

# DEADLY DEMOCRACY

LETHAL POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN BRAZIL

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**O**n the evening of 14 March 2018, Marielle Franco, a city councillor in Rio de Janeiro, was leaving a political event when she was shot four times in the head.<sup>1</sup> Anderson Gomes, her driver, was fatally shot three times in the back, while Fernanda Chaves, her assistant, escaped.<sup>2</sup> This political assassination exemplifies a broader pattern. Although the case received international media coverage, it was not an exceptional event, but rather part of a worldwide phenomenon: the resolution of political conflicts through the elimination of opponents.

Democracies are facing mounting challenges, including the rise of far-right governments, increasing political polarization and the encroachment of organized crime into institutional politics. Lethal political violence is one such threat, yet despite its significance, it has been understudied, with most research focusing on high-profile cases rather than on systematic patterns. However, political assassinations represent one of the most extreme threats to democratic governance worldwide and thus understanding patterns of lethal political violence is essential.

Brazil can be regarded as a key case study for deeper analysis of this phenomenon. The country has a long history of political violence. Between the 1889 coup d'état that ended the empire and established the republic, and the 1964 coup that precipitated a military dictatorship, at least 20 political conflicts were resolved through the killing of opponents.<sup>3</sup> The two decades of dictatorship that followed (1964–1985) maintained this method of resolving political disputes.

Since the fall of the authoritarian regime in 1985, Brazil has consolidated formal democratic institutions, held regular elections and peacefully transferred power between rival parties. Yet institutional stability has coexisted with political violence: since 2017, three former presidents have been imprisoned, one has been impeached and there has been an attempted coup. These developments are part of a social configuration that drives a preference for violent solutions to political conflicts. Nevertheless, Brazil lacks rigorous and consolidated statistics on political assassinations.

This study provides the first comprehensive longitudinal survey of lethal political violence in Brazil, encompassing institutional political actors (politicians) and non-institutional political actors (activists) during two decades of intense political conflict. It documents 1 228 cases of lethal political violence: 760 assassinations, 358 attempted assassinations and 110 death threats,<sup>4</sup> spanning six governments – both left-wing and right-wing – from the inauguration of the first left-oriented president after the

end of dictatorship, in 2003, to the far-right coup attempt on 8 January 2023. This represents an annual average of 61.4 cases, or about 5.1 per month, an extraordinarily high rate for an established democracy.<sup>5</sup>

This research makes two contributions to understanding lethal political violence in Brazil. Analytically, it reveals patterns in regional distribution, perpetration styles, victim profiles and the most common locations for executions. It also highlights key subjects and political contexts in lethal political violence, primarily the political orientation of the government. Politically, it demonstrates that lethal political violence has become disturbingly routine in Brazil, a situation that demands an urgent policy response. The conclusion addresses implications for Brazilian democracy and offers policy recommendations.

## Methodology

This study is based on three methodological assumptions. First, it includes institutional actors (politicians) and non-institutional ones (activists) as political actors, going beyond existing literature.<sup>6</sup> The research provides a comprehensive analysis on political assassinations in Brazil, encompassing politicians and activists at a national scale.

Second, in order to avoid the broad category of 'political violence', this study adopts the more specific term 'lethal political violence', referring to any successful or attempted assassination, or credible death threat, against politicians (including candidates, incumbents and recent office-holders) or activists involved in disputes over political positions, resources or state-managed opportunities. This definition encompasses three nested analytical categories, which become increasingly exclusive. These categories are not interchangeable and will be used throughout the report to specify the data considered at each stage of the analysis.

- 'Lethal political violence' is the broadest category and refers to all assassinations, attempted assassinations and death threats that were motivated by political reasons.
- 'Political lethality' is a middle-range category, referring to assassinations and attempted assassinations only. This is a more narrow category, excluding threats because these are inconsistently reported across regions and victim types, and not all credible threats result in actual attempts.
- 'Political assassination' is the narrowest category, corresponding to completed murders only (excluding threats and unsuccessful attempts).

Third, this report employs an adapted protest event analysis methodology to systematically identify and code lethal political violence events from newspaper sources. Primary data sources are two major Brazilian news outlets from the Globo media group, selected for their comprehensive national coverage: the digital platform G1 (2010–2023) and the digitized print newspaper *O Globo* (2003–2013).<sup>7</sup> Despite limitations inherent in newspaper-based event analysis, several factors support the reliability of the findings. The consistency of geographic and temporal patterns across several independent variables (victim type, conflict theme, method, location) suggests measurement error does not substantially bias core findings. The high concentration of cases being in frontier regions known for land conflicts (the North and the Central-West regions) aligns with what NGOs and social movements frequently report.

## Key findings

- In the two decades between 2003 and 2023, politicians faced greater risk of lethal political violence (63.1% of cases) than activists did (35.7%), contradicting assumptions that institutional positions provide protection. Among office-holders, candidates and recent former officials, 470 were killed and 305 faced threats or assassination attempts.
- Political leaders were disproportionately targeted (61.9% of assassinations) but other political actors also faced considerable risk (36.3%). Local politicians (94.4%) were more at risk than state or federal officials.
- Men constituted 74% of victims of lethal political violence, reflecting the fact that Brazil's politicians are mostly male.
- The rate of lethal political violence per million voters was five times higher in the North region than in the South. Roraima, Mato Grosso do Sul and Pará were the deadliest states for activists. Alagoas was the deadliest state for politicians.
- Urban areas accounted for most cases overall (63.1%), but activists were predominantly killed in rural or forest areas (72%) and politicians more in cities (83.4%).
- Over half (54%) of assassinations occurred in visible public spaces, such as streets and roads.
- Firearms were used in 87.5% of cases, indicating professional execution rather than crimes of passion. This suggests an established market for political assassination services.
- Two conflict types dominated: institutional political disputes (399 cases) and land ownership conflicts (393 cases). Land conflicts primarily affect activists; institutional conflicts primarily affect politicians.
- Municipal election years were associated with elevated assassination rates for politicians, whereas federal election years appear to have had greater consequences for activists.
- Political crises (2013–2016) coincided with increased lethality, suggesting that institutional breakdown enables violent political conflict resolution.
- Right-wing federal governments (2016–2022) saw 56.1 assassinations per year, compared with 25.9 per year under left-wing federal governments (2003–2016, 2023).



