

Sovereignty at the Doorstep: How Brazil's Far Right Turned a Word into a Weapon

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the appropriation of sovereignty in Brazil's 2026 presidential election. The platforms of right-wing presidential candidates including Flávio Bolsonaro narrowed the term to domestic policing, whereby "sovereignty" becomes a justification for a permanent state of exception, organized around "terrorism", a category imported from US foreign policy. This shift enables Bolsonaro and others to deflect accusations of surrendering national interests, in an election cycle with elevated prospects of US interference. Drawing on electoral platforms, Brazilian intelligence and public security reports, and a household opinion survey, the essay argues that this agenda targets the street-level end of illicit commerce while leaving its financial structures intact. Its racial and gender selectivity is built into its design, and its punitive prescriptions run against what Brazilians say they want when asked.

TAGS:

Brazil; Latin America; Far-right; Terrorism; Racial Justice; Sovereignty

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A Word Changes Hands

"Sovereignty begins at your doorstep." This promise heads the chapter on public security of Flávio Bolsonaro's presidential platform (Bolsonaro 2026). Yet some three months before filing that document with Brazil's Superior Electoral Court, the candidate had been welcomed at the White House. What followed threw the promise into sharp relief.

On May 28, 2026, two days after Donald Trump received Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and Comando Vermelho (CV), Brazil's two largest criminal organizations, would be designated foreign terrorist organizations under US law. The Brazilian government, which had opposed the measure for months, was informed rather than consulted. Writing for *Security in Context*, Fernando Brancoli of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro showed how the designation imports into Brazil the legal logic that helped open the way for the extraterritorial use of force in the Caribbean and Venezuela (Brancoli 2026).

This essay examines the other side of that encounter. Whereas Brancoli followed the designation from Washington into Brazil's election, I trace the corresponding movement within Brazil, the incorporation of sovereignty into the right's security platforms. My argument is that this move splits the concept's two historical dimensions. It claims unrestricted supremacy over the population at home while yielding independence to a foreign power. With the first round scheduled for October 4 and a possible runoff on October 25, the election is unfolding under external pressure that Brazilian intelligence has itself begun to assess.

Four claims follow from that argument. The exception these platforms propose would reach the Constitution itself. The terrorist category they import would weaken the very

cooperation against organized crime that it promises to strengthen. The agenda they present as a response to crime leaves crime's finances largely untouched while concentrating on the people least able to escape it. The punitive consensus they invoke bears little resemblance to what Brazilians describe when they are asked.

A note on the field of candidates. Lula, of the Workers' Party (PT), is running for re-election. Flávio Bolsonaro, a senator and son of the imprisoned former president, carries the Liberal Party (PL) banner. Ronaldo Caiado and Romeu Zema are sitting governors of Goiás and Minas Gerais, standing for the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Novo party. Renan Santos founded the Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL), the hard-right street movement that drove the 2015 protests for Dilma Rousseff's impeachment, and now runs for Missão, the party the movement created. Augusto Cury, a psychiatrist and best-selling author, runs for Avante on the right of the field. Samara Martins stands for Unidade Popular (UP), a party of the radical left. The platforms cited throughout are the government programs each campaign filed with the Superior Electoral Court, which are public documents.

Power To The People- Or Power In Their Hands?

Sovereignty has never had a single meaning. For the sixteenth-century French jurist Jean Bodin, it denoted a ruler's supreme power over a territory and its inhabitants. Two centuries later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau relocated that power. In *The Social Contract*, the Genevan philosopher argued that sovereignty belongs to the people and, as the exercise of the general will, cannot be alienated. Later, particularly in twentieth-century international law, sovereignty also came to denote a state's independence from other states, expressed through sovereign equality and the principle of non-intervention. These dimensions coexist uneasily. Critical security studies has good reason to distrust the first, which has justified state violence in many settings, including Brazil.

