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By Erika Larkins and Susana Durão

In the leadup to the election, there was much speculation about whether or not Bolsonaro had the kind of institutional support from the military or other political leaders to carry out a coup if he lost. We now know he does not. Brazil's democratic institutions

are working. But what the events of the last month have revealed is that the outgoing president, together with his remaining allies and his politician sons, have strategically weaponized the police force, with potentially long-term consequences. The politicization of the police poses a real risk to the construction of a flourishing, progressive Brazil. Breaking with a culture of impunity should be among Lula's first priorities as when he takes office.

Starting on election day, one particular police force emerged as the armed wing of Bolsonarismo: the Federal Highway Police, which just so happens to be controlled directly by the president, not state governors. While millions of Brazilians went to the polls, this force carried out a highly unusual set of actions. Following a plan supposedly hatched at the presidential residence in the days prior to the election, the force established an unprecedented number of police checkpoints (almost 600), stopping vehicles and checking IDs and preventing people from reaching the polls. Checkpoints



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... by Bolsonaro's legions, the supporters took to the streets, blocking  
roads with trucks, with over 962 blockades in 25 states. Some called for military  
intervention. Others even evoked Nazis. The Federal Highway Police again played a  
problematic role. The same force which so effectively stopped buses on election day  
seemed to move at a snail's pace when it came to removing blockades, so much so  
that

the Supreme Court ordered their commander be fined 100,000 reais for every hour of  
what seemed to be inaction. In a chilling video which went viral, one officer told a  
cheering crowd that his only order was to be out in the streets with them. In a handful of  
states, the Military Police had to be called out by the state governors to do the work  
their colleagues would not or could not.

The Federal Highway Police is relatively young compared to other law enforcement  
groups in Brazil. It doesn't have a strong identity, making it more open to political  
manipulation. Commander Silvinei Vasques, who was supposedly recommended for his  
post by Flavio Bolsonaro in 2021, has transformed the force. Through untransparent  
pork barrel funding mechanisms, known as the "secret budget," developed under the  
current government and which are now under investigation, two of Bolsonaro's sons,  
who hold elected office in the legislature, are alleged to have sent millions of reais to  
Vasques and other top brass. Vasques even called for people to vote for Bolsonaro on  
social media.



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including the massacre of 20 men suspected of planning a coup, robbery, kidnapping

Gerais, and the use of tear gas on an already restrained suspect that led to his death.

In the immediate aftermath of the election, political pressure finally forced the police to do their job. For now. Lula and his administration must immediately look for ways to seek accountability for those officers who supported calls for the coup and encouraged undemocratic unrest. Brazil cannot have a police force working to undermine the president, be it via active steps like suppressing the vote, or passive ones, where officers simply looked the other way. The future stability of the country depends on it.

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