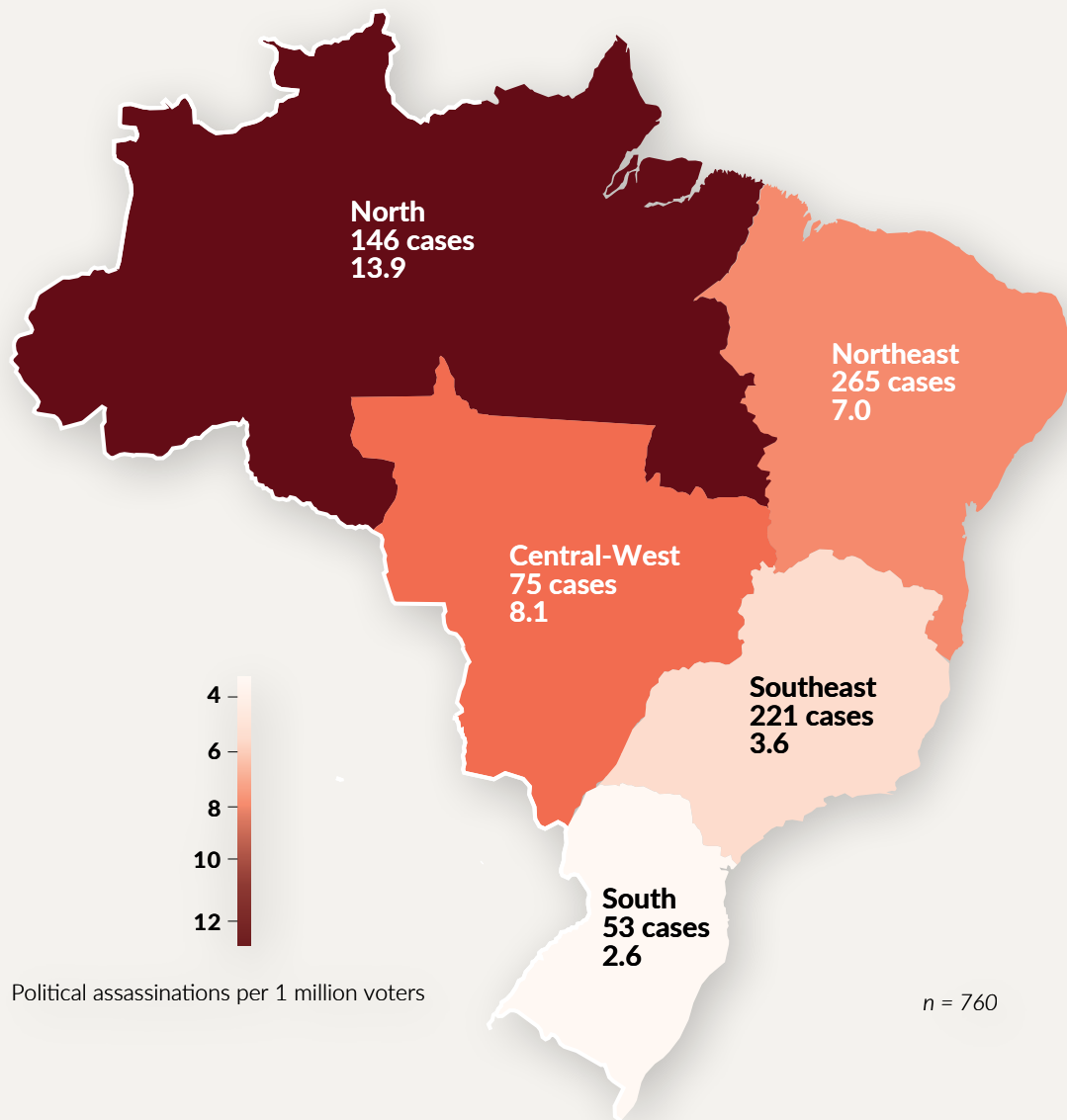
# TRENDS IN BRAZIL'S LETHAL POLITICAL VIOLENCE

**T**his report analyzes the patterns and dynamics of lethal political violence in Brazil, breaking down the phenomenon across five dimensions. First, it considers its geographical distribution, highlighting which regions and states are most affected by political assassinations. Second, it considers the places and arenas where the violence occurs, including urban and rural areas, and private and public spaces. Third, it examines the methods of execution, underlining the professionalized nature of political killings. Fourth, it looks at the profiles of the victims in order to identify which categories of political actors face the greatest risk. Finally, the report addresses the motives and timing behind lethal escalation, looking at conflict themes and temporal patterns across different governments. Together, these analyses provide a comprehensive understanding of where, how and why lethal political violence manifests in Brazil.

## The geography of lethal political violence

Political assassinations are not equally distributed across the country. Brazil encompasses vast territory and diverse socio-demographic, economic and political realities. Moreover, states vary drastically in population density, ranging from sparse populations distributed across extensive territories (Amazonas) to large populations in relatively small areas (Rio de Janeiro). Consequently, the raw numbers of political assassinations in each state have limited analytical value.

To address this, this study calculated rates per million voters in each state's politically active population (all citizens 16 years or older, eligible to vote or hold office) based on the average number of voters throughout the period according to Superior Electoral Court data.<sup>8</sup> These numbers varied minimally over two decades, justifying their use as a constant. Based on this criterion, a gradient of political assassinations among the regions, states and municipalities of Brazil emerged, revealing stark geographic inequality in lethal political violence.<sup>9</sup>



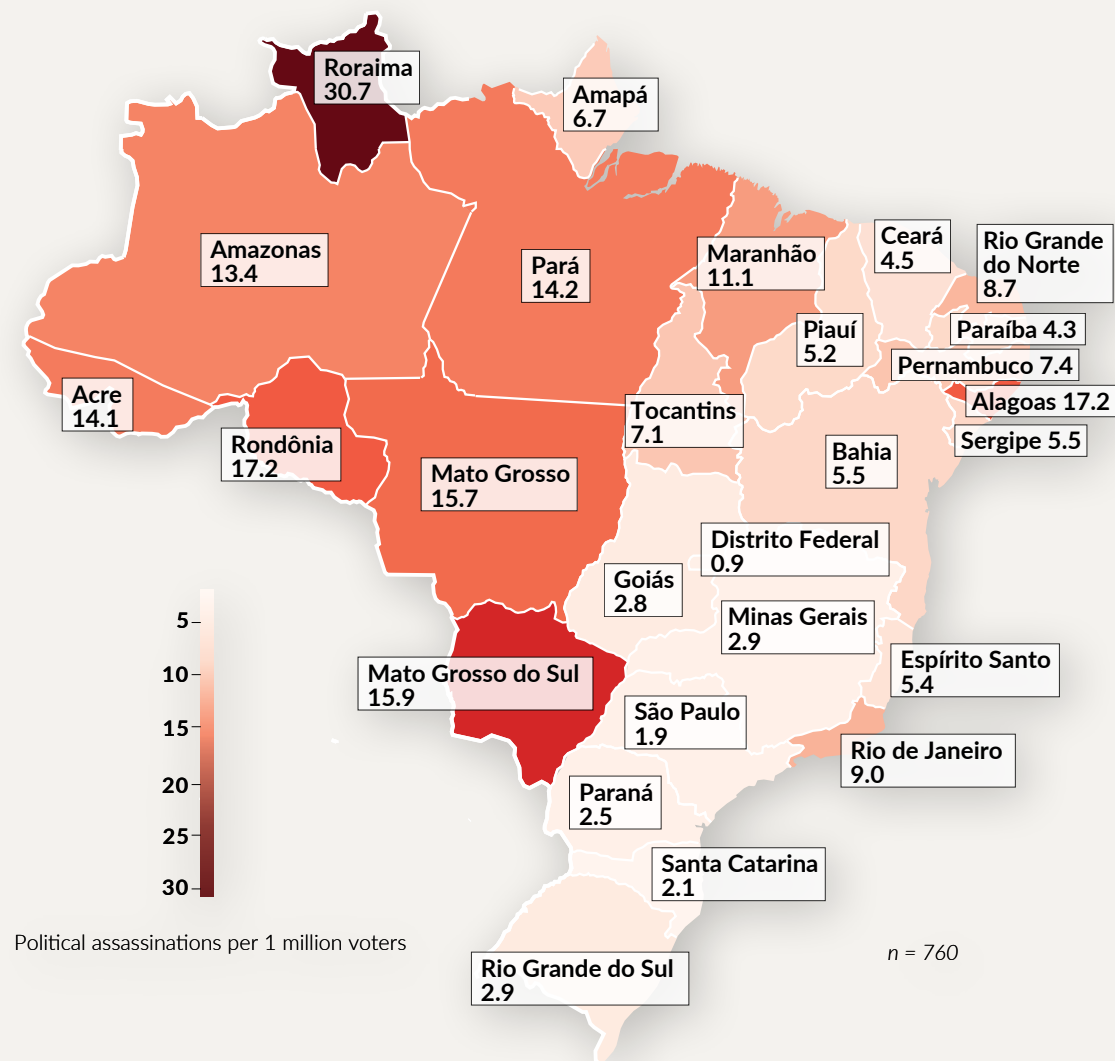
**FIGURE 1** Distribution of political assassinations by region.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebrap), 2003–2023

Although the Northeast and Southeast regions recorded the most cases, this reflects their larger populations. When calculating rates by electorate, the North had the highest political assassination rate and the South had the lowest. The North's rate (13.9) exceeded the South's by a factor of 5.3, indicating regional disparities in conflict intensity and the state capacity's to enforce the rule of law. The Southeast and South regions had the lowest rates of political assassination cases, respectively. The Central-West region ranked high, considering its relatively small population.

Although the regional pattern is significant, there were state-level variations, as shown in Figure 2. When considering only states, a vertical divide emerged, with North and Central-West states having higher rates than South and Southeast states.





**FIGURE 2** Distribution of political assassinations by state.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebrap), 2003–2023

Each region had at least one state with a high political assassination rate, and the two northern states of Roraima and Rondônia had the highest rates nationally. All other northern states except Amapá and Tocantins had strikingly high rates. In Central-West, the two Mato Grosso states had similarly high rates. Alagoas emerged as the outlier in the Northeast.