The candidates examined here are reviving an old meaning. They take up Bodin's sovereignty—power exercised over the population—and set it against Rousseau's sovereignty, which makes the people the holders of that power, as well as its notion of independence from external powers. What results is sovereignty enforced with maximum severity against the governed, through suspended safeguards, armed forces deployed in policing, and rights curtailed by administrative decision. Outwardly, however, sovereignty is ceded as legal categories, economic sanctions, and electoral pressure arrive from Washington. That combination is the subject of this essay.

The Pressure Brazilian Intelligence Is Tracking

In late August 2026, the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (Abin) sent a confidential assessment of electoral threats to the presidency, the Superior Electoral Court, and the Ministry of Justice. It moved US interference to what the agency calls a level of criticality, the classification it applies to threats that require action by the institutions responsible for running the election (Bergamo 2026). The report described a “sequence of actions consistent with a previously identified pattern,” unfolding in four stages: defining a Brazilian criminal organization as a threat to US national security; constructing a narrative about its transnational operations; connecting the issue to the US financial system; and imposing sanctions on Brazilian individuals and companies.

The fourth stage came in July, when the US Treasury sanctioned two Brazilians and three companies based in Brazil over alleged links to PCC-connected money-laundering networks. Abin described the measure as a “new phase in the escalation of US sanctions and interference.” Drawing on strategic documents released by Washington between November 2025 and May 2026, the report described the purpose of this pressure as denying rival powers, China above all, access to “strategic assets, natural resources, and infrastructure in the region,” so that control of them passes, directly or indirectly, to the US government or to US private capital (Bergamo 2026). The first stage Abin identified, classifying criminal groups as terrorist organizations, is precisely what three presidential platforms propose to incorporate into Brazilian law.

In October 2025, the White House had presented Brazilian officials with a draft joint declaration under which Brazil would undertake not to detain, imprison, or restrict “the participation of political dissidents in the electoral process (Bergamo 2026).” President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva dismissed the text as a dead letter. Yet the category of political dissident does not describe the situation in Brazil in 2026. Jair Bolsonaro was tried by the Supreme Federal Court in public proceedings, with full rights of defense and livestreamed hearings. In September 2025, he was convicted of leading a plot to overturn the 2022 election result and assassinate the president-elect, vice president-elect, and a Supreme Court justice—a sequence that culminated in the storming of the headquarters of all three branches of government on January 8, 2023 (Brancoli 2026; Pereira 2025). No opposition party has been barred from contesting the election. Bolsonaro's Liberal Party (PL) is running the convicted former president's son for the presidency. To describe this as political persecution is to adopt Washington's narrative of Brazil as a “left-wing dictatorship.”

Annexing Sovereignty

Against this backdrop, sovereignty changes location in the right's platforms. Flávio Bolsonaro's foreign policy chapter complements his security chapter: "sovereignty does not begin far away; it begins at home," and "those who cannot guarantee security at home have no authority to speak of sovereignty abroad (Bolsonaro 2026)."

Ronaldo Caiado, governor of Goiás and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) candidate, proposes an Integrated System for the Protection of National Sovereignty, "priority zones for the recovery of sovereignty," and a Domestic Terrorism Law recognizing that "militias and criminal organizations, such as the PCC and CV, threaten national sovereignty (Caiado 2026)." Romeu Zema, governor of Minas Gerais and a member of the Novo party, proposes designating criminal groups as terrorist organizations "nationally and internationally (Zema 2026)." Renan Santos, the Missão party's candidate, describes their territorial control as the "progressive erosion of state sovereignty." His platform concludes that "our legal framework protects the enemy," referring to the 1988 Constitution (Missão 2026).

