

**FROM HUMANITARIAN MISSIONS TO GOVERNMENT: THE ARMED FORCES
AND THEIR POLITICAL CONNECTIONS IN BRAZIL**

***DAS MISSÕES HUMANITÁRIAS AO GOVERNO: AS FORÇAS ARMADAS E SUAS
CONEXÕES POLÍTICAS***

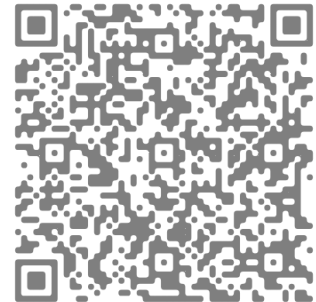
***DE LAS MISIONES HUMANITARIAS AL GOBIERNO: LAS FUERZAS ARMADAS Y
SUS CONEXIONES POLÍTICAS EN BRASIL***



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ABSTRACT: This article contributes to the debate on military involvement in politics, focusing on the key role played by the Armed Forces in “humanitarian missions” and their political connections. Online newspapers and empirical data from fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2020 are used as source material for the analysis, in dialogue with the literature. The aim is to discuss how the “Peacekeeping Mission” in Haiti (2004 to 2017) and the “Welcome Operation” (*Operação Acolhida*) in the Brazilian state of Roraima (2018 to present) intersect with and/or are part of the Armed Forces’ strategic objectives for political control. These missions augment the economic, social, and symbolic resources at the disposal of the Forces and their agents, which, once converted into political capital, take the form of the appointment of military personnel from these missions to key positions in the Bolsonaro government and their running for and holding of elected office.

KEYWORDS: Humanitarian Missions. Armed Forces. Politics.

RESUMO: O artigo ora apresentado, pretende contribuir para o debate sobre a presença militar na política, enfocando o protagonismo das Forças Armadas nas missões humanitárias e suas conexões com a política. Para tanto, utilizo como fonte e objeto de análise jornais online e o material empírico da pesquisa de campo realizada entre 2018-2020, em diálogo com a bibliografia. Pretende-se discutir como a “Missão de Paz” no Haiti (2004 - 2017) e a “Operação Acolhida” em Roraima (2018-atual), confluem e/ou se inserem nos objetivos estratégicos de controle político das Forças Armadas. Tais missões ampliaram os recursos econômicos, sociais e simbólicos da corporação e de seus agentes que convertidos em capital político, se expressam na ocupação de cargos chave por militares integrantes dessas missões no atual governo e da ascensão desses atores a cargos de representação política.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Missões Humanitárias. Forças Armadas. Política.

RESUMEN: El artículo aquí presentado, pretende contribuir al debate sobre la presencia militar en la política, enfocando el protagonismo de las Fuerzas Armadas en las misiones humanitarias y sus conexiones con la política. Para ello, utilizo como fuente y objeto de análisis, periódicos digitales y el material empírico de investigación de campo realizada entre 2018-2020, junto con la bibliografía. Se pretende discutir como la "Misión de Paz" en Haití (2004-2017) y la "Operación Acogida" en Roraima(2018-actual) confluyen y/o se introducen en los objetivos estratégicos de control político de las Fuerzas Armadas. Estas misiones amplían los recursos económicos, sociales y simbólicos de la corporación y de sus agentes, que convertidos en capital político, se expresan en la ocupación de cargos clave por militares integrantes de esas misiones en el actual gobierno y de la ascensión de esos actores a cargos de representación política.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Misiones Humanitárias. Fuerzas Armadas. Política.

Introduction

The presence of the Armed Forces (FFAA) in Brazilian politics dates back to the Proclamation of the Republic. Since then, eight presidents with military backgrounds have governed the country. Three of them were elected through popular votes, and five came to power through the military regime². After the dictatorship, the explicit military activism in the previous phase took on a new dimension. The process of democratization required a more technical and professional approach by the military (CARVALHO, 2006), although they never completely withdrew from the political sphere. In the new context, political negotiations, not always explicit, predominantly favored the Armed Forces³. Nevertheless, when the interests of the military institution were directly contradicted, the spirit of the corporation reignited, making the political activism of its members visible (ZAVERRUCHA, 2001; PEREIRA *et al.*, 2022).

In the second half of the 2000s, during the presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011) from the Workers' Party – PT, military actors reemerged in the public space, openly protagonizing episodes of tension and political antagonism (GUILHERME, 2021; PENIDO *et al.*, 2021).

Despite this government paradoxically being recognized as the one that invested the most in the infrastructure and modernization of the Armed Forces, the gains made during the PT administrations (investments, recognition, and technical-operational experience, especially after Brazil's participation in the Peacekeeping Mission in Haiti⁴) clashed with the management of certain issues and/or policies that contradicted certain sectors within the military. These issues included matters related to the Amazon, the environment, borders, mining, land demarcation, and, particularly, the recovery of the historical memory of the dictatorship (GOMES; SANTOS, 2019; PENIDO *et al.*, 2021).

² In addition to Deodoro da Fonseca and Floriano Peixoto, the first military presidents, the military actively participated in presidential elections until 1964. Hermes da Fonseca governed the country between 1910-1914. General Eurico Gaspar Dutra served as president from 1946-1950. Getúlio Vargas defeated Air Force Brigadier Eduardo Gomes in 1950. General Juarez Távora lost the election to Juscelino Kubitschek in 1955. Jânio Quadros won against Marshal Henrique Lott in 1960. During the years of the civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985), there were five presidents: Castelo Branco, Costa e Silva, Médici, Geisel, and Figueiredo. In the post-dictatorship period, Jair Messias Bolsonaro was elected for the term 2018-2022 (WESTIN, 2018).