Roraima's position as the state with the highest rate of political assassinations (30.7) reflects a three-year wave of conflicts around the Yanomami territory – at 9.6 million hectares, the country's largest Indigenous reserve. Between 2020 and 2023, the territory was the scene of violence between Indigenous communities defending their land and armed groups profiting from illegal extraction.<sup>10</sup>

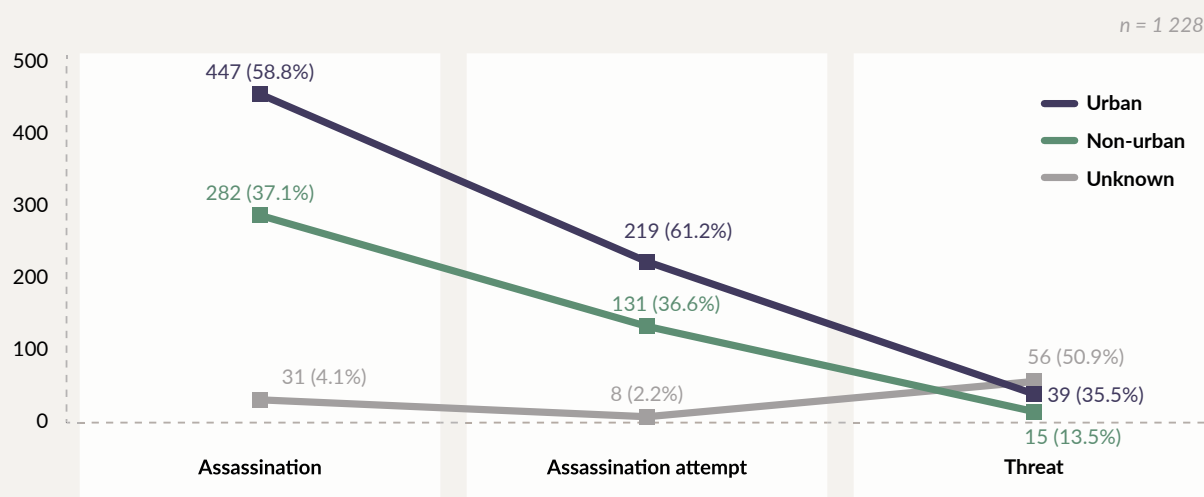
Adjacent states did not exhibit the same rates, suggesting that local factors, rather than regional ones, can be more significant for explaining political violence. Moreover, there are variations within regions: the national capital, Brasília, is in a region (Central-West) with a high rate of political assassinations, but itself has a relatively low rate (0.9 per million). Certain cities had exceptionally high rates of political assassinations, and municipal size was assessed to be a critical risk factor.

The concentration of high assassination rates in small municipalities reflects several interrelated dynamics. Small towns typically have a weaker federal state presence, with limited law enforcement capacity and less judicial oversight. Local power structures are often personalized, with political and economic elites exercising concentrated control over political institutions, social spaces and economic opportunities. Additionally, some of these municipalities are in frontier regions under rapid agricultural expansion and resource extraction, generating intense conflicts over land, and local institutional capacity for mediation is limited. The combination of weak state authority, personalized power relations and high-stakes resource conflicts creates conditions conducive to violent political rivalry. This data reveals that municipal size significantly affects the risk of assassination, with the highest rates concentrated in small towns across all regions.

## Places and arenas

While lethal political violence occurs nationwide, its spatial distribution exhibits distinct patterns by victim type. When all cases are considered together, urban areas accounted for most events: 447 killings and 219 attempted assassinations occurred in cities, representing 63.1% of total cases (Figure 3). The numbers mirror Brazilian society, which is predominantly urban (87.4% of the population lives in urban centres, according to the 2022 census).<sup>11</sup>

The urban/non-urban distinction reveals vastly different risk profiles for politicians and activists. As Figure 4 shows, once disaggregated by political role, a clear pattern emerges: 83.4% of lethal political violence in urban areas targeted politicians, while 72% in rural or forest areas targeted activists. In other words, the location of victims' political engagement largely determines where they face lethal risk.



**FIGURE 3** Distribution of victims of lethal political violence in urban and non-urban areas.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebrap), 2003–2023

| Victim type      | Urban  |      | Non-urban |      | No information |      | Total  |      |
|------------------|--------|------|-----------|------|----------------|------|--------|------|
|                  | Number | %    | Number    | %    | Number         | %    | Number | %    |
| Politicians      | 588    | 83.4 | 117       | 27.3 | 70             | 73.7 | 775    | 63.1 |
| Activists        | 108    | 15.3 | 308       | 72.0 | 22             | 23.2 | 438    | 35.7 |
| Indirect victims | 7      | 1.0  | 3         | 0.7  | 2              | 2.1  | 12     | 1.0  |
| No information   | 2      | 0.3  | 0         | 0.0  | 1              | 1.0  | 3      | 0.2  |
| <b>Total</b>     | 705    | 100  | 428       | 100  | 95             | 100  | 1 228  | 100  |
| Number = 1 228   |        |      |           |      |                |      |        |      |

**FIGURE 4** Lethal political violence by urban/non-urban space.

NOTE: Indirect victims were considered as ordinary citizens who did not work as politicians or activists but were threatened or killed due to their permanent ties (as family members) or occasional connections (as employees or followers) with politicians or activists.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebrap), 2003–2023

More than two-thirds of violence targeting activists occurred in non-urban spaces, reflecting the rural and frontier locations where land conflicts are concentrated. For politicians the pattern inverts, with about five times as many cases of lethal political violence in cities compared to rural areas. This pattern aligns with where these actors conduct their political work. Many activists conduct their work in contested areas, such as forests or the countryside, while politicians congregate in cities, where political institutions are located.

In addition, lethal political violence was not equally distributed spatially across types of locations. Within rural and urban categories, it is possible to identify diverse social spaces where attacks occurred: streets, highways, roads, public buildings, farms, Indigenous territories and victims' homes. These places were organized according to their visibility. Visible places are the locations where the presence of witnesses was likely. Closed places are unseen or difficult-to-see spaces where crimes could be committed beyond public view. This classification aims to measure whether perpetrators feared legal consequences and punishment.

Over half of all assassinations (52.8%) occurred in visible public spaces, suggesting the killers had no fear of the consequences of their actions. The second most frequent location, victims' homes (18.2% of assassinations and 11.8% of attempts), fits expectations of crime as a hidden affair. Notably, although representing small proportions, several cases occurred in closed spaces where one would expect publicity rather than secrecy: locations where the state itself is present. The study found that 2.4% of assassinations and 10% of attempts happened in public buildings, especially in city halls and city council buildings. Moreover, a number of threats (4.5%) were made in these locations, revealing institutional failure to protect political actors even within state-controlled spaces. This finding suggests either state complicity or breakdown of authority in protecting political activity.



Although some political crimes are committed in closed places without witnesses, most deaths occur in plain sight. Political assassinations are not mainly clandestine operations executed in secret to prevent witnesses from testifying. On the contrary, cases that occurred either in open urban spaces such as streets (42.4%) or on roads and other open spaces outside cities (10.4%) together represent more than half of the total. The public nature of the violence signals that perpetrators calculate that they face minimal risk of arrest or prosecution.

Another way of analyzing the places where assassinations and attempts occurred is by ownership status. Considering property ownership, cases could be allocated according to whether they happened in public, private or contested arenas. A public arena is a state property or a space with a defined public use, such as a square, where anyone can go without needing permission. A private arena is a space under individual or collective ownership and does not provide free access. This study defines a contested arena as a place where the ownership is in dispute, and the conflict about its status runs simultaneously in the judicial sphere and through direct struggle between actors claiming their rights over it. What is at stake in contested arenas is precisely whether state or judiciary authorities will rule them either as public or as private property. Hence, it occupies a liminal, ambiguous legal position between individual or collective ownership. Locations were coded as contested arenas when news reports indicated ongoing legal disputes over land ownership or use rights. They include occupied farms where landless movements challenge individual ownership, and Indigenous/environmental reserves where illegal economic activities challenge collective rights. Cases were coded as private arena only when no ownership dispute was mentioned in reports.

| Arena          | Assassination |      | Attempted assassination |      | Death threat |      | Total  |      |
|----------------|---------------|------|-------------------------|------|--------------|------|--------|------|
|                | Number        | %    | Number                  | %    | Number       | %    | Number | %    |
| Public         | 440           | 57.8 | 198                     | 55.3 | 25           | 22.7 | 663    | 54   |
| Private        | 160           | 21.1 | 69                      | 19.3 | 74           | 67.3 | 303    | 24.7 |
| Contested      | 160           | 21.1 | 91                      | 25.4 | 11           | 10   | 262    | 21.3 |
| <b>Total</b>   | 760           | 100  | 358                     | 100  | 110          | 100  | 1 228  | 100  |
| Number = 1 228 |               |      |                         |      |              |      |        |      |

**FIGURE 5** Lethal political violence by arena.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebral), 2003–2023

Public arenas accounted for 57.8% of assassinations (440 cases) and almost 200 attempted assassinations. The willingness to kill publicly suggests either perpetrator confidence in impunity or a deliberate intention to send intimidating messages to other political actors. Private arenas, encompassing residences and civic organization buildings, accounted for the smallest proportion of assassinations: 21.1% (160 cases).



