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Social programmes, not soldiers, are what's needed in Brazil

Brazil's President has put the military in charge of Rio de Janeiro. Is this an attempt to deflect attention from the nation's wider problems?

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On 16 February, Brazil's President Michel Temer ordered a 'federal intervention' in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Later approved by both houses of Congress, this effectively puts Rio de Janeiro under military control – with General Braga Netto assisting the state's civilian government as a military supervisor, or *interventor*. He is in charge of all security forces – the 45,000-strong military police force and 9,500 civilian police officers.

Deploying the military on civil security duties is nothing new in Rio. Ahead of the 2016 Summer Olympics, President Dilma Rousseff sent the military into Maré favela – a costly and largely unsuccessful move. Ten thousand soldiers have assisted with civil security in Rio de Janeiro since September 2017 and there have been 18 military operations throughout Brazil to 'maintain law and order' since 2016. Yet this is the first time since the end of military rule that the central government has directly intervened in a federal state and taken control of public security, which is a constitutional responsibility of the states.

Officially, this intervention is due to Rio's precarious security situation, which is said to have worsened at the last carnival. When announcing the measure, President Temer argued that the state of Rio de Janeiro was in the grip of organised crime. According to his Justice Minister Torquato Jardim, Brazil is at 'war' with an internal enemy, the drug gangs.

Insecurity is front of everyone's mind

Brazil's public security situation is clearly worrying and needs decisive state action. Five people are murdered hourly and there are over 60,000

deaths a year. Security is one of the nation's most pressing issues. Rio itself saw nearly 7,000 people killed in 2017 – a murder rate of almost 40 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. This rate was even higher in the 1990s, but has been rising sharply since 2015. The 'financial emergency' declared in Rio in June 2016 made this gloomy picture worse still.

Even so, Rio de Janeiro is by no means the state with the biggest security problem. Rio is just tenth in the 'Atlas of Violence' issued by the state research institute IPEA, with security much more precarious in several states in northern and north-eastern Brazil. Available statistics even refute the impression of rampant violence at the last carnival, as notably conveyed by the Globo TV network. According to Joana Monteiro, Director of the Institute of Public Security, key security indicators have actually improved in recent years.

Corruption scandals have rocked the local political elite for months, and the official emergency declared in 2016 has paralysed much of the public administration.

What prompted this extraordinary intervention measure in Rio? Initially, many observers suspected a convenient pretext for President Temer to distract attention from the pension reform, a key plank of his economic 'reform agenda', for which he has so far failed to gain a majority in Congress. No constitutional reforms are permitted during the intervention, which is in place until 31 December this year, when Temer's term of office ends. So he can put a hugely unloved proposal on the back burner, while placing the popular issue of security at the heart of his new political agenda. Those around him expect this change of tack to help him be re-elected – despite his current approval ratings by elections polls of no higher than 3 percent.

Observers also highlight the political interests of Temer and his party, the MDB, which governs Rio de Janeiro state – where the deep-seated crisis is more political and economic than security-related. Corruption scandals have rocked the local political elite for months, and the official emergency declared in 2016 has paralysed much of the public administration. So the intervention is partly aimed at getting the political wheels back on track in Rio, thus boosting the electoral hopes of many of the President's allies.

The intervention is also likely aimed at restoring the military's image as a 'saviour' in politically unresolved conflicts. Some people fear this will lead to militarisation by the back door. Governor Pezão and interventor Braga Netto are already describing Rio as a 'laboratory' for the country. A few

days ago, Army Commander-in-Chief, *Eduardo* Villas Bôas, said that a national military intervention would be a possibility, should former president Lula da Silva not be found guilty by the Supreme Court. Temer said he will talk to all governors about ways and means of extending the military 'partnership'.

