
Designating the Election: How a US Terror Label Entered Brazil's October Race

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the Trump administration's May 28, 2026 designation of Brazil's two largest criminal organizations – the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and the Comando Vermelho (CV) – as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) cannot be read as a counternarcotics measure alone. The move arrives in the middle of a Brazilian presidential election in which the family of imprisoned former president Jair Bolsonaro has openly lobbied Washington for the designation, while the party's nominee, Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, runs against Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on a public-security platform. Read alongside Operation Southern Spear in the Caribbean and the January 2026 capture of Nicolás Maduro, the Brazilian episode is the moment when the "Caribbean playbook" – counterterrorism categories applied to Latin American crime, which open the door to extraterritorial force – moves from the periphery of the hemisphere into its largest democracy. The designation functions less as a tool against organized crime and more as an instrument of electoral and sovereignty pressure, in ways that should concern anyone working at the intersection of security, democracy, and US–Latin American relations.

TAGS:

Brazil, US-Latin America Relations, Latin America

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A Foreign Category Arrives at a Domestic Vote

On May 28, 2026, hours after President Donald Trump received Senator Flávio Bolsonaro at the White House, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and the Comando Vermelho (CV) had been designated as Specially Designated Global Terrorists, with full Foreign Terrorist Organization status to take effect on June 5.¹ The Brazilian government – which had publicly and privately opposed the designation for months – was informed but not consulted. The sequence of those two events on a single afternoon is the starting point of the analysis that follows: a U.S. counterterrorism category, requested by a Brazilian presidential candidate, formalized by the U.S. government, and arriving in the Brazilian electoral calendar with four months to spare before the October vote. What this essay traces is the road by which the hemisphere arrived there, and why the designation is best understood not as a counternarcotics measure but as an electoral and constitutional event.

In early March 2026, Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio held a phone call that Itamaraty officials initially described, with deliberate vagueness, as a routine diplomatic exchange. It was not. The central issue, leaked in the days that followed, was Washington's reactivated pressure to classify the PCC and the CV as Foreign Terrorist Organizations under US law.² On March 25, Vieira confirmed publicly that he had told Rubio "the Brazilian government is against this classification."³ By then, the State Department had already completed the technical paperwork; the

¹Marco Rubio, "Terrorist Designation of Comando Vermelho and Primeiro Comando da Capital," U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, May 28, 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/05/terrorist-designation-of-comando-vermelho-and-primeiro-comando-da-capital/>; "US to designate two Brazilian gangs as 'terrorist' organisations," *Al Jazeera*, May 29, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/5/29/us-to-designate-two-brazilian-gangs-as-terrorist-organisations>.

²Robert Muggah, "Brazil's Gangs in Trump's Crosshairs," *Americas Quarterly*, April 1, 2026, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/brazils-gangs-in-trumps-crosshairs/>.

³"Brazil announces US partnership to intercept weapons, drug trafficking," *Al Jazeera*, April 10, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/10/brazil-announces-us-partnership-to-intercept-weapons-drug-trafficking>.

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decision, according to officials in both capitals, was awaiting only political sign-off in Washington.⁴

To readers familiar with Latin American security debates, the procedural details may sound like a technicality; they are not. The Trump administration has used the FTO label over the past year to remake the legal architecture of US action in the hemisphere. Twelve Latin American drug-trafficking groups were added to the list of designated terrorist organizations between February and December 2025.⁵ In September 2025, the United States began Operation Southern Spear, a campaign of lethal strikes against vessels in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific that the administration justifies under a self-declared "armed conflict" with these groups. By early May 2026, that operation had produced at least 56 strikes and 188 confirmed deaths, with the identities of those killed almost never publicly disclosed.⁶ On January 3, 2026, the same legal architecture underwrote *Operation Absolute Resolve*: the air-and-ground attack on Venezuela that killed seventy-five to eighty people in Caracas and ended with President Nicolás Maduro and his wife flown to New York to face narcoterrorism charges.⁷

This is the international background against which the Bolsonaro family, beginning in early 2025, organized one of the most public lobbying efforts in Brazilian republican history. Eduardo Bolsonaro, then a federal deputy, relocated to the United States in February 2025 and spent the following ten months pressing Republican officials for sanctions against Brazilian Supreme Court justices, for tariffs on Brazilian exports, and – more recently – for the FTO designation of the PCC and the CV.⁸ The Brazilian Chamber of Deputies stripped him of his mandate in December 2025, after he missed more than 80 percent of the year's sessions; he is also under indictment for obstruction of justice in the case against his father.⁹ His older brother, Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, received their imprisoned father's endorsement to run for the presidency on December

⁴"Brazil's Sovereignty Test: US Gang Terror Designation," *Eva Daily*, March 2026, <https://www.evadaily.com/article/brazil-sovereignty-test-us-gang-terror-designation>.