View of the federally protected Kanamari community in Amazonas state. Some assassinations stem from conflicts over land ownership, as Indigenous communities attempt to protect their collective territories from illegal extraction. © Herve Bar/AFP via Getty Images

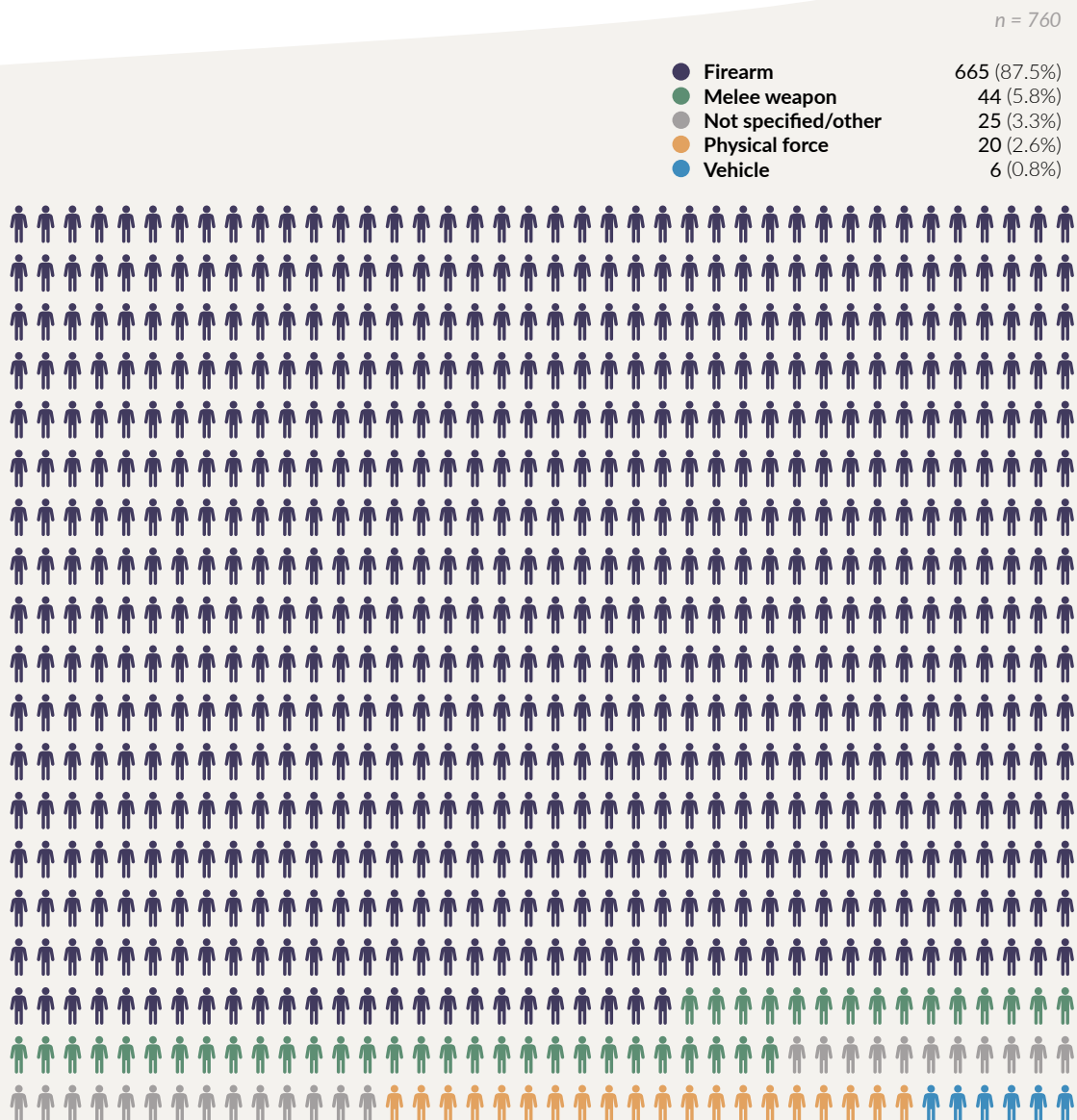
The remaining 21.1% (160 cases) of political assassinations occurred in contested arenas plagued by conflict over ownership – usually a struggle between the legal and the legitimate use of land, and possession. There are two types of contested arenas. The first is where there is a conflict between individual owners and collective users of the same land. This particularly characterizes large rural properties. Typically, social movements occupy land, arguing that it is unproductive without extensive economic use. This is a constitutionally regulated situation under which the federal state may expropriate land for agrarian reform. While conflicts persist, one side ‘occupies’ the land without recognizing individual private property as legitimate, while the other side defends its legal ownership rights and characterizes the others as ‘invaders’, asking the courts to expel them. This semantic conflict – ‘occupy’ versus ‘invade’ – clarifies that sides do not recognize each other as equally legitimate, with both claiming their own rights over land. Many such cases end in bloodshed.

The second type of contested arena is an area under collective ownership, constitutionally recognized as federally protected reserves for Indigenous people and/or environmental protection. In these cases, conflict begins differently: organized economic groups exploiting local natural resources are invaders, claiming the collective land is unproductive and should be opened to economic activities leading to the area’s development. These groups include illegal loggers, miners and ranchers. Such conflicts frequently end in murder, particularly when Indigenous people or environmental activists attempt to defend territorial integrity.

In both modalities, what is public and what is private remains to be decided through ongoing legal and physical struggles. Disputes extend beyond lawfare and institutional regulation, escalating to direct lethal violence. This is clearly evident in land conflicts, which accounted for 21.1% of all political assassinations (160 cases), demonstrating that territorial disputes are a central driver of political lethal violence in contemporary Brazil.

## Methods of execution and perpetrator profiles

Political assassinations in Brazil are carried out using a variety of methods, ranging from shootings and stabbings to poisonings and even striking victims with small aircraft. The methods of killing and the weapons used can be arranged along a gradient of physical proximity between the perpetrator and the victim. This study distinguishes two modalities: direct violence, where perpetrators beat, strangle or stab their victims; and indirect violence, using instruments such as firearms, vehicles and poison. This division helps distinguish crimes of passion from professional executions. Direct physical violence typically indicates a personal connection between perpetrator and victim, suggesting that the motivation could be emotional. Methods that create physical distance between the perpetrator and the victim usually point to the involvement of contract killers. Although personal crimes can be committed using indirect instruments, particularly guns, and professional contract killings can involve direct violence, this classification is analytically relevant because newspapers frequently characterize some political assassinations as motivated by revenge or hatred.



**FIGURE 6** Political assassinations by method.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP–Cebap), 2003–2023



Firearms were used in 87.5% of the political assassinations documented during this period (Figure 6). Direct physical violence (involving knives, cars or physical force) was used in only 8.4% of cases. Most of the crimes occurred without direct physical contact between the perpetrator and the victim, indicating that most of the political assassinations were not motivated by revenge or hate. Rather than being motivated by passion, they typically require rationality. Among indirect forms of killing, unconventional instruments were infrequently used (less than 1%, as when people were struck by vehicles), suggesting political killings are usually systematically planned and professionally executed. Two factors help explain this pattern: gun availability and normalization, and an established market for hired killers.

The availability of firearms is thus relevant to understanding lethal political violence in Brazil.<sup>12</sup> Historically, Brazil has experienced high rates of violence. The first government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2011) tried to address the matter by preventing citizens from owning guns. In 2005, a plebiscite asked voters whether the sale of firearms and ammunition to civilians should be prohibited. The plebiscite came out in favour of gun ownership, and the firearms market expanded.<sup>13</sup> Access to firearms increased further under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2023), who encouraged ownership and public display of guns. This fuelled an increase in the availability of legal and illegal firearms through extensive trafficking and domestic manufacturing.

