

SURE-FIRE SECURITY OR CATALYST FOR URBAN CONFLICT?

The privatization of security in São Paulo

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Of heightened concern in recent years is the degree to which São Paulo, Brazil is marked by spatial segregation, economic disparity, organized crime and a "culture of lethal police action."¹ Recent occurrences suggest that São Paulo may be experiencing what some have termed an "urban guerilla war."² Events such as the Mother's Day violence of 2006, in which 152 police and suspected criminal organization members were killed, have shown that an unaccountable police force and under-regulated private security firms have become directly and violently engaged with organized crime on the streets of the city. The privatization of security has undoubtedly played a central role in the ratcheting up of deadly armed confrontations in urban São Paulo.

Privatized security apparatuses are providing physical security for a large proportion of São Paulo's population as they struggle under the routine threat of violent and economic crime in a city under-protected by public security services. Consistent under-spending by various levels of government on public security and social services in periphery communities has allowed criminal activity to skyrocket. In 2004, there were a reported 875,033

criminal acts in the city, of which 5,797 were homicides.³

Citizens' adaptation to being perpetually threatened can be seen in the substantial increase in private security firms in recent years. Between 2000 and 2004, the number of private security personnel in Brazil — many of whom were civil or military police — doubled from 540,334 to 1,148,568. The impact of the private security sector on the public security workforce is notable. In the 10 years prior to 2000, 88 percent of all police officers killed in São Paulo were killed while off-duty, most while working privately.⁴ The employment of private security forces further stratifies the segregation of society based on racial, economic and social lines. The result is a city which is punctuated by highly fortified security bubbles, protected by unaccountable and under-regulated private forces, which are designed to resist the reality of a disparate and deeply troubled Brazilian society.

While the upper and middle classes of São Paulo are occupied in defending themselves from prospective thieves and kidnappers through private means, residents of favelas on the social and economic periphery also benefit from a form of private

protection. In the São Paulo metropolitan area, where many periphery settlements are not as concentrated as in Rio de Janeiro — and, as a result, not subject to the same degree of turf wars — most communities are controlled by a larger criminal network, the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC). Unlike the territorial gangs of Rio, the PCC is not known to maintain an openly armed presence within the favelas. Rather, its decentralized, affiliate-based organizational structure has been compared to that of Al Qaeda,⁵ allowing it to function virtually independent of major leaders, many of whom are imprisoned.

The lack of state presence in São Paulo's periphery settlements allows the PCC to monopolize security within favelas and to operate the drug trade and other criminal ventures virtually unhindered. Although not respectful of human rights, the PCC's armed presence provides favela residents a degree of protection from military-style police incursions into their communities.

[Opposite:] Buses were set ablaze by gangs as part of the Mother's Day 2006 wave of violent attacks in São Paulo, Brazil. (May 2006)