

Clampdown on Housing Rights Activists in Bolsonaro's Brazil

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The far-right president's violent, discriminatory rhetoric has unleashed a rise in attacks on marginalized populations.

It's 6:30 am on Monday, June 24. three plainclothes police officers from the São Paulo criminal investigations department walk up to the apartment of Janice Ferreira da Silva. She is a leader of São Paulo's Homeless Movement of the Center ([MSTC](#)), the host of the weekly [Free Lula](#) news bulletin, and a well-known singer and cultural activist in the city. Her nickname is Preta, which in Portuguese means "black," the color of her hair and skin.

Her sister answers the door, and the officers are quickly inside, talking fast and barking orders. They wake up Preta and two other sisters and order them to sit in the living room while they hurl questions at them. "Where are the drugs? Where are the guns?" the officers ask. They turn the place upside down, rifling through closets and drawers. They find nothing.

Preta, 36, and her seven brothers and sisters largely grew up in housing occupations in São Paulo, which has one of the highest numbers of building occupations in the world. Most of the siblings are now activists or social workers. They are used to dealing with the authorities, but they say they've never been subjected to anything like this. Across town, police are also raiding the apartments of their brother Sidney and two other housing activists, Edinalva Silva Pereira and Angélica dos Santos Lima, from the Movement of Housing for All. The officers confiscate Preta's laptop and several documents. A few hours later, she's in jail, and so are Sidney and the other two activists, all accused of extortion and improper collection of rent.

A photo taken at the moment of her arrest shows Preta wearing a gray and black sweatshirt. Her thick black hair is pulled back. Her right hand forms an "L"—for Lula. This has become the symbol of the Brazilian left over the past year, which is demanding the release of former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. A hero of Brazil's lower classes, he is in prison on a corruption conviction handed down with scant evidence by a biased judge, as revealed in [recent leaks](#) by *The Intercept Brasil*.

It would be two days before Preta's and Sidney's lawyers could get information about their cases. As we go to press, the four activists are still in jail, and arrest warrants have been issued for eight others, including Preta and Sidney's sister Liliane and their mother, Carmen.

It's a sign of the times in Brazil under far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who was elected last year on the promise of fighting crime and ending corruption—and destroying the left. "[We're going to end activism in Brazil](#)," he vowed late last year. "You criminals from the MST [Landless Workers' Movement] and the MTST [Homeless Workers' Movement], your actions are going to be labeled as terrorism. Either fall in line and submit to Brazilian laws, or you are going to end up like that drunk [Lula] in Curitiba."

São Paulo Governor João Doria, from the right-wing Brazilian Social Democracy Party, echoed

Bolsonaro's sentiments during his campaign last year, promising to crack down on occupations if elected. Bolsonaro has been slow to make good on that particular promise, but many fear that these recent arrests are a leap in that direction.

São Paulo could be considered the heart of Brazil's movement for housing and urban reform. With a population of more than 12 million, it is the Western Hemisphere's largest city. From an airplane, high-rise buildings along the city's iconic main drag, Paulista Avenue, seem to push into the sky like a row of nails. Miles away, past gridlocked highways, on the outskirts of the city, brown cinder block homes in the favelas stretch over hillsides in every direction. It can take favela residents [a couple of hours](#) to travel into the city center by bus.

Poor residents have been pushed to the edge by market forces and powerful interests, which have resulted "in huge social segregation between rich and poor neighborhoods," says Anderson Kazuo Nakano, a professor in urban architecture at the Federal University of São Paulo. "When you live in the center, you're not going to see the biggest poor neighborhoods unless you take the Metro and travel to the periphery of the city." For decades, housing activists have been fighting to change this state of affairs by demanding urban reform and their right to housing, as enshrined in the 1988 Constitution.

Building occupations have multiplied in downtown São Paulo. They are easy to miss, though, if you don't know what you're looking for. At least a dozen movements coordinate more than 70 buildings there, in which as many as 6,000 people live. "Today a family that makes minimum wage cannot afford to pay rent. So the occupations are a solution for families making low wages, to hold on to their right to housing and maintain the minimum conditions for survival," says Osmar Borges, a longtime housing rights organizer in São Paulo.