After the pro-gun movement won the plebiscite in 2005, carrying guns became increasingly socially acceptable in parts of Brazil. During the campaign for the impeachment of then president Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016)<sup>14</sup> and throughout Bolsonaro's presidential campaign, gun rights were repeatedly championed. Bolsonaro's term expanded civilian firearm ownership through executive decrees, state propaganda encouraged the display of guns and shooting clubs spread throughout the country. Hence, firearms became easily accessible and gun ownership was normalized. Between 2019 and 2022, civilian firearm registrations increased by 123%, reaching 2.9 million.<sup>15</sup>



Jair Bolsonaro, centre, signs a decree easing gun laws in Brazil, 2019. During his presidency, Bolsonaro advanced measures to ease restrictions on gun ownership, contributing to a wider availability of firearms – an increase that has influenced the dynamics of lethal political violence in Brazil. © Andre Coelho/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Most of the crimes in the data set were committed by specialists in violence, executioners who act quickly and perform impersonal crimes, having no previous connections to the victims.<sup>16</sup> The most common situation involved execution by a paid perpetrator or two perpetrators who arrived in cars or on motorcycles and left immediately after the shooting. These killers did not speak to or touch victims, most frequently shooting them more than once in the head to make sure they were dead.

There were no significant variations in the methods and instruments used to kill activists and politicians. Both were predominantly shot by professional killers using firearms in precisely targeted attacks. Who hires these specialists, how much they earn, and which networks enable these transactions remain open questions, though some reports suggest fees ranging from US\$200 to US\$6 000 per assassination.

Understanding how political actors are killed provides crucial insights into perpetrator profiles and market dynamics, as most often this was not spontaneous violence but calculated elimination. Equally important is gathering information on victims, to provide a sense of the demographic and organizational dimensions that determine political assassination risk.

## Demographics of lethal political violence

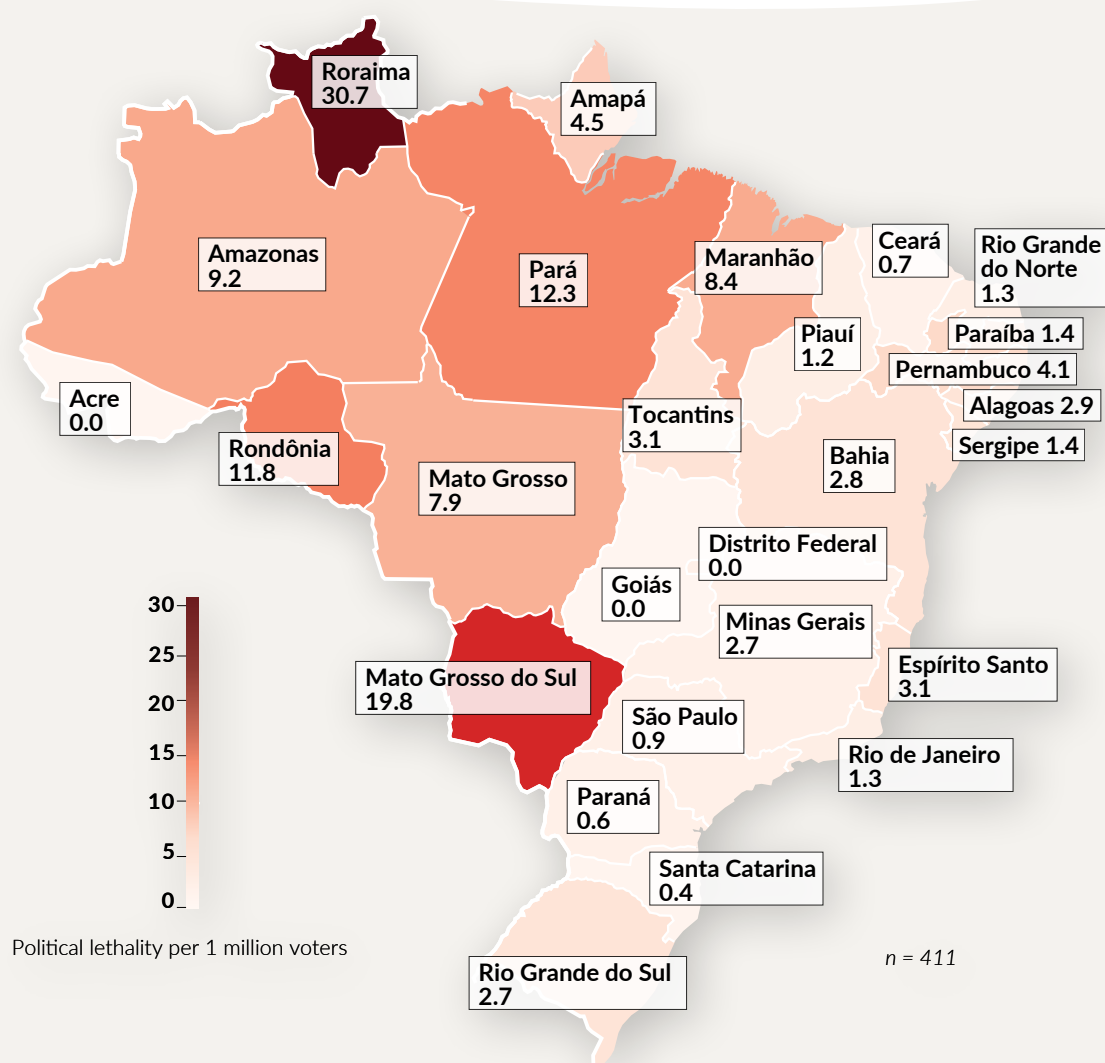
Politicians tend to be the targets of lethal political violence more frequently than activists do. As Figure 7 shows, 63.1% of attacks were aimed at politicians and 35.7% at activists, while indirect victims accounted for 1.2%. Although the media may under-report cases involving activists, politicians were still typically killed in larger numbers. This finding challenges the assumption that the visibility and resources associated with institutional positions offer protection from political violence.

| Victims          | Assassination |      | Attempted assassination |      | Death threat |      | Total  |      |
|------------------|---------------|------|-------------------------|------|--------------|------|--------|------|
|                  | Number        | %    | Number                  | %    | Number       | %    | Number | %    |
| Activists        | 279           | 36.7 | 132                     | 36.9 | 27           | 24.5 | 438    | 35.7 |
| Politicians      | 470           | 61.8 | 222                     | 62   | 83           | 75.5 | 775    | 63.1 |
| Indirect victims | 11            | 1.5  | 4                       | 1.1  | 0            | 0    | 15     | 1.2  |
| <b>Total</b>     | 760           | 100  | 358                     | 100  | 110          | 100  | 1 228  | 100  |

**FIGURE 7** Lethal political violence, by victim profile.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebrap), 2003–2023

Differences reappear when examining the spatial distribution of these actor categories. Figures 8 and 9 disaggregate deaths into activists and politicians, revealing that the most lethal locations depend fundamentally on actor profiles. When plotted together (see Figure 1), attacks on activists and politicians are concentrated in the North and Central-West regions. Disaggregated, the same regions are the most dangerous for activists. In the Central-West region, Mato Grosso do Sul reached 19.8 cases per 1 million voters. In the North, Pará and Rondônia had high rates, but Roraima was the most lethal state for activists, with 30.7 cases per million voters. Figure 8 shows that political lethality (the sum of successful or attempted assassinations and credible death threats) targeting activists alone comes close to matching the aggregated pattern.