Caiado and Zema come from traditions distinct from the Bolsonaro family's inner circle. Both, however, supported Jair Bolsonaro's government and made public security central to their opposition to the left while governing their states. One right-wing platform stands apart. Augusto Cury's, filed for Avante, addresses organized crime through financial disruption and police coordination, leaving terrorism and sovereignty out of the chapter altogether.⁸

The shift also performs different functions for different candidates. Across the platforms that adopt this framing, sovereignty justifies exceptional measures at home. Flávio Bolsonaro, Caiado, and Zema also endorse terrorist classifications aligned with the US designation. For Flávio, the language supplies an additional rhetorical shield, since it allows those who supported Washington's sweeping tariffs and convened foreign diplomats to challenge Brazil's electronic voting system to claim the banner of sovereignty.

Renan Santos turns the word inward without the same outward alignment. According to journalist João Filho, he is the only right-wing candidate to condemn the January 8 coup-related attacks. That does not amount to a democratic commitment, since he also proposes reviewing the convictions to secure lighter sentences (Filho 2026a; 2026b). His position shows that a willingness to suspend safeguards does not depend on alignment with Washington.

Making The Exception Permanent

The platforms spell out what this version of sovereignty would mean in practice. In Flávio Bolsonaro's and Caiado's documents, criminal groups and militias become narcoterrorist organizations. Caiado goes further and would let the Brazilian armed forces act against organized crime without activating the Guarantee of Law and Order mechanism, known as GLO, an instrument that currently makes domestic military deployment subject to presidential authorization and a defined time limit (Caiado 2026).

The remaining measures divide along candidate lines. Caiado's platform would monitor every conversation between a prisoner and a lawyer, hold prisoners to 90 percent of a sentence before any move to a less restrictive regime, and set a minimum 45-year sentence for association with or recruitment to a criminal organization (Caiado 2026). Flávio Bolsonaro's promises five maximum-security federal prisons modeled on El Salvador's, grouped under the name TREVA, half a million additional prison places in four years, a national facial-recognition system with more than one million new cameras, and chemical castration for men convicted of sexual crimes against women and children. Both would lower the age of criminal responsibility to sixteen, and Flávio Bolsonaro would also have offenders from the age of fourteen punished as adults for serious crimes.² Zema's platform proposes sixteen "or below (Zema 2026)." Some of these measures collide with constitutional safeguards, among them full rights of defense, the professional inviolability of lawyers, and the exclusion of under-eighteens from adult criminal liability, and would require constitutional amendment (Brazil Constitution 1988). In its comparison of the right-wing presidential platforms, the civil society organization Instituto Sou da Paz groups the measures that suspend constitutional safeguards under the heading of turning exception into permanent policy. Chemical castration sits in a different category, as a corporal penalty rather than an emergency power (Instituto Sou da Paz 2026).

Renan Santos's platform is the most explicit. It proposes adopting *Direito Penal do Inimigo*, or "enemy criminal law," the doctrine associated with German jurist Günther Jakobs that distinguishes criminal law for citizens, with full safeguards, from criminal law for enemies, with "preventive measures and disproportionate sentences." The platform would implement it through "successive state-of-defense decrees" in areas controlled by criminal groups. People classified as "associates" would lose civil and political rights, while a National Classification Commission would wield immediate administrative authority. The chapter is titled "Prendeu, Matou"—"Arrested, Killed"—and calls for leaders to be neutralized "in the most efficient way" when there is "danger or resistance (Missão 2026)." Flávio Bolsonaro's platform similarly declares that "a criminal with a rifle in hand will be shot down by the security forces (Bolsonaro 2026)."

These promises have a recent precedent. On October 28, 2025, a Rio de Janeiro police operation in the Alemão and Penha favela complexes, under then-governor Cláudio Castro of the PL, left 122 people dead. Rio's Public Defender's Office considers it the deadliest police operation in the state's history (Forum Brasileiro 2026). Six months later, the Federal Police told the Supreme Court that material supplied by the state government was technically inadequate for forensic examination. Military Police body-camera footage had still not been handed over (Correa 2026).

The *Brazilian Public Security Yearbook* recorded 6,602 deaths resulting from police intervention in 2025, the highest total in its series and one in every six intentional violent deaths nationwide. Its conclusion was that the state "has been part of the problem, not just part of the solution (Forum Brasileiro)." The platforms thus propose making federal policy out of a practice whose investigation remains unresolved.