³ According to Zaverucha (2001), the budgetary superiority of the Ministry of Defense during the FHC government, in comparison to ministries related to social areas (health, education, social assistance, and labor), among other paradoxical expenditures in the absence of threats justifying such investments, serves as a demonstration of the political power of the military institution.

⁴ Guilherme (2021), citing the research “Brazil, the BRICS, and the World in the 21st Century: National Defense Strategies and Geopolitical Challenges in a Changing World” conducted by João Fábio Bertonha in 2017, notes that there was a 50% increase in military spending during left-wing governments for the benefit of infrastructure and modernization of the armed forces, with twice the expenditure on the military during the Lula government.

The dissatisfaction of these military personnel materialized through a series of incidents and public manifestations conveyed in the press and on social media platforms, revealing their opposition to the government. Statements in favor of *Operação Lava Jato* and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff marked the beginning of a period of significant visibility of political activism by these actors. This ultimately led to an increased involvement of military personnel in the government of Michel Temer (2016-2018), their active participation in political-electoral mobilization surrounding the candidacy of Jair Messias Bolsonaro, and their extensive occupancy of positions within this government (2019-2022).

It is noteworthy that a significant portion of the military personnel who comprised the support base of the Jair Bolsonaro government, holding key and important positions, had previous involvement in humanitarian operations within an administration that was averse to humanitarianism and human rights.

Building upon this premise, this article aims to contribute to the debate regarding the military presence in politics. It seeks to establish the links between military humanitarianism and the political activism of the Armed Forces, with a specific focus on individuals who transitioned from the Peacekeeping Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) and the *Operação Acolhida* in Roraima to the Jair Bolsonaro government. Therefore, it seeks to establish the connection between these humanitarian missions, one abroad and the other domestic, and the escalation of power/political influence of the Armed Forces in recent decades, culminating in the Bolsonaro government.

For the development of this article, a qualitative approach has been adopted, based on information collected through field research in Roraima between 2018 and 2020⁵, as well as information gathered through bibliographical research from various secondary sources, including academic articles, books, dissertations, online newspapers, among others. The article does not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis of the missions discussed but rather to highlight the relationship between both missions and their connections to national politics.

⁵ The qualitative and ethnographic field research was conducted during my postdoctoral research in the Graduate Program in Society and Borders and as a member of the Interdisciplinary Group for Interdisciplinary Studies on Borders (GEIFRON), from 2018 to 2020

Mission of Peace: Military Humanitarianism and Politics

In April 2004, through Resolution 1542, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) established the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). The mission aimed to address the severe crisis of political-institutional instability, which resulted in other significant problems for Haitian society. Brazil, under the initiative of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, joined the mission, and the Brazilian Armed Forces were designated to lead the military command of the mission. On May 30, 2004, the first Brazilian troop was deployed to Haiti under the command of General Augusto Heleno Ribeiro Pereira (VALLER FILHO, 2007).

Assuming the responsibility of leading the military command of the mission represented for Brazil a convergence between the concern to contribute to Haiti's stability, an important issue in the regional context, and the consolidation of strategic interests. This meant projecting itself as a power on the international stage, establishing itself as a regional leader, and securing a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (BORGES, 2011; VALLER FILHO, 2007; CARVALHO, 2019).

Brazil's participation in the mission also represented the alignment of the Brazilian government with the global policies of neoliberal capitalism, which, contradictorily, since the 1980s, has combined the defense of human rights with a militarized form of humanitarianism. This has involved the extensive involvement of military agents, strategies, actions, and securitization techniques (FELDMAN-BIANCO, 2018; PEREIRA *et al.*, 2022).

Borges (2011, p. 80) suggests that this humanitarian logic took shape in Latin America through the coordination of multilateral organizations committed to rethinking the role of the military, modernizing the Armed Forces, and developing a common agenda in the post-dictatorship period⁶. Globally, it aligns with the mobilization and defense of international organizations around military interventions as an alternative to addressing social issues and protecting populations from threats of rights violations, including practices by the national State itself (PEREIRA *et al.*, 2022)⁷

⁶ This concern would result in a series of events organized for this purpose and carried out from the late 1980s, among which the author highlights: "Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas (CDMA - 1995); Conference of Central American Armed Forces (CFAC - 1997); Regional Security System (RSS - since 1996); the South American Defense Council (Unasul - 2008)." In 2008, the Latin American Association of Peacekeeping (Training Centers (Alcopaz) was created, initiated by Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Peru, and Uruguay, with the aim of preparing personnel for peacekeeping missions. The latter was chaired by Brazil from August 2009 to July 2010 (BORGES, 2011).

⁷ The authors argue that international organizations found justifications to advocate for militarized humanitarianism in the impacts caused by the end of the Cold War and globalization (PEREIRA *et al.*, 2022, p.

In this sense, MINUSTAH undoubtedly emerges from this neoliberal capitalist logic. The Brazilian mandate represents the convergence of broader national interests and specific interests of the Brazilian Armed Forces, namely, gaining logistical and operational improvement in a real mission, modernizing/updating themselves, and enhancing the image of the institution associated with the atrocities committed during the dictatorship. In other words, seeking to “restore the symbolic power lost during the dictatorship” (BORGES, 2011, p. 119).

Specialized analyses indicate a successful Brazilian participation in the mission. This success can be seen from the perspective of foreign policy strategy and the prestige gained by the Armed Forces, along with other achievements such as budget expansion and opportunities for technical improvement and learning innovative methods of military intervention provided by the UN (BORGES, 2011; GOMES; SANTOS, 2019; CASTRO; MARQUES, 2019)⁸.

