to small farmers. A new law limits agrarian reform and permits the 'regularisation' of illegally acquired land at well below the market price, an old practice of the fazendas.

environmental law at the said: 'This law is the biggest land ownership. It and will cause an even ownership]. You also have and debt relief given to big landowners.'

*This law is the biggest defeat for the democratisation of land ownership. It completely changes the rules*

Juliana Malerba

Juliana Malerba, professor of University of Rio de Janeiro, defeat for the democratisation of completely changes the rules greater concentration [of land to factor in all the tax rebates

For two years, leading ruralist Blairo Maggi has been agriculture minister. He is known in Brazil as the 'soya king' as he owns the Amaggi group, the world's biggest soybean producer; the group's name appeared in the Paradise Papers because it was said to have set up an offshore trust in the Cayman Islands with the Louis Dreyfus group.

Carlos Frederico Marés de Souza Filho, who teaches agricultural law at the Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná, said: 'This government has done away with all environmental regulation of agriculture, whether for GM seeds or chemical fertilisers. The legal framework was very limited to begin with. The law now permits the use of pesticides banned in their countries of origin.'

With 235 deputies out of 513 and 27 senators out of 81, the ruralist group can afford to be ambitious. It has already proposed initiatives which would have increased violence if they had been approved: a law allowing rural producers to carry weapons, and another classifying the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST) as terrorist organisations.

The ruralists have also commissions of inquiry into the demanded judicial investigations anthropologists, representatives NGOs, prosecutors and justice

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Layza Queiroz Santos

conducted parliamentary Incra and Funai. These of 96 people, including of national and international ministers, whom the ruralists

regard as guilty of 'fraud over the demarcation and approval of land'. The investigations have not moved forward, but the threat remains, especially as 'the judiciary bears a heavy responsibility in the process of criminalising social movements,' according to Layza Queiroz dos Santos, a lawyer for Brazil's Committee for the Defence of Human Rights. 'If a power balance is not achieved between progressives and conservatives in the Congress that is elected this year, there's a danger these attacks will resume.'

While the Temer government works on behalf of agribusiness, four million campesinos in Brazil remain landless and almost 66,000 fazendas, around 175m hectares, are non-productive. 'And these figures are conservative estimates,' says Marés de Souza Filho. 'The criteria for measuring productivity date from 1980. If the poverty of the campesinos is ignored, conflicts will become radicalised.' The number of Brazilians living in extreme poverty increased by 11.2% between 2016 and 2017, from 13.34 to 14.83 million people.

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- ❖ **About the author:** Anne Vigna is a French journalist based in Rio de Janeiro since 2012 for France, Switzerland, Belgium and Mexico.
- ❖ **About this paper:** [Brazil goes back to an oligarch past](#) and [Lunch with the ruralists](#), were originally published as separate articles in Le Monde Diplomatique. To subscribe to Le Monde diplomatique in English, visit [www.mondediplo.com](http://www.mondediplo.com).
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