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By Pedro Marin

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The Role of the Brazilian Military in the Coup Attempt

The far-right mob that [invaded](#) the federal building, Congress, and the Supreme Court and [vandalized](#) government buildings at Three Powers Plaza in Brasília on January 8, demanded a “[military intervention](#)” in Brazil. They had set up camps that had assembled in front of army barracks throughout the country since November demanding the “[military to overturn](#)” the election of Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (known as Lula). On November 11, 2022, the commanders of the armed forces [released](#) a note giving the coup camps a safe haven—not only physically but also legally. It is important to note two elements of that document: first, the commanders stated, through an illogical interpretation, that the camps in favor of a coup were legal because the protesters were peaceful, and that “both possible restrictions on rights by public agents and possible excesses committed in demonstrations” would be reprehensible, despite the fact that demanding the military to stage a coup is a crime ([Article 286](#)). In practice, the commanders of the three armed forces acted as constitutional interpreters, defending the democratic legitimacy of the coup camps and saying, in advance, that any measure taken by the institutions against the camps would be considered illegal by them.

The second element of the note made reference to the concept of “moderating power.” Reaffirming their commitment to the Brazilian people, the commanders said the armed forces were “always present and moderators in the most important moments of our history.” The moderating power was introduced as part of the [constitution of 1824](#), based on the [ideas](#) of Benjamin Constant, who predicted that to avoid “anarchy” that marked the concept of the three branches of the government, it would be necessary to grant one of the

powers (in Brazil, the monarch) a fourth power, capable of solving institutional disagreements.

On January 2, when Lula's Minister of Defense José Múcio [said](#) that he considered the camps to be a “manifestation of democracy,” and that he had “friends and relatives” who were part of these camps, he was only repeating what the military had been saying since November.

Brazil has a long history of military intervention in politics. The Brazilian republic was [founded](#) through a military coup in 1889. From then until 1989, Brazil experienced at least [15 coups d'état attempts](#), of which five were successful: including a [21-year-long military dictatorship](#). After the fall of the dictatorship, in 1985, there was an expectation among Brazilians that civilian control would be established over the military and that respect for democracy would prevail among them. But the redemocratization process itself was controlled by the outgoing military government, through a “slow, gradual, and safe political opening,” in the [words](#) of then-military President Ernesto Geisel, and the pressure of the army on the Constituent Assembly that wrote the 1989 constitution guaranteed them the [role](#) of “[guarantors] of the powers and defenders of law and order.”

During Lula's first two terms (from 2003 to 2011) as president, the military adopted a lobbying strategy in dealing with the government. Since the impeachment of former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, however, they seem to have returned to the forefront of politics. Statements [encouraging](#) coups began to emerge from among the reserve and active military personnel, without punishment, and even the then-commander of the armed forces, General Eduardo Villás Boas, stated in a tweet that he “[repudiates impunity](#)” when the Supreme Court was preparing to decide on a *habeas corpus* petition filed by Lula in 2018. Villás Boas later would describe his tweet as an “[alert](#).” The army took [important positions](#) in former President Michel Temer's government and expanded its [political participation](#) under the government of former President Jair Bolsonaro, and has continuously threatened the electoral process in 2022.

On January 8, as the governmental buildings in Brasília were vandalized by the angry mob, a Law and Order Guarantee (GLO) decree was [discussed](#) and 2,500 military personnel were mobilized, ready to respond to the escalating situation. If such a decree had been signed, the armed forces would have been responsible for controlling the security of Brazil's federal capital. Lula, instead, [decreed](#) a federal intervention “in the area of security in the Federal District,” appointing Ricardo Capelli, executive secretary of the

Ministry of Justice, to command it. The president later [declared](#) that if he had carried out a GLO, “then the coup that these people wanted would be taking place.”

The involvement of the military in the acts of January 8 is being investigated. Many [reserve members](#) of the armed forces participated in the acts. The reasons why the Presidential Guard Battalion, the army battalion responsible for the security of the Planalto Palace, did not prevent the demonstrators from invading the government headquarters is also [under](#) investigation. “There were a lot of conniving people. There were a lot of people from the [police] conniving. A lot of people from the armed forces here were conniving. I am convinced that the door of the Planalto Palace was opened for these people to enter because there are no broken doors. This means that someone facilitated their entry,” [said Lula](#).

After the establishment of the federal intervention, the security forces, led by the intervenor Ricardo Capelli, repressed and arrested the coup demonstrators.. The army mobilized armored vehicles to block and [prevent](#) the police from entering the camp and arresting those [responsible](#) on January 8. According to [the Washington Post](#), senior army commander, General Júlio César de Arruda, told the Minister of Justice Flávio Dino: “You are not going to arrest people here.” The police were only [allowed](#) to enter the camp the next day.

This incident is just a manifestation of what the armed forces have been saying since November 2022: that they consider themselves a moderating power and that they will not allow—even after the destruction on January 8—“[public agents](#)” to carry out any act they consider a “[restriction of rights](#)” of the coup demonstrators.

The army gave a safe haven to the coup demonstrators before and after they vandalized the buildings in Brasília and while they were asking for an army intervention against the president. At the same time, it was unable to protect the presidential palace from such a crowd. This sends a clear message about who the army was trying to defend and what it considers its true mission.

In Brazil, it becomes more and more urgent that the masses, who [shouted](#) in chorus “No amnesty!” for Bolsonaro during Lula’s inauguration on January 1, 2023, include the military in their demand.

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