⁵Luíza Leão Soares Pereira, "US's moves to label Brazilian crime syndicates as "terrorist organizations": a prelude to the use of force?," *EJIL: Talk!*, March 18, 2026, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/u-s-s-moves-to-label-brazilian-crime-syndicates-as-terrorist-organizations-a-prelude-to-the-use-of-force/>.

⁶"US Navy Kills 4 In Caribbean Boat Strike As Trump's "Operation Southern Spear" Death Toll Hits 163," *Marine Insight*, 2026; "Timeline of Boat Strikes and Related Actions," *Just Security*, <https://www.justsecurity.org/124002/timeline-vessel-strikes-related-actions/>.

⁷"Imagery from Venezuela Shows a Surgical Strike, Not Shock and Awe," *CSIS*, January 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/imagery-venezuela-shows-surgical-strike-not-shock-and-awe>.

⁸"Brazilian Congress Expels Bolsonaro's Son Who Spent Months Lobbying Washington," *Bloomberg*, December 18, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-12-18/brazilian-congress-expels-bolsonaro-s-son-who-spent-months-lobbying-washington>.

⁹"Brazil's lower house strips Eduardo Bolsonaro and Alexandre Ramagem of their seats," *Brasil de Fato*, December 19, 2025, <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2025/12/19/brazils-lower-house-strips-eduardo-bolsonaro-and-alexandre-ramagem-of-their-seats/>.

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6, 2025, and was confirmed as the Liberal Party's (PL) candidate by party president Valdemar Costa Neto.¹⁰

To put the timeline plainly: the same family that is asking the United States to extend its terror-designation regime into Brazil is the family contesting Brazil's October 2026 presidential election. This is not a coincidence to be politely set aside, it is the principal political fact of the cycle.

The Caribbean Playbook

What makes the FTO debate in Brazil substantively different from earlier US counternarcotics initiatives is the legal and military doctrine that has accreted around the label since early 2025. Reading Operation Southern Spear and Operation Absolute Resolve together, three features stand out.

First, the FTO designation has been used to justify the extraterritorial use of lethal force against actors who, until very recently, would have been classified as criminal suspects subject to interdiction, evidence collection, and prosecution. As Luíza Leão Soares Pereira has argued, the strikes amount to summary executions justified by reference to a "narcoterrorist" category whose international-legal status is, at best, contested.¹¹ Mary Ellen O'Connell, writing in the same forum, called the campaign at sea a "phony war." Her language is rhetorical but legally precise considering the absence of an *armed attack* as required by Article 51 of the U.N. Charter. Whatever one's view of cartel violence in the region, the US position on this point matters: an FTO designation has become, in practice, a permission slip for unilateral force.

Second, the designation has bled into electoral and constitutional politics in target states. The most dramatic case is Venezuela, where the Cartel de los Soles label preceded the operation that captured the head of state. But the pattern is broader: US financial and prosecutorial instruments – bank-secondary sanctions, asset freezes, criminal indictments tied to "material support" provisions – now reach into the everyday operations of legitimate firms, banks, and even public officials in countries where designated groups operate. The Brazilian financial system, deeply integrated with US correspondent banking, would face significant exposure, with knock-on effects on credit, capital flows, and public investment. Officials in Brasília, including in the Ministry

¹⁰Allison Griner, "Flavio Bolsonaro enters Brazil's 2026 presidential race with father's nod," *Al Jazeera*, December 6, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/6/flavio-bolsonaro-enters-brazils-2026-presidential-race-with-fathers-nod>.

¹¹Luíza Leão Soares Pereira, "US's moves to label Brazilian crime syndicates as "terrorist organizations": a prelude to the use of force?," *EJIL: Talk!*, March 18, 2026, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/u-s-s-moves-to-label-brazilian-crime-syndicates-as-terrorist-organizations-a-prelude-to-the-use-of-force/>.