Not even the controversies and allegations regarding aspects of the Brazilian Armed Forces’ actions managed to undermine the prestige acquired within the United Nations framework. Borges (2011, p. 119) points out that humanitarian work and the exaltation of the soldier-hero, specially formulated after the 2010 earthquake, were crucial in restoring the image of the Armed Forces, which had been tarnished by the “*anos de chumbo*” (“years of lead”). MINUSTAH projected a different perception of the military and the institution onto the population. A “new military” and a new “Armed Forces” emerged from the Peacekeeping Mission, no longer associated with “authoritarianism, torture, and murders committed during the dictatorship.” There was, therefore, “a positive reconstruction (including in the media) of the image of the armed forces as providers of peace” (PEREIRA *et al.*, 2022, p. 90).

By regaining institutional credibility, the Armed Forces equipped themselves with *political capital*⁹ to exert influence over national events¹⁰. The progressive and revitalized

85). Two issues are addressed in this regard. The first concerns an operation to capture a “criminal” in a favela in Port-au-Prince, which resulted in 27 deaths and accusations of excessive use of violence by Brazilian troops, as well as subsequent allegations of rape involving members of the Brazilian troop during the thirteen years of the presence of the Armed Forces in the country (HARARI, 2011; SILVA, 2017; STARGARDTER, 2018; SILVA, 2021).

⁸ In an interview with the commanders of MINUSTAH, conducted by Castro and Marques, it is noted that there is a certain unanimity among them regarding the numerous gains for the Brazilian Armed Forces. In fact, General Santos Cruz emphasizes, “Brazil achieved good regional projection, good projection within the UN, prestige increased, but the greatest gain was directly for the Armed Forces” (CASTRO; MARQUES, 2019, p. 89).

⁹ In the sense employed by the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, where the accumulation of certain social resources, including recognition and prestige, can equip individuals with a certain authority and/or political power.

¹⁰ For example, in public statements in favor of *Operação Lava Jato*, in the episode involving the Twitter statements of General Villas Bôas, who was then the Commander of the Army, on the eve of the Supreme Federal Court (STF) vote on Lula’s *habeas corpus*. These statements were conceived by many as a “threat” and/or interference, and even blackmail. In addition to statements in favor of Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment by active-duty and retired agents, among other forms of political activism.

political activism of military personalities occurred a few years after the start of the mission in Haiti. It is emblematic that the first public controversies involving active-duty generals opposing the government were led by personalities who played the role of *Force Commanders* in Haiti¹¹.

In the power balance, the erosion of the PT government highlights the resurgence of the *symbolic power* of the Armed Forces. The materialization of this power is evident in the campaign in favor of the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, the expansion of the military corporation's responsibilities in Michel Temer's government, the influence they exerted over his administration (2016-2018)¹², and the gradual occupation of positions in his government¹³. Regarding the influences on government decisions, it is worth noting: i) the appointment of a military officer to lead the Ministry of Defense, a ministry that had been led by civilians since its creation¹⁴; ii) the appointment of the Ministry of Defense to lead the federal humanitarian response to the Venezuelan migration in Roraima, in contradiction to the existing immigration laws.

During Temer's brief presidency, there were numerous pressures from the Armed Forces that indicate interference in his decisions, many of which were maintained despite strong criticism, appeals, and opposition from experts and civil society entities.

However, the political activism of the Armed Forces became even more evident during the preparations for the electoral race when they declared support for Jair Bolsonaro's candidacy (PSL at the time). They openly participated in his election campaign and, subsequently, in his government¹⁵.

Over the thirteen years that MINUSTAH lasted (2004-2017), Brazil appointed a total of eleven Force Commanders to lead the multinational UN troops in Haiti. Among them, six commanders were appointed to key positions in the Bolsonaro government starting in 2019.

¹¹ The episode involving General Augusto Heleno and the Lula government in 2008 can be cited as emblematic in this regard. It occurred in the context of the demarcation of the Raposa do Sol indigenous land in Roraima, at a time when the general was in charge of the Amazon Military Command. He refused to send Army troops to assist the Federal Police in expelling rice producers who had invaded indigenous lands on the border between Brazil, Venezuela, and British Guiana. In addition to clear disobedience, the general began to openly criticize the government's indigenous policies (MARTINS FILHO, 2019; PENIDO *et al.*, 2021).

¹² A Folha de São Paulo article from 2018 draws attention to the topic <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2018/03/temer-da-a-militares-controla-sobre-areas-sensiveis-do-governo.shtml>

¹³ According to data from the Brazilian Federal Court of Accounts (*Tribunal de Contas da União*), around 2,765 military personnel occupied positions in the Temer government. Source. Accessed on January 10, 2022.

¹⁴ In January 2018, General Joaquim Silva e Luna was appointed to lead the Ministry of Defense.

¹⁵ In 2018, while still in active duty, General Luiz Eduardo Ramos, who had been part of the Peacekeeping Mission in Haiti, criticized the Workers' Party (PT) and advocated for Bolsonaro's candidacy within the Southeast Military Command in São Paulo.

Additionally, two generals and a captain held other roles in MINUSTAH. The key figures in this process are the generals who served as commanders in Haiti (*Force Commanders*), such as Augusto Heleno (2004-2005), who became the Minister-Chief of the Institutional Security Office (GSI); Santos Cruz (2007-2009), who became the Minister of the Government Secretariat; Floriano Peixoto (Haiti 2009-2010), who occupied the positions of Minister of the General Secretariat of the Presidency and President of the Post Office; Luís Eduardo Ramos (2011-2012), who became the Chief of Staff; Edson Pujol (2013-2014), who served as the Chief of the Brazilian Army; and Ajax Pinheiro (2015-2017), who became an Advisor to the Superior Court of Justice (CASTRO; MARQUES, 2019).