Military agenda for political reshuffles

Temer issued a decree to create the new 'Extraordinary Ministry' of Public Security, tasked with providing cities with security assistance. Former Defence Minister Raul Jungmann heads up this new ministry and military officer General Silva e Luna now leads the Defence Ministry. These changes attracted rebuke from Former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who recalled how the custom of appointing a civilian Defence Minister (dating back to 1999) was a hard-fought symbol of the overturning of military rule, which held sway from 1964 to 1985. Temer's break with this tradition is by no means his first step towards giving more political power to the military. He had already appointed General Sérgio Etchegoyen as Secretary of Institutional Security in the executive cabinet, a role that has been revived.

There is little clarity, coordination and sophistication in the new 'security package' – in marked contrast to the resolute stand against crime that was so apparent when it was unveiled. Just days after the intervention was announced, the *interventor* called for a working group to draw up a security analysis. Some of the initially announced measures, including 'collective search warrants', were hastily withdrawn due to legal concerns.

Army commander Villas Bôas is anxious about the military's new role and demanded a guarantee that deployed soldiers would not subsequently be held accountable for any breaches of human rights committed while maintaining public order. The Supreme Federal Court is to examine the constitutionality of a legislative change that transfers jurisdiction for murders by military personnel from the civil courts to military tribunals.

Fear and suspicion about the intervention

Many civilian experts are also sceptical about the intervention in Rio. Jacqueline Muniz, a security expert at Universidade Federal Fluminense, described it as highly expensive but largely ineffective 'operational theatricality'. Jurema Werneck, Director of Amnesty International in Brazil, sees the intervention as an 'inappropriate and extreme measure'

that is putting people's lives at risk. As the military deployment will mainly affect the one million or so residents of Rio's favelas – called a 'risk group' and viewed with suspicion by Justice Minister Jardim – many fear an escalation of the 'war on the poor'. Critics also point to the patchy international record of military action against organised crime. Mexico is a striking example, with over 100,000 people dying in the 'drug war' since 2006, and 23,000 lives lost in 2017 alone. Yet Mexico's drug trade and drug-related crime continue as before, underlining how the military is not trained to perform civilian security tasks.

Human-rights activists and favela residents complain of increased police violence.

Militarisation of security policy in Brazil is clearly more about creating the impression of strong government action than adopting a structural approach to combating the causes of violence and crime , especially in an election year. There is a widespread appetite for populist security policies in Brazil, so an 'iron-fist' policy looks like a vote-winner, as over 70 percent of Brazilians believe that human rights are impeding the fight against crime. Hence the opposition's muted response. Although the left-wing parties in Congress voted against intervention, leading opposition figures failed to challenge using intervention under military control. Only a few mentioned alternative measures such as liberalisation of Brazil's strict drug policy, which leads to overcrowded prisons that are themselves hotbeds of organised crime.

Urgent need for professional security

Experts note the long-standing need for a reformed security sector. Ideally this would bring the various police forces together and ensure that the security forces are trained in community policing. Rio in particular is notorious for heavy-handed policing, the subject of many complaints by favela residents, and must address wide-scale corruption within the police and the infiltration of its ranks by organised criminals.

A month into the military intervention, which was at first warmly welcomed by parts of the population, the pervading sense is certainly not one of greater security. Human-rights activists and favela residents complain of increased police violence. The political assassination of left-wing local politician Marielle Franco, well-known for her stand against police violence and her role on the commission set up by Rio de Janeiro's city council to monitor the intervention, has also triggered a wave of

‘active outrage’.

Protests against militarisation could finally result in a state using its resources effectively for the majority of the population. That is the vision of Jailso de Souza da Silva, founder of the Observatório de Favelas de Rio. But as things stand in Brazil, this is likely to remain a mere pipedream for years to come.



Katharina De Moura Hofmann
Berlin

Katharina Hofmann de Moura works with the Global and European Policy department in FES Berlin. Previously, she led the FES offices in Brazil and Mozambique.



Thomas Manz
Paris

Thomas Manz heads the office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Paris. He previously worked for the foundation in Brazil.