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of Finance, have warned of "billion-dollar" macroeconomic risks should the designation move forward.¹²

Third, and most importantly for the Brazilian case, the designation reframes domestic public-security debates as theatres of an external conflict. Once an organization is a Foreign Terrorist Organization in the eyes of US officials, every domestic policy choice in the host state becomes legible through the binary of "with us or against us." A Brazilian president who refuses joint operations becomes "soft on terror." A Supreme Court that rules against unilateral surveillance is "obstructing counterterrorism cooperation." A community-policing initiative in a Rio favela becomes "permissive." This is the rhetorical machinery that, in Colombia and Mexico, anchored decades of militarized security cooperation. In Brazil, it is being introduced into a presidential race already polarized by the criminal conviction of one candidate's father.

The Election as Battleground

The election itself is scheduled for October 4, 2026, with a runoff on October 25 if no candidate clears 50 percent in the first round.¹³ President Lula, eligible for a fourth term, will face Flávio Bolsonaro on the right and a fragmented set of governors and centrist outsiders. The far-right's central campaign theme is public security, which now polls as one of the top concerns of Brazilian voters and where the Bolsonaro coalition has historically held an advantage.¹⁴

The internal Brazilian debate over the FTO designation has, predictably, fractured along electoral lines. São Paulo Governor Tarcísio de Freitas, a leading figure on the right and a possible alternative candidate had Flávio Bolsonaro stumbled, declared on March 11 that the US designation would be "an opportunity," because it would "open the path for cooperation, integrate intelligence, bring financial resources, and allow us to fight more effectively."¹⁵ Lula's government, by contrast, has insisted that the PCC and the CV are profit-driven criminal enterprises, not political-ideological actors, and that classifying them as terrorists would conflate radically different phenomena and surrender Brazilian

¹²"Brazilian government fears billion-dollar impact on the financial system if Trump classifies PCC and CV as terrorist organizations," *Revista Sociedade Militar*, March 2026, <https://en.sociedademilitar.com.br/2026/03/governo-teme-impacto-bilionario-no-sistema-financeiro-brasileiro-caso-trump-classifique-pcc-e-cv-como-organizacoes-terroristas-fplv.html>.

¹³"2026 Brazilian general election," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Brazilian_general_election.

¹⁴"Flavio Bolsonaro Emerges as Main Challenger in Brazil Presidential Election Poll," *Bloomberg*, January 21, 2026; "2026 Brazilian general election," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Brazilian_general_election.

¹⁵"Tarcísio diz que EUA declararem PCC como terrorista é 'oportunidade'," *Poder360*, March 12, 2026, <https://www.poder360.com.br/poder-seguranca-publica/tarcisio-diz-que-eua-declararem-pcc-como-terrorista-e-oportunidade/>.

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jurisdictional authority.¹⁶ In April, the Lula government announced a parallel partnership – the *DESARMA* program, signed between Brazil's Federal Revenue Service and US Customs and Border Protection – that targets the same flows of weapons and drugs without invoking the terrorism framework.¹⁷ The implicit Brazilian message is that cooperation is possible and welcome; subsumption under US counterterrorism law is not.

This is where the Bolsonaro campaign converts the foreign-policy fight into a domestic asset. If the designation arrives before October, Flávio Bolsonaro can present it as a Washington-validated diagnosis of Brazil's security crisis and a rebuke of Lula's "leniency." If it does not, his campaign can blame the Lula government for "sabotaging" US cooperation. Either way, a decision made in the West Wing is converted into a wedge issue in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Belo Horizonte. The peculiarity here is that the wedge has been actively engineered by Brazilian actors operating in Washington: this is not a foreign imposition that the right is opportunistically embracing, but a sequence the right helped design.

Sovereignty as a Security Concept

Scholars working in critical security studies often handle the term "sovereignty" with skepticism. It can be a smokescreen for state violence; it has been invoked to silence transnational accountability; it has been used to defend regimes that needed to be defended against. Those critiques are valid and necessary. But the Brazilian case poses a different question: what does it mean for a democracy to lose control over the designations of its own internal violence?

This is a question Latin American thinkers have asked before. Manuela Trindade Viana's work on the transnational circulation of "security models" reminds us that what gets exported from one Latin American country to another, often via US or international consultants, is rarely public safety in the abstract. It is a particular grammar – pacification units, exceptional courts, militarized intelligence, anti-mafia statutes – that travels with its own assumptions about who counts as a citizen and what counts as a threat.¹⁸ The FTO designation belongs in this lineage. It is not just a list. It is a grammar of governance.