The generals who served as heads of operations for the Brazilian contingent in MINUSTAH and held positions in the Bolsonaro government are Fernando Azevedo (2004-2005), who became the Minister of Defense; Otávio Rêgo Barros, who was appointed as the government's spokesperson. In addition to them, Captain Tarcísio de Freitas (2005-2006), who was the head of the technical section of the Brazilian Peacekeeping Engineering Company, became the Minister of Infrastructure in the Bolsonaro government (STARGARDTER, 2018; CASTRO; MARQUES, 2019).

It is also worth noting that Tarcísio de Freitas, before joining the Bolsonaro government, held the position of Secretary of Coordination of the Investment Partnerships Program (linked to the Presidency of the Republic) in the Temer government (2016-2018). In 2022, he ran for the governorship of São Paulo, emerged victorious, and currently holds that political office.

Operação Acolhida: Connections with MINUSTAH and the Temer-Bolsonaro Governments

Since 2017, civil society organizations concerned about the progressive increase of migrants from Venezuela arriving in Roraima in a situation of extreme socioeconomic vulnerability began demanding a federal response from the Brazilian government. However, it was after the migration situation reached its peak that the government decided to intervene.

In February 2018, Michel Temer issued the provisional measure MP/820¹⁶, which conceived what would become the humanitarian response to that migration process. At the time,

¹⁶ The complete document regarding the publication of the measure can be accessed at the following website: <https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/531963-publicada-medida-provisoria-para-atender-venezuelanos-que-migram-para-roraima/>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

the Federal Police estimated the presence of approximately 40,000 Venezuelan immigrants living, mostly, in a state of extreme economic and social vulnerability.

However, the celebrated announcement of federal action immediately turned into concern for the entities involved in humanitarian assistance. This was because Temer's decision to designate the Ministry of Defense to lead the humanitarian response contradicted immigration legislation enacted in 2017. Going against the legislation that demilitarized the immigration issue by removing it from the scope of the Armed Forces, Michel Temer upheld his decision.

For these entities, the president disregarded all the social struggle waged since 2013 to consolidate legislation in the direction of rights (SILVA, 2021). During the interviews I conducted with representatives of these organizations in Roraima, the interlocutors pointed out that the emergency nature of the migration demand required necessary collaboration and military logistical expertise¹⁷. However, they considered the militarized response a significant setback in light of the new legislation.

There was much concern that the rights violations, which were already frequent, including by the local government, would intensify in the face of arbitrary power, possibly exercised from the perspective of criminalization¹⁸. Despite these concerns, the Ministry of Defense established in February 2018 the two operations that would be carried out concerning the Venezuelan migration, as documented by the army itself,

The *Operação Acolhida*, under the coordination of the Humanitarian Logistics Task Force (FT Log Hum); and Operation Control, under the responsibility of the 1st Jungle Infantry Brigade (1st Bda Inf SI), aimed to increase security in the Roraima border area, intensify screening and control of immigrants, directing them to reception centers, and assisting in their internalization process in Brazil or their return to Venezuela (RORAIMA, [21--], online, our translation).

For the operational coordination of the Humanitarian Logistics Task Force (FT Log Hum): *Operação Acolhida* Brigadier General Eduardo Pazuello was appointed. In the following

¹⁷ They were referring precisely to concerns about the quantity of migrants who, left to their own devices, would endure the upcoming period of heavy rains in the state. Among them were many pregnant women, small children, the elderly, and the sick. Faced with the urgency of building shelters to protect them, the organizations reduced their resistance and ultimately succumbed to the military's command.

¹⁸ This perspective was also adopted, for example, by the government of Roraima, which viewed migration as a threat. Suely Campos, the governor of Roraima at the time, blamed migrants for the increase in crime, seeking to prevent their entry and/or make it difficult for them to stay in the state. Since 2016, she had been trying to close the border between Brazil and Venezuela and supported the Federal Police in the "expulsions" and deportations of "undocumented" individuals, restricting the use of public services for non-nationals, among other hostilities (SARMENTO; RODRIGUES, 2020).

March, the first brigade of the Armed Forces began its operation in Roraima.

In April 2018, the military convened a meeting with entities, collectives, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies¹⁹ to explain the objectives of the mission and persuade them to participate in the *Operação Acolhida*.

On this occasion, they emphasized the willingness of the Armed Forces to work in synergy with other entities, often using the argument of humanitarian expertise acquired in the Peacekeeping Mission to defend the legitimacy of the operation's command in the face of dissatisfied and resistant civilian entities. This resistance gradually gave way to cooperation because, after all, the extreme vulnerability of migrants, reduced to a state of begging and threatened by xenophobic violence from individuals and institutions, required the urgent commitment of all involved (MILESI; COURY; SOUZA, 2018; SARMENTO; RODRIGUES, 2019).

Furthermore, federal resources allocated to the operation were concentrated in the Ministry of Defense and administered by the Armed Forces. International Agencies (UNHCR, IOM, UNFPA, UNICEF, among others), which represent the UN system's presence in Roraima, concentrated international resources. Thus, the Army and the Agencies ended up transferring resources for the entities to carry out humanitarian actions in a kind of outsourcing of humanitarian activities (OLIVEIRA; SARMENTO; VALERIO, 2020).

In a short time, even the “apolitical” entities²⁰ fully integrated into *Operação Acolhida*. They even praised its presence, associating it with a sense of greater security to carry out humanitarian work, referring to a scenario marked by episodes of xenophobia that affected the entities themselves²¹.

Even the more combative entities critical of militarized humanitarianism also established partnerships with the Armed Forces and/or international agencies that financed the provision of “humanitarian services”. These partnerships were almost always made under a commitment to confidentiality, which significantly limited the organizations' autonomy in their political stance regarding controversial and/or arbitrary situations in the operation. And there have been quite a few of these since its inception.

In 2018, the National Human Rights Council (CNDH), when visiting *Operação*

¹⁹ Among them, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), IOM (International Organization for Migration), and UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund).

²⁰ The term used by some interlocutors to define the organizations they represented.