What The Terrorist Label Cannot Do

There is a serious argument for the terrorist designation that deserves consideration. The PCC operates in twenty-eight countries, with a defined command structure and coordination among state-level cells. It is reasonable to ask whether ordinary instruments of international criminal justice cooperation are sufficient (Pereira 2026). The right-wing platforms answer no and offer the terrorist designation as the alternative.

People working directly on the issue challenge that answer. Lincoln Gakiya, a prosecutor in the specialized organized-crime unit of the São Paulo Public Prosecutor's Office and one of the Brazilian officials in closest contact with US authorities, warns that the terrorist label raises classification levels and moves case material into the remit of the CIA. Brazilian investigators who currently exchange case information directly with the FBI and the DEA would lose that access (Pereira 2026). The designation jeopardizes the very cooperation it promises to strengthen.

There is also a problem of definition. Brazil's terrorism law requires ideological motivation, an argument used by National Secretary for Public Security Mário Sarrubo to reject the designation. Twelve United Nations special rapporteurs have said that the measure conflates terrorism and organized crime. Camila Nunes Dias, a researcher at the Federal University of ABC and the University of São Paulo's Center for the Study of Violence, observes that criminal groups pursue economic objectives and have no interest in destroying the state (Dias 2026). The recent politically motivated violence against Brazil's institutions was the 2022 coup attempt and the January 8, 2023 attack. Most right-wing candidates promise amnesty for those convicted in connection with them (Filho 2026).

Militias expose another practical limit. Formed by serving and retired police officers, firefighters, military personnel, and prison officers, they organized in Rio's western zone from the 2000s onward and compete with criminal groups for territory. Flávio Bolsonaro's platform proposes declaring them narcoterrorist organizations. Yet Flávio himself honored Captain Adriano da Nóbrega, leader of the death squad known as the *Escritório do Crime*, in Rio's Legislative Assembly, and employed Nóbrega's mother and then-wife in his office (Nexo Jornal 2026). The difficulty here is structural. A doctrine of war needs an enemy that stands outside the state, and militias stand inside it. A 2024 study by Instituto Fogo Cruzado and researchers at the Fluminense Federal University found that militia-held areas in Rio were less likely to register confrontations with the police than areas held by criminal groups. A category built for foreign enemies will be unlikely to turn on the security forces themselves.

Who Pays- And Who Profits?

Brazil spent R\$163.12 billion on public security in 2025, roughly US\$32 billion, the highest figure on record. States accounted for 80.5 percent of that spending. Rio de Janeiro's 2026 security budget of R\$19.4 billion exceeds its health and education budgets. A study by Justa, which monitors justice-system budgets, found that nearly half of the R\$109 billion spent by twenty-four states on security and prisons went to their Military Police forces. For every R\$4,877 spent on policing, public authorities allocated R\$1 to policies for people leaving prison (Batistella 2026).

That distribution favors visible, uniformed policing, which catches offenses in progress and low-level crime, over investigation, forensic work, and reintegration. The tools needed to reach the upper tiers of criminal organizations receive less attention.

Those upper tiers handle enormous sums. According to Instituto Sou da Paz's electoral agenda, organized crime moved fuel, illegal mining, and smuggling worth more than R\$350 billion (nearly US\$69 billion) over three years (Instituto Sou da Paz 2026). *Floresta em Pó*, a report by Instituto Fogo Cruzado and its partners, mapped 550 cocaine laboratories across the country and put the trade at some US\$6 billion a year. Brazil has added refining to its older role as a transit route. Goiás holds 44 of the highest-capacity laboratories. Three factors converge there. The state sits on the Rota Caipira, the corridor the PCC controls from the Bolivian and Paraguayan borders. Its road network carries traffic without effective inspection. Its rural infrastructure supplies the isolated sheds where refining takes place. Caiado governed Goiás throughout the six years in which the state allowed this under its watch (Instituto Fogo Cruzado 2025; Intercept Brazil 2026). In 2025, Operation Carbone Oculto uncovered a multibillion-real PCC money-laundering scheme running through fintech companies and the fuel sector

into São Paulo's Faria Lima financial district (Dias 2026). The platforms that invoke sovereignty devote a fraction of the attention to the deep structures of crime, drugs, and corruption that they lavish on prisons and cameras.