¹⁶"PCC e CV são terroristas? Veja o que dizem Lula, Tarcísio e especialistas," *CNN Brasil*, March 2026, <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/nacional/brasil/pcc-e-cv-sao-terroristas-veja-o-que-dizem-lula-tarcisio-e-especialistas/>.

¹⁷"Brazil announces US partnership to intercept weapons, drug trafficking," *Al Jazeera*, April 10, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/10/brazil-announces-us-partnership-to-intercept-weapons-drug-trafficking>.

¹⁸Fernando Brancoli (ed.), *Beyond Militarism: Reimagining Security and Resistance in Contemporary Latin America*, Security in Context Report 25-01, May 2025, <https://www.securityincontext.org/posts/security-in-context-report-beyond-militarism-reimagining-security-and-resistance-in-contemporary-latin-america>.

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For Brazil, the consequences of accepting that grammar would extend well beyond October. Such rhetoric would shape how a future government, of any political color, can negotiate with armed actors, regulate financial transactions, set bail in narcotics cases, deploy the army in domestic operations, and answer to Brazilian courts. The country has spent forty years rebuilding constitutional civilian rule after a military dictatorship that itself drew on hemispheric security doctrines exported from Washington. To accept the FTO framing in 2026 would invite the same grammar back through a different door – a door this time held open by the family of a former president convicted, in September 2025, of plotting a coup against the very institutional order under threat.¹⁹

What the SiC Reader Should Keep in View

Three things follow this discussion.

First, the US terror designation in Brazil is best understood not as a discrete policy debate but as the Brazilian station in a now-continental project of reframing counterterrorism. The same legal-political logic that struck Caracas in January and continues to strike fishing boats off the Caribbean coast every few weeks is now being rehearsed against São Paulo's prison-based syndicates and Rio de Janeiro's favelas. This is not a metaphor, but the use of the same statutes, the same designations, the same executive orders.

Second, the electoral dimension is not incidental. Lobbying by the Bolsonaro family was the proximate cause of the renewed FTO push, and the timing – months before a presidential vote – is itself a form of intervention. International law's traditional doctrine of non-intervention, often dismissed as soft or rhetorical, here acquires unexpected weight. As the *EJIL: Talk!* analysis put it, even the *threat* of force generated by FTO designation, used to interfere in the upcoming Brazilian elections, is a violation of the rule of non-intervention.²⁰ The Brazilian state is being asked to govern in the shadow of a unilateral category that its government rejects but that significant domestic actors are actively soliciting.

Third, the response that scholars and practitioners affiliated with Security in Context have long argued for – a definition of security oriented toward dignity, equity, and democratic accountability – has rarely been more concrete than in this case. A Brazilian security policy that takes the PCC and CV seriously, that targets their financial structures, their territorial control, and their links to public officials, is both possible and

¹⁹Allison Griner, "Flavio Bolsonaro enters Brazil's 2026 presidential race with father's nod," *Al Jazeera*, December 6, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/6/flavio-bolsonaro-enters-brazils-2026-presidential-race-with-fathers-nod>.

²⁰Luíza Leão Soares Pereira, "US's moves to label Brazilian crime syndicates as 'terrorist organizations': a prelude to the use of force?," *EJIL: Talk!*, March 18, 2026, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/u-s-s-moves-to-label-brazilian-crime-syndicates-as-terrorist-organizations-a-prelude-to-the-use-of-force/>.

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necessary. It does not require the FTO label. It does require, however, sustained resistance to the conversion of Brazil's internal democratic debate into another front in a US-led "armed conflict" with Latin American crime.

Brazil's October election will be decided by Brazilian voters. The terms on which it will be debated, however, are being co-authored in Washington – and, as we have seen, sometimes by Brazilian hands. Whether the country exits this cycle with its security apparatus intact, its courts independent, and its sovereignty meaningful, will depend in part on whether scholars, journalists, and policymakers in the region treat the FTO question as the constitutional moment it has become, rather than as a routine bilateral irritant. The vocabulary we accept now will determine the policies that are thinkable later. That is why the designation matters, that is why the election matters, and that is why they cannot be analyzed separately.

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