²¹ In 2018, for example, a severe case of persecution was recorded, including death threats against a human rights activist who was advising migrants on their rights, as well as the invasion and vandalism of an entity with which he was associated.

Acolhida observed a series of irregularities suggesting necessary corrections. Among them was the fact that the humanitarian response was “mainly being executed by the Armed Forces, with insufficient involvement and presence of other government departments”. In this regard, their recommendation to the Presidency of the Republic and the Chief of Staff was:

Ensure the presence and involvement of other government departments in addition to the Armed Forces in actions in Roraima for the provision of public services and assistance to the population in Roraima, both local and migrant. For the latter, the focus in Roraima should especially aim at productive integration and the protection of labor rights and public policies for social development (our translation).

After these recommendations, some adjustments were made, and other ministries became more involved with *Operação Acolhida*, which, although under the coordination of the Chief of Staff, continued to be under the command of the Ministry of Defense, the Armed Forces, with a particular emphasis on the Army. It is important to note that the Chief of Staff's office itself was taken over by a military officer in 2020 during the Bolsonaro government.

Since its establishment, *Operação Acolhida* has received various types of complaints, including allegations that migrants and refugees in shelters have their autonomy restricted by intense control and surveillance over their movements and communication with the outside world²². In August 2021, news reports informed about the existence of a “punishment corner”, mistreatment, and aggression applied by Army agents against indigenous migrants in the operation's shelters. They also mentioned the existence of a complaint letter and inspections of these shelters by the Public Defender's Office (DPU) and the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF), which theoretically confirmed the allegations²³.

²² During fieldwork, researchers affiliated with UFRR research groups were prevented from interviewing migrants and refugees housed by the FFAA and UNHCR on the pretext that the entry of researchers into the shelters would create discomfort and invade the privacy of the immigrants. This decision was made without consulting the individuals themselves.

²³ On August 6, *Repórter Brasil* published the article “*Exército cria ‘canto dos maus-tratos’ em abrigos de RR para confinar indígenas venezuelanos alcoolizados*” (Army creates ‘corner of mistreatment’ in RR shelters to confine intoxicated Venezuelan indigenous people). Available at: <https://reporterbrasil.org.br/2021/08/exercito-cria-canto-dos-maus-tratos-em-abrigos-de-rr-para-confinar-indigenas-venezuelanos-alcoolizados/>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

On August 9 of the same year, G1 also published a report titled “*Defensoria identifica ‘cantinho da vergonha’ para castigar indígenas venezuelanos em abrigo*” (Defender's Office identifies 'corner of shame' to punish Venezuelan indigenous people in shelter). Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/rr/roraima/noticia/2021/08/09/defensoria-identifica-cantinho-da-vergonha-para-castigar-indigenas-venezuelanos-em-abrigo.ghtml>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

On August 30, 2021, Folha-UOL published the following news: “*MPF reúne denúncias de abusos contra indígenas em abrigo do exército*” (MPF collects reports of abuses against indigenous people in army shelter). Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2021/08/mpf-reune-denuncias-de-abusos-contra-indigenas-em-abrigo-do-exercito-em-rr.shtml>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

Medeiro (2022, s/p, our translation) published a report in which an indigenous migrant, a representative of the Warao ethnic group, revealed in an interview: “We do not have the freedom to meet only with our people, with national and international organizations, without the presence of the Army”²⁴.

Throughout the five years of the operation's existence, the effectiveness of the work of the Armed Forces has also been questioned. Despite the significant federal spending on humanitarian work, in addition to international resources, there is little visibility about its results, especially for the residents and authorities of Roraima, who continue to live with what is considered the uncomfortable presence of hundreds of vulnerable migrants on the streets of the cities of Pacaraima, on the border with Venezuela, and in Boa Vista²⁵. This number continues to grow, despite the 9 shelters of the operation and the efforts of FT Log Hum, the Armed Forces, and their partners in the process of interiorization (sending migrants to other states)²⁶.

Despite the paradoxes and allegations that question the effectiveness and humanitarianism of the operation commanded by the Armed Forces, such news does not seem to undermine the credibility of the Army or the involved military personnel, given the national and international prestige of the Armed Forces, recognized and praised for their humanitarian management model²⁷.

²⁴The article was published on the Amazonia Real website and can be accessed in its entirety at the following link: <https://amazoniareal.com.br/operacao-acolhida-nao-cumpre-promessa-a-refugiados-venezuelanos/>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

²⁵ The population and politicians in Roraima have a lot of distrust regarding the allocation and/or how federal resources are being used in the operation. In September 2019, a state deputy, during an event in the Legislative Assembly (ALERR), indicated that he had received complaints and stated: “I am taking action in relation to each of them. I want to mention, as an example, the company Overlay Containers, which provides container rentals for the Operation, the same one that General Pazuello commanded in Rio de Janeiro”. Excerpt taken from an article published on the ALERR website. Available at: <https://al.rr.leg.br/2019/09/24/jeferson-alves-critica-acao-da-operacao-acolhida-durante-visita-de-ministra-ao-estado/>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

²⁶ According to a report by *Cáritas Brasileira* in 2022, published by G1, the number of Venezuelan migrants living on the streets in Roraima had reached 5,867. Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/rr/roraima/noticia/2022/10/27/mais-de-58-mil-venezuelanos-vivem-em-situacao-de-rua-em-boa-vista-aponta-relatorio-da-caritas.ghtml>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

²⁷ In 2018, the Brazilian Army received the Human Rights Award for its humanitarian response to the Venezuelan situation under *Operação Acolhida*, granted by the Ministry of Human Rights. In 2020, international recognition for the humanitarian management of *Operação Acolhida* resulted in Brazil being elected to preside over the executive committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). More detailed information about these events can be found at the following links, respectively: <https://www.acnur.org/portugues/2018/11/22/agencias-da-onu-e-exercito-brasileiro-recebem-premio-de-direitos-humanos-por-resposta-humanitaria-a-situacao-venezuelana/>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022; <https://www.gov.br/cidadania/pt-br/noticias-e-conteudos/desenvolvimento-social/noticias-desenvolvimento-social/operacao-acolhida-coloca-o-brasil-na-presidencia-do-comite-executivo-do-comissariado-para-refugiados-da-onu>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

²⁷ Bolsonaro doubled the funds compared to the Temer government. Articles on the subject can be found at: <https://veja.abril.com.br/mundo/governo-libera-r-223-milhoes-para-assistencia-emergencial-a-venezuelanos/>.