**FIGURE 8** Political lethality aimed at activists, by state.

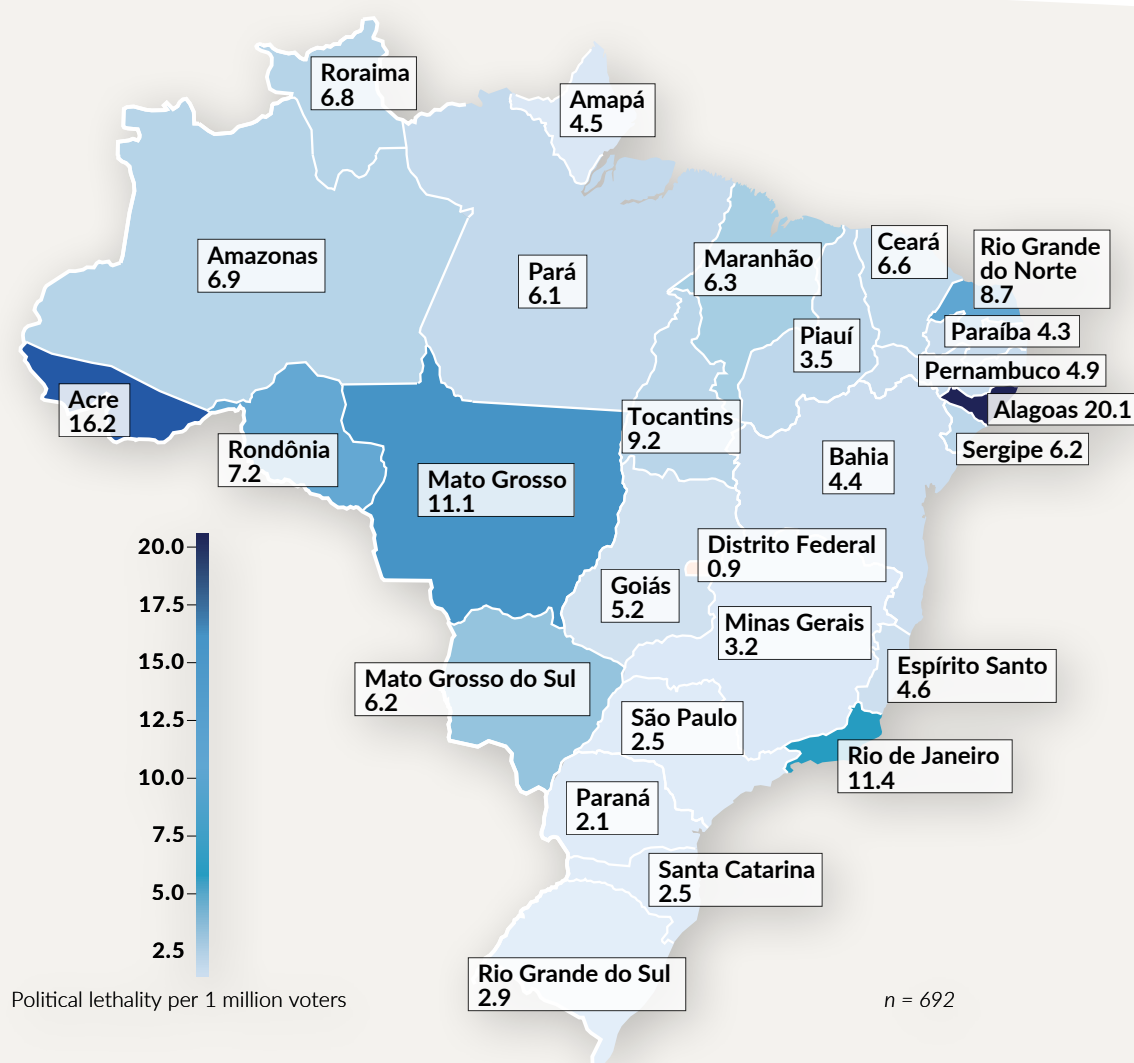
NOTE: Three cases were excluded due to absence of information about the victims.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebrap), 2003–2023



This was not the case when examining the political lethality of only politicians, whose geography of risk differs substantially, as shown in Figure 9. The North again had high rates of assassination, but this time the state of Acre led in the region, followed by Rondônia. In Central-West, while activists were killed more often in Mato Grosso do Sul, politicians' cases almost doubled in Mato Grosso, with a rate of 11.1 cases per million. The neighbouring state of Tocantins also had high numbers, pointing to a possible regional phenomenon. Rio de Janeiro emerged as an enclave of violence in the Southeast region, with 11.4 cases per million, possibly due to the activities of militias and the control organized crime wields over vast territories, particularly in the metropole.<sup>17</sup>

The most significant difference was a concentration of cases in the Northeast region, where Alagoas was the country's most dangerous place for politicians, with 20.1 cases per million voters. This rate is 2.3 times higher than in Rio Grande do Norte (8.7 cases per million), the region's second most dangerous state.



**FIGURE 9** Distribution of political lethality targeting politicians, by state.

NOTE: Four cases were excluded due to absence of information about the victims.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebrap), 2003–2023

These geographic patterns reflect regional socio-political configurations according to conflict types. The high rates for activists correlate with areas of intensive resource extraction (logging, mining, ranching) in contested territories, particularly the Amazon and Pantanal biomes. Roraima and Mato Grosso do Sul also have ongoing disputes over Indigenous land demarcation.

In contrast, Alagoas's position as the most dangerous state for politicians suggests dynamics rooted in local political competition, such as disputes over municipal resources and contracts, a hypothesis that merits further investigation. Rio de Janeiro's elevated rate similarly reflects local dynamics involving control over territories by militias and organized crime, and violent competition for political office.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to disaggregating cases by victim type, differences were analyzed within each group. For politicians, their office-holding status was considered: incumbents, candidates, or out of office and not running. Activists were evaluated according to role within a particular organization.

Politicians not running for office were more likely to be killed than candidates and incumbents. Even though incumbents were targeted in significant numbers (230 or 30.3% of assassinations), being in office appears to have provided some protection compared to being out of office (60.2%). Those running faced a lower risk: only 8.7% died during electoral campaigns, likely because elections increase media attention and candidate visibility, slightly raising costs for perpetrators.<sup>19</sup>

| Politicians and activists in politics | Assassination |      | Attempted assassination |      | Death threat |      | Total  |      |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|------|-------------------------|------|--------------|------|--------|------|
|                                       | Number        | %    | Number                  | %    | Number       | %    | Number | %    |
| Not running for/out of office         | 458           | 60.2 | 230                     | 64.2 | 48           | 43.6 | 736    | 59.9 |
| Incumbents                            | 230           | 30.3 | 96                      | 26.9 | 56           | 50.9 | 382    | 31.1 |
| Candidates                            | 66            | 8.7  | 27                      | 7.5  | 6            | 5.5  | 99     | 8.1  |
| No information                        | 6             | 0.8  | 5                       | 1.4  | 0            | 0    | 11     | 0.9  |
| <b>Total</b>                          | 760           | 100  | 358                     | 100  | 110          | 100  | 1 228  | 100  |
| Number = 1 228                        |               |      |                         |      |              |      |        |      |

**FIGURE 10** Lethal political violence against politicians and activists, by victim's office-holding status.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebrap), 2003–2023

Focusing on activists alone, differences emerge according to organizational formats. This study distinguishes four organizational types of activism, based on formalization and scope:

- **Unions:** Formally registered labour organizations with registered members and legal recognition to collectively bargain labour rights.
- **Formal civil organizations:** Registered NGOs, cooperatives and advocacy groups with defined legal status, registered members and usually engaged in policy-focused activism.
- **Social movements:** Informal networks of activists mobilized around one or overlapping agendas, with fluid membership and a standard contentious action repertoire.
- **Civic associations:** Informal political organizations on behalf of small local populations, such as Indigenous groups, *quilombos* (settlements founded by people of African origin) and riverine communities. These groups are often based on traditional local governance structures and have members running for office at the local level.

The most exposed activists overall were those engaged in social movements, who were targeted in 31.6% of cases involving activists. For killings only, the highest proportion of cases (35.7%) involved formal civil organizations such as NGOs. Union members were the least exposed to assassination risk (9.7%) and to any risk overall. It is likely that this is related to the progressive weakening of unions. In the 1980s, unions were Brazil's most important organizational format, but they declined as economic activity shifted from industries towards service sectors and agrobusinesses, both with lower unionization rates.<sup>20</sup>

| Organization type             | Assassination |      | Attempted assassination |      | Death threat |      | Total  |      |
|-------------------------------|---------------|------|-------------------------|------|--------------|------|--------|------|
|                               | Number        | %    | Number                  | %    | Number       | %    | Number | %    |
| Social movements              | 73            | 26.4 | 57                      | 43.2 | 8            | 28.6 | 138    | 31.6 |
| Local community organizations | 78            | 28.2 | 48                      | 36.4 | 5            | 17.8 | 131    | 30   |
| Civic organizations           | 99            | 35.7 | 14                      | 10.6 | 12           | 42.9 | 125    | 28.6 |
| Unions                        | 27            | 9.7  | 13                      | 9.8  | 3            | 10.7 | 43     | 9.8  |
| <b>Total</b>                  | 277           | 100  | 132                     | 100  | 28           | 100  | 437    | 100  |
| Number = 437                  |               |      |                         |      |              |      |        |      |

**FIGURE 11** Lethal political violence against activists, by organization type.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebrap), 2003–2023

Despite dissimilar distributions in other metrics, lethal political violence against politicians and activists shared a common feature: ordinary members were less affected than leaders. As the most exposed actors, leaders are easily identified as targets and thus accounted for 61.9% of assassinations and 84.5% of death threats involving activists. Eliminating leaders also causes greater disruption in organizations than eliminating ordinary members.