The promise of half a million new prison places is revealing. Brazil's prison population grew by a similar number over the past two decades, reaching 964,668 in 2025. Over the same period, the number of criminal groups rose from roughly five to more than eighty. Specialists attribute much of that growth to overcrowded prisons, which function as recruitment and command centers for the groups (Dalapola 2026).

The figures establish a priority, and the priority has a consequence. Ostensive (publicly visible) policing reaches offenses in progress. Reaching laundering requires financial investigation, forensic capacity, and the units that receive the smallest share of the budget. When those units do operate, the effect is measurable. Operation Carbono Oculto dismantled a scheme worth billions, and the Lula government reports R\$35.8 billion in losses imposed on criminal organizations since 2023 through financial disruption (da Silva 2026). The reading that follows is my own. An apparatus that consumes R\$163 billion a year, accounts for 6,602 deaths, and incarcerates almost a million people while leaving crime's financial flows intact performs an economic function. It manages a population treated as disposable while preserving the business it claims to fight. Denouncing these deaths as human rights violations remains indispensable. That argument becomes stronger when it also demonstrates how selective public spending protects those who profit from crime.

Whose Lives Are Expendable?

Black Brazilians accounted for 79.7 percent of the 40,775 intentional violent deaths recorded in 2025; deaths of Black people at police hands were 3.5 times those of white people (Dutra et al. 2026). Black people also make up 69.6 percent of the nearly one million people in prison (Martin 2026).

When Renan Santos proposes stripping rights from people administratively classified as associates of criminal groups, the measure falls on a population that the same police forces, in the same territories, have been targeting for decades. Dennis de Oliveira, a researcher and professor at the University of São Paulo's School of Communications and Arts, argues that antiracism must be central to democratic politics precisely because the far right knows very well who it is targeting (Oliveira 2026). The same is true of sovereignty. The population already living with suspended safeguards is racially identifiable; the presidential platforms propose extending that condition.

For women, the trend ran against the overall decline. While violent deaths fell by 8.2 percent in 2025, femicides rose by 4 percent to more than 1,500 cases. Most were committed by intimate partners inside the home, and nearly two-thirds of the victims were Black women (Anuario Brasileiro 2026). A household survey conducted by Instituto Sou da Paz and OMA Pesquisa in November 2025, with 1,115 interviews across forty municipalities in state capitals and metropolitan areas, found that 63 percent of women had changed their habits for fear of violence, compared with 51 percent of men (Instituto Sou da Paz 2026)).

Flávio Bolsonaro's proposals—electronic ankle monitors for abusers, full-term imprisonment, and chemical castration—operate after the offense. Janine Salles de Carvalho, executive coordinator of Rede Justiça Criminal, similarly observes that most proposals before Congress address the aftermath of violence. She identifies expanded access to firearms as a direct risk factor for femicide (Brasil de Fato 2026).

A Punitive Agenda Without A Majority

The campaigns assume that Brazilians demand ever harsher responses. The available evidence complicates that assumption. In a Sou da Paz survey, only 20 percent agreed that “the only good criminal is a dead criminal,” a figure consistent across regions. Seventy-three percent said that all offenders should be tried, punished, and imprisoned. Arming the population had the support of 21 percent, while 60 percent opposed gun ownership. Eighty-two percent said body cameras protect good police officers, and 55 percent preferred enforcing existing sentences to increasing them (Instituto Sou da Paz 2026).