In these five years of the Humanitarian Task Force's operation, three generals have been in command: Eduardo Pazuello (2018-2020), Antônio de Manoel Barros (2020-2021), and Sérgio Schwingel (2021-2023). Among them, General Eduardo Pazuello stands out, with previous roles in the government of Roraima, subsequently promoted to the Ministry of Health by Jair Bolsonaro in 2020, amid the Covid-19 pandemic²⁸. In the 2022 elections, he was elected to parliament as the second most-voted federal deputy in Rio de Janeiro. In addition to General Pazuello, *Operação Acolhida* also brought Colonel Georges Feres Kanaan (2018-2020), deputy operational coordinator of *Operação Acolhida* and right-hand man of Pazuello, who took over the position of Secretary of Social Articulation, subordinated to the Government Secretariat (Segov) of the Presidency of the Republic²⁹.

Confluences: Peacekeeping Mission, *Operação Acolhida*, and Politics

As we delve into the two most relevant humanitarian missions undertaken by the Brazilian Armed Forces, the connection between them and national politics becomes increasingly evident. The Brazilian Armed Forces found an excellent opportunity to rebuild their image and simultaneously gain *political capital* through their involvement in the MINUSTAH mission. The position they attained as one of the most trusted Brazilian institutions (CUNHA *et al.*, 2014) a decade after the commencement of MINUSTAH seems to support this hypothesis.

The transfer of *Operação Acolhida* to the Brazilian Armed Forces in 2018 points to this empowerment. Given the political influence and credibility of the military institution within society, the Temer government faced little difficulty in contravening immigration legislation and entrusting them with command. At that time, they encountered only sporadic resistance from entities and human rights activists whose social image had been discredited in the evolving political and social landscape³⁰.

Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022;
https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2019/04/14/interna_politica,1046253/gastos-do-brasil-com-refugiados-chegam-a-r-265-2-milhoes.shtm. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

²⁸ The article about the appointment of the general, a logistics specialist, to the Ministry of Health is available at: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/09/16/em-ato-no-planalto-pazuello-e-efetivado-e-saude-passa-a-ter-ministro-titular-apos-4-meses.ghtml>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

²⁹ The appointment was published in the Official Gazette of the Union (DOU) on September 3, 2020. The document can be accessed at: <https://www.in.gov.br/en/web/dou/-/decretos-de-2-de-setembro-de-2020-275667020>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

³⁰ This reflects the rise of extreme-right ideologies and the defense of so-called “traditional” values, including those of “homeland” and “family”, which are widely associated with the military.

In this context, the mission in Roraima continues the legacy established during MINUSTAH, safeguarding the image and credibility gained. The representation of the Brazilian Armed Forces as a humanitarian entity committed to “saving lives” both within and outside the country carries a strong symbolic appeal. This representation is intended to be preserved and reproduced.

The Department of Social Communication of the Brazilian Armed Forces has been highly effective in this regard. There is a significant investment in promoting humanitarian actions through various electronic and digital communication channels. Pereira *et al.* (2022), based on Machado's work (2021), highlight the official efforts of the Brazilian Army in producing and disseminating videos and images of *Operação Acolhida*. They also point to the explicit connection between the dissemination of this material and “the explicit objective of the military institution to present itself as the legitimate leader of humanitarian management” (PEREIRA *et al.*, 2022, p. 99, our translation)³¹.

The prominence of the military in these various media outlets also serves to counterbalance the news and/or allegations that have emerged during these missions, thereby minimizing their impact on the prestige of the Armed Forces. Stargardter, referring to MINUSTAH, noted that addressing these allegations irritates the military, who prefer to emphasize the “success” of the operation (STARGARDTER, 2018).

The military institution has also garnered many supporters and allies in civil society who promote and extol their operations and roles, endorsing their political activism as well. For example, in early 2020, the Record network published a series of reports on refugees, with five episodes aired during the *Balanço Geral RJ* program. In addition to addressing the migratory plight of these individuals towards Brazil, it celebrated the role of the Armed Forces in this humanitarian mission on national soil³². In August 2022, an election year, *TV Brasil*, a public network, aired a report on the struggles of migrants and refugees, subtly showcasing the military's involvement in various aspects of welcoming Venezuelan migrants³³.

³¹ In many instances during my research in Roraima, I heard complaints from civil society organizations involved in *Operação Acolhida* regarding how the Brazilian Armed Forces focused on self-promotion, silencing or downplaying the work of organizations that, according to my interlocutors, were the ones actually doing the “hands-on” work.