Yet ordinary members of political parties and regular activists were the victims of 36.3% of assassinations and the targets of more assassination attempts (58.1%) than leaders. This suggests that political assassination in Brazil targets not only organizational disruption through the elimination of leaders but also intimidation of entire groups through violence against ordinary members. Hence, political activity itself is dangerous regardless of a person's position within an organization.



| Victim position                | Assassination |      | Attempted assassination |      | Death threat |      | Total  |      |
|--------------------------------|---------------|------|-------------------------|------|--------------|------|--------|------|
|                                | Number        | %    | Number                  | %    | Number       | %    | Number | %    |
| Leader                         | 470           | 61.9 | 148                     | 41.3 | 93           | 84.5 | 711    | 57.9 |
| Ordinary member or sympathizer | 276           | 36.3 | 208                     | 58.1 | 17           | 15.5 | 501    | 40.8 |
| No information                 | 14            | 1.8  | 2                       | 0.6  | 0            | 0    | 16     | 1.3  |
| <b>Total</b>                   | 760           | 100  | 358                     | 100  | 110          | 100  | 1 228  | 100  |
| Number = 1 228                 |               |      |                         |      |              |      |        |      |

**FIGURE 12** Lethal political violence against activists, by internal hierarchy.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP–Cebrap), 2003–2023

The data also suggests that local politics is more hazardous than state and national politics. For all three types of lethal political violence, 88.4% of cases involving politicians targeted those working at the municipal level. This data should be read cautiously, however, as Brazil has far more political offices at municipal level than at state and federal levels.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the finding that local politics is particularly violent aligns with existing research.<sup>22</sup> Municipalities are the sites of disputes over resources and opportunities, and control construction contracts, land use permits and municipal hiring.

| Scope of political activity | Assassination |      | Attempted assassination |      | Death threat |      | Total  |      |
|-----------------------------|---------------|------|-------------------------|------|--------------|------|--------|------|
|                             | Number        | %    | Number                  | %    | Number       | %    | Number | %    |
| <b>Municipal</b>            | 285           | 94.4 | 109                     | 85.2 | 41           | 66.1 | 435    | 88.4 |
| <b>State</b>                | 9             | 3    | 10                      | 7.8  | 10           | 16.1 | 29     | 6    |
| <b>Federal</b>              | 1             | 0.3  | 3                       | 2.3  | 11           | 17.8 | 15     | 3    |
| <b>No information</b>       | 7             | 2.3  | 6                       | 4.7  | 0            | 0    | 13     | 2.6  |
| <b>Total</b>                | 302           | 100  | 128                     | 100  | 62           | 100  | 492    | 100  |
| Number = 492                |               |      |                         |      |              |      |        |      |

**FIGURE 13** Political lethality against politicians, by administration level.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP–Cebrap), 2003–2023

In terms of gender, the victims of lethal political violence were predominantly male (74%). Male activists and politicians are typically killed in higher numbers. This is unsurprising, as politics in Brazil remains a male-dominated sphere. In 2025, women occupied only 18.1% of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 19.8% in the Senate.<sup>23</sup> In the 2020 municipal elections, 33.3% of candidates were women, but they won only 16% of mayoral positions and 18% of city council seats.<sup>24</sup> The gender imbalance in lethal political violence mirrors the gender imbalance in political activity more broadly. Additionally, when women are assassinated for political reasons, these cases often exhibit features of gender-based violence overlapping with political motivations, a phenomenon requiring analysis beyond this study's scope.

| Victim           | Male   |      | Female |      | No information |      | Total  |      |
|------------------|--------|------|--------|------|----------------|------|--------|------|
|                  | Number | %    | Number | %    | Number         | %    | Number | %    |
| Activists        | 238    | 26.2 | 53     | 44.9 | 147            | 72.7 | 438    | 35.7 |
| Politicians      | 663    | 73   | 65     | 55.1 | 47             | 23.3 | 775    | 63.1 |
| Indirect victims | 6      | 0.7  | 0      | 0    | 6              | 3    | 12     | 1    |
| No information   | 1      | 0.1  | 0      | 0    | 2              | 1    | 3      | 0.2  |
| <b>Total</b>     | 908    | 100  | 118    | 100  | 202            | 100  | 1 228  | 100  |
| Number = 1 228   |        |      |        |      |                |      |        |      |

**FIGURE 14** Lethal political violence, by victim's sex.

NOTE: Sex was attributed to cases using the genderBR library, a tool developed by Fernando Meireles in Package 'genderBR': Predict Gender from Brazilian First Names (v1.1.2), The Comprehensive R Archive Network, 2025, which estimates the probability of a person's sex based on their first name and their state of birth, using demographic data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. The sample was subsequently corrected using newspaper descriptions of victims. The variable 'victim's name' was standardized according to the victim's official name. Social names were not considered, which is why the term 'sex' is used in this figure rather than 'gender'.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebrap), 2003–2023

## Why and when political conflicts become deadly

Why do certain political conflicts escalate to lethal violence, and when is lethal political violence more likely to occur? To answer these questions, the study identified two main explanatory frameworks for lethal political violence. One concerns the conflicts victims were engaged in, and the other is related to the government in charge when the lethal political violence occurred. Regarding motive, four topics emerged as central in lethal political conflicts: institutional politics (32.5% of all cases), land ownership (32%), scarce resources and opportunities (10.4%), and organized crime (1.6%).<sup>25</sup>

Crimes resulting from issues of institutional politics – candidate nominations, challenging of election outcomes, management of resources and opportunities – revolve around who is in charge and what should be done with public resources, opportunities and state positions. These lethal conflicts are the ones not resolved through institutional mechanisms. In democracies, electoral competition, legislative

negotiation and judicial arbitration provide peaceful channels for political disputes. Our data points to those institutional mechanisms' failure to process part of the conflicts. The killing of political adversaries shows that some actors consider violence to be more more effective than institutions for achieving political goals.

Conflicts related to land ownership are land disputes over property or use of Indigenous peoples' reserves, environmental reserves and farming land, and target mainly non-institutional political actors. A substantial proportion of the victims were killed in rural or forest areas where the rule of law is harder to enforce. Conflicts tend to be resolved violently because these areas are often in frontier regions where state presence is weak or absent.

Disputes over scarce resources and opportunities include conflicts over construction contracts, land development projects, commercial disputes and business partnerships. While not formally about political office or public resources, these disputes become political through actors' use of political connections and state power to advance private interests.

While only a few conflicts involve organized crime, their implications are potentially significant because they overlap with political activities, often involving politicians either engaged with organized crime or being targeted for denouncing it. This intersection of organized crime and governance merits further research, since there is evidence that organized crime groups increasingly compete directly for political office rather than merely seeking to influence office-holders.<sup>26</sup>

| Conflict type               | Activists |      | Politicians |      | Indirect victims |      | No information |     | Total  |      |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------|-------------|------|------------------|------|----------------|-----|--------|------|
|                             | Number    | %    | Number      | %    | Number           | %    | Number         | %   | Number | %    |
| Land property or use        | 315       | 71.9 | 77          | 9.9  | 1                | 8.3  | 0              | 0   | 393    | 32   |
| Institutional politics      | 35        | 8    | 362         | 46.7 | 2                | 16.7 | 0              | 0   | 399    | 32.5 |
| Resources and opportunities | 47        | 10.7 | 80          | 10.3 | 1                | 8.3  | 0              | 0   | 128    | 10.4 |
| Organized crime             | 0         | 0    | 20          | 2.6  | 0                | 0    | 0              | 0   | 20     | 1.6  |
| Other                       | 15        | 3.4  | 3           | 0.4  | 0                | 0    | 0              | 0   | 18     | 1.5  |
| No information              | 26        | 6    | 233         | 30.1 | 8                | 66.7 | 3              | 100 | 270    | 22   |
| <b>Total</b>                | 438       | 100  | 775         | 100  | 12               | 100  | 3              | 100 | 1 228  | 100  |
| Number = 1 228              |           |      |             |      |                  |      |                |     |        |      |