The showcase occupation of the MSTC, one of São Paulo's most organized and vocal housing movements, is called [9 de Julho](#). In a 14-story Art Deco building that was abandoned in the mid-1970s, 9 de Julho shatters the misguided stereotype that housing occupations are grungy, rat-infested hellholes, plagued by drug abuse and criminals.

A grandmother brews communal coffee over a massive 10-burner stove in the middle of the large collective kitchen. Down the hall, a man in a black T-shirt and frizzy gray hair pushes a slab of wood through a table saw in the building's workshop, which produces furniture and other products for this and other occupations. Children browse a large occupation library or kick around a soccer ball in an outdoor court that is adorned with colorful graffiti art of flowers, women dancing, and what looks like an African queen holding a small child.

Upstairs, potted plants are set cozily outside many of the apartments. Framed children's drawings line the walls. The halls are spotless, and the occupation is managed with a dedicated militancy. One family on each floor sweeps up and throws out the trash each day. Major decisions are decided in monthly assemblies by the more than 120 resident families. Women are in almost all key positions of power. A handwritten sign in Portuguese reminds residents of the stark reality in the municipality of São Paulo: "Housing is a right. More than 600,000 vacant properties. More than 396,000 homeless families. Occupy, resist, construct, live."

For Preta and several of her brothers and sisters, 9 de Julho is home away from home. They don't live there, but they are intrinsically connected. Just two days before she was arrested, she helped to organize a "[diverse cities](#)" festival at 9 de Julho, which was held the day before São Paulo's massive LGBTQ Pride Parade. Thousands of people attended the 9 de Julho event, with music, food, and a dance celebrating gender diversity. Preta sang. Her voice is powerful; her lyrics, political. A YouTube clip of her recent release "[Minha Carne](#)" ("My Meat") pays homage to black and indigenous

women's struggles in Brazil. It was partly filmed at the 9 de Julho occupation.

Residents tell stories of the scores of famous Brazilian artists and musicians whom Preta has brought to visit their occupation. They say much of the vibrant graffiti covering their home was thanks to Preta, who helped organize teams of artists to bring color to the space.

Her connection there runs deep. When she was 14, her mother moved her and her seven brothers and sisters from the state of Bahia to a previous occupation at 9 de Julho. (There have been at least three since the late 1990s.) Carmen, who had arrived before them, learned of the homeless movement after sleeping on the streets and in shelters. The family lived in 9 de Julho for six years before residents moved out in an agreement with the city.

Carmen eventually became one of the [key leaders in the MSTC](#) and the city's homeless movement. She successfully led the occupation at the former Hotel Cambridge, which the residents won from the city in 2016 and is now being renovated and converted into permanent housing. She, too, recently faced accusations of extortion, which were [thrown out by a judge](#) in January.

The accusations against Preta and her fellow activists stem from an investigation in [the wake of a fire at a building](#) with no connection to the MSTC. Housing movement leaders say the city used the fire as justification to crack down on occupations. It shut off electricity for months to at least two occupations and opened a criminal investigation, accusing 19 leaders of several housing movements of extortion, criminal organization, and forcing residents to participate in mobilizations in support of the Workers' Party or the occupation of other buildings.

Iberê Bandeira de Mello, one of a team of volunteer lawyers working on Preta and Sidney's case, calls the accusations against the MSTC worrisome and completely false. "It's insanity," he says. "We live in a moment now in the country where you start from the principle that someone is guilty and you carry out the whole investigation based on this principle. So it's easy to make someone look guilty if you think they are."

The testimonies against Preta allege that she collected monthly maintenance fees from residents at the Hotel Cambridge occupation. The residents of the MSTC's five occupations, including 9 de Julho, do not pay rent, but they do pay a \$50 monthly maintenance fee, which the movement uses to cover the costs of keeping up the buildings, security at the front gates, and utilities in buildings where electricity and water are regulated. This fee, written into the movement's statutes, was approved by all residents in the occupations.

Preta's and Sidney's arrests, many residents say, are a means of attacking the occupation, the movement, and Carmen. "Why are these people in jail? Carmen has two children in jail. They are destroying her family. And they want to destroy the lives of hundreds of families. That's what the government is doing," says Claudete Lindoso, who has lived at 9 de Julho for the past three years. She is originally from the poor northeast of Brazil and, like most of the residents, is poor and black. "There is no extortion here. There are no criminals here. There are no vandals or bums. All of the people here have jobs, and they are just trying to make things better," she says.