³² Reference to the report can be found on the broadcaster's website. Available at: <https://recordtv.r7.com/recordtv-emissoras/sudeste/record-tv-rio/serie-de-reportagens-sobre-refugiados-garante-crescimento-de-audiencia-29062022>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

³³ The report, with a strong humanitarian appeal and a duration of 26:59 minutes, was aired by TV Brasil and on the broadcaster's online channels in May 2022. It was also re-aired in June. The report titled “*Caminhos da Reportagem | Os venezuelanos no Brasil*” can be viewed on the YouTube platform at

Since 2019, Jovem Pan Radio has periodically published news about *Operação Acolhida*. In its news channel titled “*Os pingos nos Is*”, on January 17, 2022, the renowned journalist Alexandre Garcia stated “the *Operação Acolhida* for Venezuelans deserves a Nobel Peace Prize”, emphasizing that “Brazil saves lives from Maduro’s socialism”³⁴. Leda Nagle, on her YouTube channel in August 2022, published an interview with Eduardo Pazuello, at the time a candidate for federal deputy, in which they discussed, among other topics, the important role played by the general in *Operação Acolhida*³⁵.

When we consider the Peacekeeping Mission and *Operação Acolhida* in perspective, albeit briefly, it becomes apparent that the Armed Forces have emerged politically strengthened from these missions and encouraged to exert greater political influence at the national level. The number of military personnel from the barracks who have declared themselves antagonistic to left-wing parties, especially the PT, and who have formed ranks in the Temer government, actively participated in the Bolsonaro government, and are entering the political arena appears symptomatic.

Re[actions], Visibilities, and Links Between the Military and Politics

The process of Brazilian democratization, achieved through socio-political struggles that weakened the military regime, forced the Armed Forces to adopt a more technical-professional focus rather than a political one (CARVALHO, 2005). However, as Rodrigues and Janot (2020, p. 92) indicate, based on specialized literature, it is important to understand that the professionalization of the Armed Forces does not nullify their political influence but rather produces a cohesive sense of belonging to the State that can lead to various forms of intervention, “from negotiations and blackmail with political groups to the takeover of civilian offices and coups”.

Zaverucha (2001) argues that the withdrawal of the military to the barracks after the reestablishment of democracy is a myth unsupported by reality. According to the author,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcBsuWEBix0>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022. This video has received 111,643 views.

³⁴The video can be accessed at <https://jovempan.com.br/videos/programas/os-pingos-nos-is/alexandre-garcia-operacao-acolhida-para-venezuelanos-merece-nobel-da-paz.html>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

³⁵ It’s important to remember that Eduardo Pazuello, now a retired general, while still on active duty, openly engaged in political activism, participating in motorcycle rallies and appearing on stage with then-former President Jair Bolsonaro, who was seeking re-election. This behavior is prohibited for active-duty military personnel by the Military Statute and the Army Disciplinary Regulations, which forbid them from participating in collective political demonstrations.

military involvement in Brazilian politics has continued. What has changed is only the way this interference occurs, “without the burden of being in government but with the bonus of being in power” (p. 33, our translation). From this perspective, the political retreat of the Armed Forces is false, and the impression of its truthfulness arises from the establishment of a conservative democracy that nullifies motivations for coup attempts. However, the stability of our democracy, meaning military subordination, depends on the degree of government compliance with military interests.

Building upon this analysis, episodes of military insubordination during Luís Inácio Lula da Silva’s government (2003-2011) and the political articulation openly triggered against the Dilma Rousseff government after the establishment of the National Truth Commission in 2011 gained even more intelligibility (GUILHERME, 2021). The *Raposa do Sol* episode involving the former force commander of MINUSTAH, Augusto Heleno, in 2008, therefore adds to other events that would mark the beginning of a series of [re]actions gradually shaping a “silent march” of the military towards power (PENIDO; JANOT; RODRIGUES, 2021)³⁶.

The stance of the mentioned general was not an isolated position but converged with that of other military personnel, whether with or without experience in humanitarian missions. Insubordination escalated as the policies of left-wing governments contradicted the interests and/or “threatened” the prestige of the military and its agents. Military personnel began to express public opposition to the government’s policies and to position themselves politically, just like Augusto Heleno, who became one of the main organizers of Jair Bolsonaro’s presidential candidacy (MARTINS FILHO, 2019).

The military elite, fearing that the National Truth Commission would resurrect facts from the dictatorship that they wanted to forget and bury, began to express their discomfort by amplifying criticisms of the government and belittling the commission (GUILHERME, 2021)³⁷. It was within the context of negotiations surrounding the establishment of the National Truth Commission that Jair Bolsonaro, at the time a federal deputy, managed to reestablish connections and obtain the military’s approval, allowing him to stand out as a presidential candidate³⁸.

³⁶ The authors reconstruct a series of events and the subsequent reaction of the military, which in chronological order, starting in 2005, shows the movements of these actors leading up to the coup that resulted in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016.

³⁷ The author also highlights the fact that newspapers aligned with the military, during the election campaign that marked the succession of President Lula by Dilma Rousseff, attempted to associate the president with a negative image as a former guerrilla fighter and gave space and voice to dissatisfied military personnel afterward.

³⁸ Guilherme (2021) emphasizes two specific situations in which Bolsonaro’s stance contributed to his alignment with the Brazilian Armed Forces. The first was his attempt to pass a parliamentary amendment in 2011 that would

While a group of military personnel from the Armed Forces were mobilizing to elect Bolsonaro at the national level, the state of Roraima was facing a humanitarian crisis due to the indifference and hostility of local authorities in dealing with migration issues. The worsening of the state's crisis led President Michel Temer to remove Governor Suely Campos (MDB) in December 2018.

He subsequently appointed Antonio Oliverio Garcia de Almeida (PSL)³⁹ as the state's intervenor, a politician elected as governor of the state in October of the same year. The intervenor immediately appointed the general of *Operação Acolhida*, Eduardo Pazuello, as the Secretary of State for Finance and Planning and Development of Roraima⁴⁰. Despite having gained electoral popularity in a campaign marked by anti-migration rhetoric, when he assumed the role of governor, he established cooperation ties with *Operação Acolhida*, which had been virtually non-existent in the previous government, surprising some representatives of organizations involved in the humanitarian response.

