

3-2-2018

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## Recommended Citation

Scruggs, Gregory. "Brazilian Military Takes Command of Rio State Security." (2018). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14585>

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## **Brazilian Military Takes Command of Rio State Security**

by Gregory Scruggs

Category/Department: Brazil

Published: 2018-03-02

Calling for “extreme measures” following months of worsening violence in the state of Rio de Janeiro, including robberies and shootouts that marred Rio’s Carnival celebrations, President Michel Temer announced on Feb. 16 that the Brazilian military would assume control of all security and policing operations in the state. Temer’s move marks the first time since the restoration of democracy and the adoption of the 1988 Constitution that the federal government has interfered in state affairs. Under the Brazilian Constitution’s federal system, public security is a state government responsibility.

“The federal government will give a hard and firm response and adopt all the necessary steps to confront and defeat organized crime and gangs,” Temer said in a speech. He accused organized crime of “having almost taken over Rio de Janeiro” in a way that “metastasizes” to infect the entire country.

“We are seeing entire neighborhoods besieged, schools in the line of fire, streets turned into trenches,” he said. “We are not going to accept those who kill our future and continue to assassinate our future.”

On Feb. 17, Temer traveled to Rio and formally appointed General Walter Souza Braga Netto of the Comando Militar do Leste as the new official in charge of the state’s security operations. He also announced the formation of a new Ministério da Segurança Pública that would oversee all police and armed forces in the country, effectively replacing the Ministério da Justiça. The former secretary of security for the state of Rio de Janeiro, José Mariano Beltrame, the architect of a once-successful favela pacification program, is rumored to be a leading candidate to direct the new ministry.

The federal intervention is not a military occupation, although there will likely be an increased military presence on the streets of Rio. Rather, military officials will take over the leadership of the state’s Secretariat of Public Security for an indeterminate period and will not be responsible to the state governor. Political analysts and opposition politicians called the move a smokescreen to mask Temer’s fading political fortunes and avoid a controversial vote on social security reform.

### ***Escalating violence***

As Ash Wednesday dawned on Feb. 14, the media image of Brazil’s most famous Carnival city was tarnished. For several days during the annual festivities, television stations broadcast footage of gunfights in favela communities and robberies of tourists, sometimes violent, on Ipanema Beach.

Despite 17,000 police officers on the streets, Rio Gov. Luiz Fernando Pezão admitted to a security failure. “We were not prepared,” Pezão said. “There was a failure on the first two days, and then we brought backup for police. I think there has been a mistake in our part.” He later called the number of firearms confiscated by police during Carnival an “incredible” figure.

The Carnival violence followed months of worsening public safety as the beefed-up security for the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, when 80,000 troops kept order, dwindled. The recession that

intensified after the Olympic torch glow faded wreaked havoc with the State of Rio's overblown finances, and the state government entered bankruptcy in December 2016 ([NotiSur, Aug. 5, 2016](#), and [Nov. 3, 2017](#)). Police officer salaries were late and a signature community policing program, the Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora, that reportedly brought peace to Rio's favela neighborhoods, embattled by narco-traffickers, withered on the vine.

State homicide rates soared 11% in the first nine months of 2017 over the year before, with 4,974 people killed in a population of 16.5 million, according to state figures. Just five years earlier, the statewide homicide rate had plunged to 29 per 100,000 residents. Nationwide, 61,619 people were killed in 2016, making it Brazil's deadliest year for which reliable statistics are available, according to the Brazilian Forum on Public Security.

"The situation is one of complete vulnerability," said Antônio Carlos Costa, the head of Rio de Paz, an anti-violence NGO. "The weapons used by the traffickers are weapons of war."

Temer cited these circumstances when he signed the federal intervention decree.

"Together, the police and the armed forces will combat and confront those who have kidnapped our cities," he said in Brasília following the signing ceremony. "Prison cells will no longer be thieves' personal offices. Public squares will no longer be the reception halls for organized crime."

However, security experts, including those in the military, say they are not sure the emergency move is backed with a strategic plan. While the immediate concern is to restore day-to-day order on the streets, the intervention's longer-term goal must be to clean up the police department, where corruption is rampant and renegade cops known as *milícias* engage in narco-trafficking and extortion themselves.

"Combating organized crime requires effective action by the government in economic and social spheres in order to make drug trafficking less appealing in areas where a large segment of the population is grappling with unemployment," Gen. Eduardo Villas Bôas told *The New York Times*. "Even as the military has been called to act in different areas, sometimes for lengthy periods, we don't observe considerable changes due to lack of engagement by government agencies responsible for other areas."

## *Fading fortunes*

While few dispute that violence in Rio has escalated, critics see a political motivation behind Temer's move. With elections looming in October, some think the president—who has never been elected outright by the electorate, having won office following the impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016)—is trying to shore up flagging poll numbers ([NotiSur, April 29, 2016](#), [June 24, 2016](#), [Aug. 18, 2017](#)).

Temer is grappling with single-digit approval ratings, while polls show that over one-third of Brazilians consider public security a "major issue" when choosing their candidate. Moreover, the federal intervention temporarily suspends certain legislative procedures, effectively delaying an impending vote on social security reform that is deeply unpopular.

"It was a political decision to change the country's agenda," said Gleisi Hoffmann, an opposition senator. "Seeing that social security reform was not going to pass, they changed the agenda." She

warned that the intervention could lead to an increase in “persecution and repression of social movements.”

Elected officials in Rio at first said they preferred that Temer issue a *Garantia de Lei e da Ordem*, which would give the military police powers, but Temer opted for the intervention instead and persuaded Pezão to go along.

Rodrigo Maia, the speaker of the state legislature, said that the intervention was the “last option” on the table and as a result must be “well executed.” He called the move “very difficult, in an extreme moment” and told the press that it took the governor’s convincing to bring him on board.

In a meeting with state legislators on Feb. 17, Deputy Carlos Osório said, “To work, it will require a serious injection of resources in the reorganization of the police and the capacity of the state’s social investments.”

Elected officials have publicly said that federal intervention makes the state security budget into a federal responsibility as well, but the exact amount of public funds that will be dedicated to the intervention have yet to be revealed.

“We only have one option: The move has to work,” Maia said. “If it doesn’t work, what does all this mean the day after?”

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