Two qualifications matter. The survey covers state capitals and metropolitan regions, and the propositions it tested were specific measures, from which platform-level support cannot be read directly. What it describes is a public that is punitive and legalist at the same time. Brazilians want offenders caught and imprisoned, and majorities reject killing as policy, arming civilians, and raising sentences in place of enforcing the ones already on the books. That combination is what the platforms examined here fail to offer. The assumption of an ever-harsher electorate also operates in an information environment in which 96 percent of the survey respondents said they follow news about crime and violence, and 77 percent said they do so every day, mostly through television and social media. Attributing to voters a demand they do not express serves, above all, those who stand to gain politically from it.

The Progressive Blind Spots

The democratic camp deserves the same scrutiny. Lula's platform proposes disrupting organized crime's finances, with R\$35.8 billion in losses inflicted on criminal organizations since 2023; maintaining gun controls; expanding body-camera use; implementing the *Pena Justa* plan; strengthening community policing; and improving external oversight of police activity (da Silva 2026).

Yet the document does not mention police killings, the 6,602 deaths in 2025, or the Rio operation. That omission is striking. The diagnosis that the state has become part of the problem comes from the Brazilian Forum on Public Security, whose data the government itself uses. The survey suggests a social constituency for greater control over the use of force. In the same election, Samara Martins's platform for Unidade Popular explicitly names the genocide of Black youth and calls for demilitarizing the police and ending the logic of war in marginalized urban neighborhoods (Martin 2026). Silence on this issue allows the right to set the terms of debate.

There is an infrastructure gap, too. The Brazilian state spent R\$10 billion in a single year on services from Google, Microsoft, and Oracle, while the Institutional Security Office is negotiating with Amazon Web Services to host sensitive data. US law, meanwhile, requires these companies to surrender data when ordered by US courts, wherever that data is stored (Dia 2025). The defense of digital sovereignty loses credibility while this dependence remains unaddressed. Lula does not address it.

Sovereignty For Whom?

Three conclusions follow. First, the right's appropriation of sovereignty pulls the concept apart. Unrestricted supremacy over the population is claimed at home while the legal categories and pressure of a foreign power are accepted—and, in one case, solicited. In mid-September, with the draft declaration on “dissidents” already public and his brother Eduardo lobbying in Washington for new sanctions against a Supreme Court justice, Flávio Bolsonaro declared that “we are the ones who decide the election here.” His own campaign, meanwhile, feared that its association with the sweeping US tariffs could again become a liability in the final stretch.

Second, many of those now claiming sovereignty belong to the same political camp that tried to overturn an election by force, whose leader was convicted over a plot to assassinate the president-elect, and that promises amnesty for those convicted—a commitment made by more than half the candidates. The danger does not end in October. As *Intercept Brasil* journalist Paulo Motoryn observes, Bolsonarismo has

consolidated an electoral base, political cadres, and a presence in state governments and Congress. It prioritizes the Senate elections because of the chamber's power over appointments to the higher courts and impeachment proceedings against Supreme Court justices (Motoryn 2026). The far right could lose the presidency while still expanding its congressional presence enough to obstruct the elected government and pass the amnesty the executive vetoed. João Filho also recalls that the 2022 coup attempt failed in part because Washington signaled to Brazil's military that it would not participate—a situation that no longer holds.

Third, a democratic response requires a definition of security grounded in protecting life and ensuring public oversight of force. It must reach crime's financial structures and confront police killings explicitly. As Brancoli argues, such a policy can be built without the terrorist label, and it requires resisting the conversion of Brazil's security debate into another front in the US war on crime in Latin America.

Sovereignty is a people's capacity to decide its own future. It exists only when both dimensions of the word hold together. A state that suspends safeguards for its own population to secure external recognition trades one for the other. The unresolved forensic investigation into 122 deaths, the designation announced in Washington after Trump received Flávio Bolsonaro, and the promised amnesty for those convicted over the coup are three expressions of the same political project.

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