Furthermore, the continuation of *Operação Acolhida* during Jair Bolsonaro's government surprised some activists. The president-elect's political-ideological position ran counter to humanitarianism and human rights, which resulted in predictions of the operation's termination. However, contradicting these forecasts, Jair Bolsonaro strengthened *Operação Acolhida*, increased federal funds, and praised the military entity of the operation⁴¹. As mentioned earlier, two years later, he promoted its commander to the Ministry of Health, a general who was a staunch supporter of his government and his 2022 election campaign, blatantly subverting military regulations.

allow military personnel to refuse to testify before the Truth Commission. The second was the scene he created during the impeachment vote when he praised the Brazilian Armed Forces, the Army, and even the torturer of Dilma Rousseff.

³⁹ Known popularly as Denarium and a supporter of Jair Bolsonaro, the interventionist had won the elections in October of that year for the position of governor of the state.

⁴⁰ The appointments were published in *Diário Oficial do Estado de Roraima* on December 10, 2018.

⁴¹ Bolsonaro doubles the funds compared to the Temer government, articles on the subject can be consulted at: Available at: <https://veja.abril.com.br/mundo/governo-libera-r-223-milhoes-para-assistencia-emergencial-a-venezuelanos/>. Accessed on: January 10, 2022; Available at: https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2019/04/14/interna_politica,1046253/gastos-do-brasil-com-refugiados-chegam-a-r-265-2-milhoes.shtm. Accessed on: January 10, 2022.

Final considerations

After Jair Bolsonaro's popular election in 2018, many have wondered how a figure who belonged to the so-called "lower clergy" in the military hierarchy, marginalized by his own behavior during his active service, representing the antithesis of order and other moral values commonly associated with the barracks, managed to gain the support of high-ranking military officials to run for the presidency of the country.

The answer to this question is quite simple, as pointed out by specialized literature: exaggerated optimism about Brazilian democracy led to biased analyses of military involvement in politics, leading us to overlook the multiple subtle and underground forms of activism that testify to the crucial fact: the military has never been detached from politics (ZAVERRUCHA, 2001; BORGES, 2011; LEIRNER, 2020; PEREIRA *et al.*, 2022). In this sense, the figure of Deputy Jair Bolsonaro and his form of militancy perfectly aligned with the political interests of the barracks.

All it took was for the agendas of left-wing governments to "threaten" the interests of the military corporation, power, prestige, and moral reputation, reconstructed through the lens of humanitarianism, for the Armed Forces to strategically mobilize against the government (ZAVERRUCHA, 2001; LEIRNER, 2020). To do so, they transformed dictatorship into humanism, attributed the social and political instability of the country to the PT government, and revived the banner of anti-communism and the idea of an "external enemy", mobilized in the 1960s, transforming it into "anti-PT sentiment", the "internal enemy" to legitimize their "interventionism" in society (LEIRNER, 2020).

There is a consensus among analysts of this Brazilian moment that the National Truth Commission (CNV) was the catalyst for the Armed Forces to leave behind behind-the-scenes political negotiations and take center stage in political and narrative disputes against the PT government. The possibility of opening the "black box" of the dictatorship would stimulate the corporate spirit, bringing Jair Bolsonaro and military actors closer, who would come to endorse and support his candidacy and government (MARTINS FILHO, 2019; LEIRNER, 2020; GUILHERME, 2021, PENIDO *et al.*, 2021).

By proposing to investigate the violations of that dark period in national history – crimes committed during the military dictatorship – Dilma Rousseff broke the "political pact" of silence, breaking the tacit consensus that guaranteed an "official memory of forgetting the

military period in power” since the amnesty of 1979 (GUILHERME, 2021, p. 48, our translation)⁴².

By daring to suggest the opening of the "black boxes" of the dictatorship, the government opposed various military actors, who saw this attempt as “revenge” and/or “vengeance” by “deranged leftists” (LEIRNER, 2020; GUILHERME, 2021). Around this “common internal threat”, the military organized themselves, “prepared the ground”, and secured the involvement of actors such as the Judiciary, in the *Operação Lava Jato* (LEIRNER, 2020, p. 31), and the media, which amplified the political influence of the military (MARTINS FILHO, 2019; LEIRNER, 2020; GUILHERME, 2021).

The *pact of silence* had been essential to foster and/or maintain the representation of the military corporation as a prestigious institution in the social imagination. In this sense, the publicity of violence committed during the dictatorship becomes a ghost that needs to be exorcised. Revelations about this dark period, among other issues highlighted the culture of impunity and tolerance for violations embodied in the 1979 amnesty.

The culture of impunity is evident in the silence surrounding allegations of violations by Brazilian troops in MINUSTAH, as well as in the silence regarding allegations of violations and mistreatment occurring within *Operação Acolhida*. This culture finds resonance in statements like that of the then Army Commander, General Eduardo Villas Bôas, who, during a meeting to discuss military intervention in Rio during the Temer government, “said it was necessary to give the military ‘guarantees to act without the risk of a new Truth Commission emerging’ in the future” (LOBO, 2018, our translation)⁴³.

These guarantees seemed to be fully enjoyed by *Operação Acolhida* through its visceral alignment with the Bolsonaro government between 2019-2022 and the political connections produced by this relationship.

By attempting to establish the connection between MINUSTAH, *Operação Acolhida*, the military personnel engaged in them, and politics, this article does not intend to exhaust the subject but to stimulate debate and future reflections that contribute to understanding the different forms of integration and the construction of *political capital* by Armed Forces actors in other not always explicit fronts, such as humanitarian missions.

⁴² The author mentions the strong discontent within the Armed Forces with a government that, for the first time, demands the opening of military archives that were never requested before.

⁴³ General who became a major supporter and important figure in the Bolsonaro government, serving as an Advisor in the Institutional Security Cabinet until 2022.

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