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The Racist and Sexist Nature of Brazil's New Government

By Adam Bledsoe
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The overtly racist and sexist nature of Michel Temer's government in Brazil is cause for concern in South America's largest country. Over the past several weeks critics have appropriately pointed out the various ways in which the new government has threatened the country's most marginalized sectors—closing avenues to affordable housing, removing women and people of color from government posts, and threatening to de-fund constitutionally-guaranteed services like healthcare and education. While all of these actions have been aptly criticized for their potential effects on the Brazilian poor, Temer's decision to dissolve the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) has not received sufficient attention, despite the fact that such a measure means the continuation and intensification of anti-Black racism for many Brazilian communities. Specifically, Brazil's *quilombo* communities face dire prospects as a result of INCRA's closing.

The word "*quilombo*" is of African origin and was used to designate Brazil's maroon communities during pre-abolition times. This concept was resurrected during the late 20th century by Brazil's Black Movement as Black Brazilians sought to address the country's long history of anti-Blackness by demanding that Afro-descendant communities with unique cultural, social, and political practices—modern day *quilombos*—be granted legal land titles. The Movement succeeded in securing legislation for the recognition of *quilombo* land rights in Brazil's 1988 constitution, and INCRA was designated as the body that would measure and delimit *quilombo* territories. INCRA, therefore, played a vital function in *quilombo* efforts to attain legal possession of their lands. This territorial titling is often crucial to the continuation of

these communities' existences, as *quilombos* often engage in various subsistence practices, such as fishing, farming, foraging, and shellfish collection. Clearly, access to land is central to *quilombo* ways of life. By dissolving INCRA, Michel Temer has actively eliminated an organ upon which Brazilian *quilombos* counted for legal recognition. Moreover, Temer has taken further steps to systemically marginalize *quilombo* land tenure.

Not only has INCRA been dissolved under Temer's government, but its territorial titling functions have been passed on to the Ministry of Education, which is headed by José Mendonça Bezerra Filho of the Democrats Party—a political party that actively tried to prevent the formalization of *quilombola* rights in 2012. In other words, *quilombo* titling is now undertaken by a politician from a party fundamentally opposed to the very existence of *quilombo* communities. It is obvious that by jeopardizing the process of territorial titling, Michel Temer's actions have further compromised the Brazilian *quilombos*' ability to protect their unique ways of life, thereby adding a new aspect of anti-Black racism to the national landscape. A number of cases from the northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia demonstrate the ways in which the recent government changes act as further marginalizing factors against *quilombos*.

The state of Bahia has the highest number of culturally certified *quilombos* in all of Brazil. Despite the large number of cultural certifications among the communities there, the grand majority of *quilombos* in Bahia remain territorially un-titled. In many cases this is significant because of the violence that *quilombos* face in their attempts to defend their ways of life. Quilombo Rio dos Macacos, for instance, located in the municipality of Simões Filho just outside the city of Salvador, has fought for years to receive its territorial title from the government in part because of the brutality it faces from the Brazilian navy. For around fifty years, the navy has encroached on and appropriated Rio dos Macacos land—a process that has entailed a variety of violent actions, as *quilombo* members have been beaten, shot, sexually assaulted, and had their property continually destroyed by naval soldiers. One of the ways in which the *quilombo* has attempted to protect its over 200 year legacy of self-subsistence has been to petition the government for territorial recognition. After years of public audiences and trips to Brasilia to meet with INCRA officials, Rio dos Macacos was set to receive its territorial title in 2016. However, with the dissolution of INCRA and the assumption of titling powers by the Ministry of Education, members of Rio dos Macacos now fear they may not receive their title, after all. During a recent trip to Brasilia to discuss what the change in government might mean for the community's title, *quilombo* members were led to believe that there would be no more progress on their territory's titling. Events in recent weeks make the prospect of indefinite lack of titling especially grim, as naval soldiers have again resorted to violent intimidation tactics against *quilombo* community members—confiscating the subsistence crops of a 71 year old man and employing drones to invasively observe daily life in the *quilombo*. The prospect of losing access to this constitutional right looms large not just for those struggling against military encroachment, however.

Other *quilombos* face displacement at the hands of local politicians and private landowners, as well. On the other side of All Saints' Bay, in Bahia's Recôncavo region, Quilombo Porto Dom João is also attempting to get their territory titled as they struggle against the violence of local power brokers. Like Rio dos Macacos, the members of Porto Dom João have faced numerous threats, such as assassination attempts, property damage, and persistent forms of intimidation.

These actions have been carried out by local law enforcement at the behest of Mayor Evandro Santos Almeida of São Francisco do Conde and local landowner José da Costa Falcão Junior, with the intention of removing the inhabitants of the *quilombo* from the area. The territorial titling process has thus been an important tool that Porto Dom João has used in their attempts to ameliorate the violence they continue to face. As is the case in most *quilombos* of Bahia, Porto Dom João has yet to receive its title, despite having cultural certification. The dissolution of INCRA, therefore, decreases the likelihood that Quilombo Porto Dom João will be able to lay legal claim to its land and protect it from the continued incursions of local, armed intruders.

It is true that under Dilma's regime the titling process was often unnecessarily delayed and *quilombo* communities coerced into accepting diminutions of their land in order to receive titles. Still, the fact that INCRA existed meant that there was an institutional means by which *quilombo* communities could petition for, and receive, territorial titles legally guaranteeing the right to their land. In a country that is continually expanding practices like agribusiness and mining—activities that greatly affect both Afro-descendant and indigenous populations[i]—*quilombo* communities' ability to protect their land from the increasing exploitation of land and water resources often means the difference between the preservation and erasure of their ways of life. In the cases of Rio dos Macacos and Porto Dom João, the prospect of receiving their title means the possibility of continuing their long-held traditions of fishing, cultivating their own crops, collecting shellfish, and extracting fruits and vegetables from their land in the face of armed antagonists intent on erasing their very existence.

These are but two examples among thousands of *quilombo* communities seeking territorial titling amidst Brazil's persisting forms of anti-Black racism. *Quilombos* from all across Brazil are struggling to protect their various ways of life, employing everything from civil disobedience, protests, and actions of solidarity with one another to protect their communities from the numerous threats they face. Temer's government, by dissolving INCRA and handing the job of titling *quilombo* communities to a politician with openly anti-Black sentiments, is demonstrating its lack of regard for these communities and a tendency for actively undermining the very existence of *quilombos*. Clearly, Brazil's new government is effectively adding to the already multiple forms of marginalization that *quilombos* face. As the world continues to observe and critique the actions of Temer's government, we must pay close attention to how *quilombos* and Brazil's wider Black community are affected by these changes, as well as the ways they struggle against these systemic forms of racism. By engaging with these communities and their struggles we can draw attention to, and seek to undo, the invisibilizing of Black life in Brazil and the violence with which the state treats Afro-descendant populations. In doing this, we can support and accompany the struggle of the *quilombos* as they continue to their generations-long struggle for political and territorial rights.