Preta's younger sister Lorena chokes back tears during an interview at the 9 de Julho occupation. She wears dark-rimmed glasses and a brown sweater over a black dress. On the wall behind her is a poster for a movie made about the Hotel Cambridge occupation and a large hand-drawn picture of Marielle Franco, a black lesbian city council member from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro who was outspoken against police violence in poor neighborhoods and was assassinated in March 2018 by gunmen with links to Brazil's security forces.

“What kind of a threat is Preta to society? What, is she going to kill someone with her music? Kill them with all of her love? With that amazing voice of hers?” asks Lorena. “And Sidney, he was going to start a new job on July 1. He has a little girl. He’s a single father. Black. Is that the problem?”

Preta’s and Sidney’s arrests have worried the residents of 9 de Julho and other MSTC occupations. Many are afraid the authorities are just one step away. In May, Bolsonaro directed federal agencies to [allow the eviction](#), without the approval of a judge, of occupied buildings’ residents. In the lawsuit against Preta and Sidney, prosecutors call for the immediate closure of all occupations in the center of São Paulo.

“We have to fight,” one person told an assembly of fellow residents packed into the downstairs meeting room at 9 de Julho on a cold July evening. “Today it’s Preta and Sidney. Tomorrow it could be any of us.”

Just a few days before, Benedito Roberto Barbosa, a human rights lawyer with the Union of Housing Movements and a housing leader in São Paulo, traveled to Brasília to meet with other members of the National Committee of Human Rights Defenders, who have witnessed an increase in attacks, threats, and criminalization of grassroots movements across Brazil. He says São Paulo’s housing movements have always been criminalized but now “it’s even worse—an increasing agenda of hate and attacks.” He adds, “It’s an extremely serious moment. You could almost say that we are living in a police state, a state of exception. We never know if our cell phone is being tapped or if we are being investigated. It’s a very scary situation.”

State security forces have been increasingly monitoring the left’s organizing. In the most recent case, on August 3 in São Paulo, military police [invaded a meeting](#) of female organizers involved in the Socialism and Liberty Party. Officers demanded documents and said they were “monitoring those present.”

Bolsonaro’s violent, discriminatory rhetoric has unleashed a rise in attacks on marginalized populations—in particular, LGBTQ and indigenous communities. [Several leading leftists](#) fled the country this year after receiving multiple death threats. Among them was the country’s only out gay congressman at the time, Jean Wyllys.

Disturbing memories of Brazil’s unresolved past loom large. [Under the military dictatorship](#) from 1964 to ‘85, hundreds of people were disappeared, thousands imprisoned, and roughly 30,000 tortured. This was a time that has been celebrated by Bolsonaro, who served in the military during the dictatorship. He has often praised officials from that period and [ordered the military](#) to mark the April 1, 1964, coup with celebrations this year.

The Intercept Brasil’s recent bombshell leaks revealed how bias in the judicial system helped to convict Lula and block him from running in last year’s election, opening the door for the Bolsonaro presidency. The movement to free Lula has become a key organizing tool for the Brazilian left since last year. As the host of the *Free Lula* news bulletin, Preta has been a prominent face of this movement. Her arrest and incarceration are likely no coincidence. “The grassroots leaders have suffered the principal impact [of the criminalization] because they are on the front lines,” says Federal University’s Nakano. “They are more visible. They are well known. They are in media. They are in public debates, and they are speaking out. And when they start to be seen as criminal actions, the first targets of repression are these leaders.”

Housing activists have responded to the arrests, creating a committee to fight for the release of those in jail. In mid-July, hundreds marched to a criminal court in São Paulo to deliver thousands of signatures from occupation residents demanding that those leaders be freed. A judge is expected to

rule in the coming weeks on whether to release the activists while reviewing their cases. In the meantime, their lives are on hold.

“They are criminalizing the movements because we are bothering them and making noise. If the government did its job, we wouldn’t need a movement or an occupation,” Lorena says. “You can lock up one, two, or three people, but the struggle will continue and grow. You can lock someone up, but another 500 or 1,000 will come.”

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