**FIGURE 15** Lethal political violence, by type of conflict.

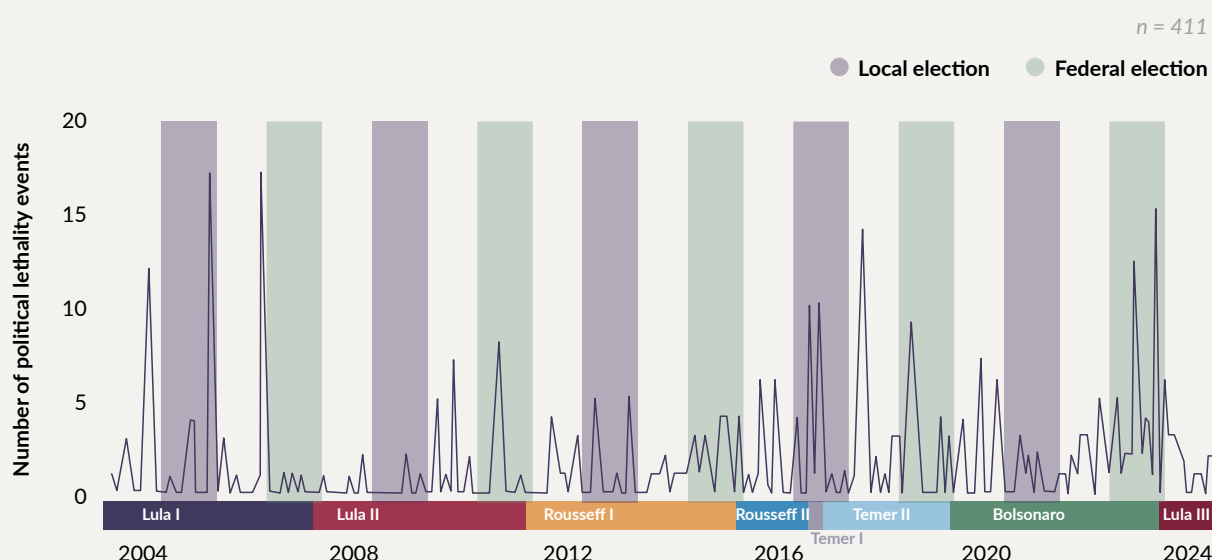
SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP–Cebrap), 2003–2023

In analyzing the threat facing politicians, it was not possible to establish the conflict type based only on current sources (the second phase of this research will look at police and judicial documentation). Nevertheless, where sufficient information was available – in almost 80% of the cases – this was robust enough to map the main themes and spaces where activists and politicians suffered lethal political violence in higher numbers.<sup>27</sup> For politicians, the most lethal political conflicts related to institutional politics: 46.7% of threats, assassination attempts and assassinations stemmed from disputes over office, power and public resources, as part of a competition for electoral politics and governance. For activists, 71.9% of lethal political violence stemmed from land conflicts. Thus, actors face different risks depending on their activities and the arenas in which they operate.

## Political junctures

The political motivations for killing are connected not only to the subjects under dispute, but also to political junctures. In politics, the most important juncture is the electoral cycle. While activists can join national or global movements and organizations, politicians compete only in domestic electoral markets. Elections can be times when conflicts are addressed through voting, but they can also feature intra-group rivalry as candidates compete for limited offices and resources. Hence, elections are ambiguous moments: institutionally designed for peaceful conflict resolution, yet potentially intensifying conflicts that may escalate to violence. To examine whether elections affect levels of political lethality, cases have been mapped against electoral periods (see figures 16 and 17).

Activists' deaths were not consistently related to local elections, but notable peaks of violence appeared before or during national elections in 2006, 2010 and 2018. National elections determine which political forces control agencies responsible for policy related to issues activists fight for, making these moments particularly consequential for their struggles. When federal elections threaten to shift policy direction on land and environmental issues, conflicts intensify. This finding relates to the number of activist deaths related to land, a topic that depends on national legislation and federal law enforcement.



**FIGURE 16** Political lethality targeting activists in local and federal election years.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP-Cebrap), 2003–2023

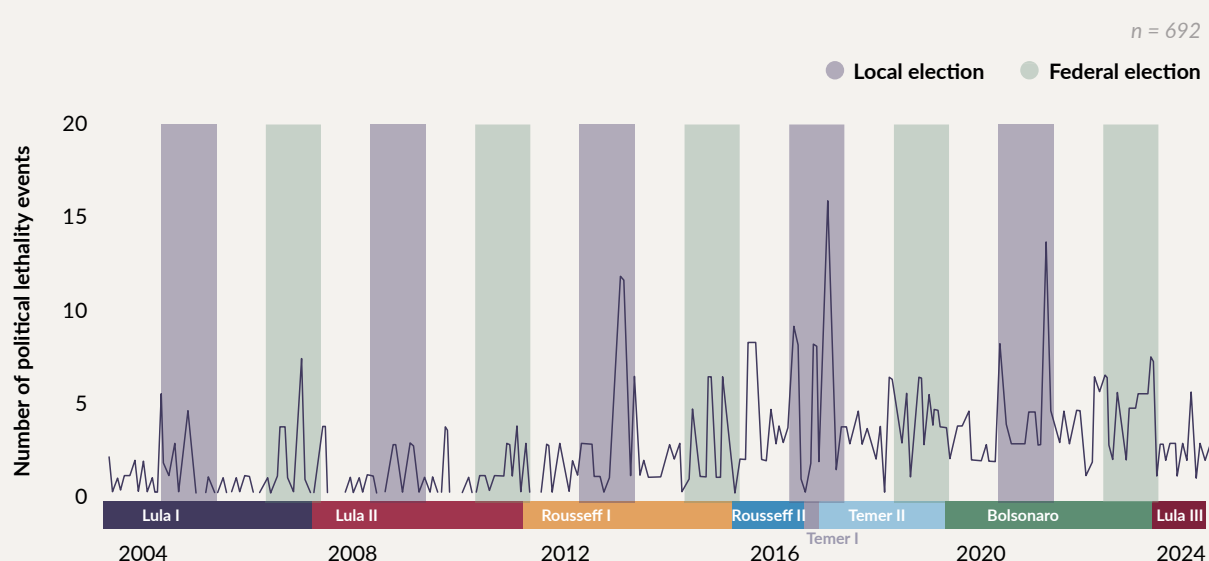


Federal elections appear to hold less significance in terms of risks to politicians. Two small peaks occurred during Workers' Party governments (2006, 2010) but more substantial surges occurred mainly in local elections from Rousseff's term onwards (2012, 2016, 2020). Despite differences related to who was governing the country at the time (discussed below), the data points to local conflicts being at the root of political lethality, since violence spikes in the months closest to voting, when campaigning intensifies.

This national picture, however, encompasses regional differences over time. When considering the 20-year period (2003–2023) as a whole, a concentration of violence in the North and Central-West regions emerges. Nevertheless, when the data is disaggregated over time and changes in governments are considered, it is the frontier regions that experienced increasing tendencies to resolve political conflicts through lethal force.

The Southeast and South regions exhibited relatively stable low rates over time, while political lethality grew in the North and the Central-West regions, mainly during the presidential terms of Michel Temer (12 May–30 August 2016 and 31 August 2016–31 December 2018). Political lethality in the North started escalating during Temer's interim government, concentrated in Roraima, a state that remained violent under the Bolsonaro administration. Notably, violence remained high even during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Northeast region displayed a similar trend, though less pronounced. The Central-West region similarly showed an upward tendency, with three discernible peaks after Rousseff's impeachment in 2016. There was also some oscillation within the region due to changes within Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul, as levels of lethal political violence in the two regions are negatively correlated.

Considering the country as a whole, lethal political violence started trending upwards in 2012, reached a peak in 2016 (the year of Rousseff's impeachment), declined during the pandemic (2020–2021), hit another peak in 2022 – (the year of the coup attempt led by Bolsonaro) and then appeared to stabilize, albeit at a high level. The two peaks connect with factors outside the data: the national political context and the political orientation of governing coalitions.



**FIGURE 17** Political lethality targeting politicians in local and federal election years.

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP–Cebrap), 2003–2023

The study found that one factor influencing the level of political assassination was the political orientation of ruling parties. Governments can be more punitive of political activity than others, either by neglecting the safety of activists and politicians, by diffusing rhetoric encouraging violence in politics, by defunding protection agencies, or by doing all of the above.

The 20 years under scrutiny had four administrations from the left: Lula's first and second terms, and Rousseff's first and second terms. As for the right, besides Bolsonaro, Temer's years were split into two terms: Temer I represents the interim presidency, when the vice president ran the government provisionally while Rousseff was suspended during her impeachment trial, and Temer II representing his presidency following Rousseff's impeachment.<sup>28</sup>

Successful killings (disregarding threats and attempts) increased under right-wing governments and decreased under left-wing ones. This may be related to the fact that the right-wing governments or Temer and Bolsonaro focused more on public safety (law enforcement and crime reduction) than on human rights (protection of vulnerable groups and due process), while the left-wing administrations or Lula and Rousseff emphasized the opposite. In Lula's first two terms (2003–2010), political assassinations were at their lowest (21.5 per year in Lula I and 15.8 in Lula II). During his eight years in office, 149 assassinations were recorded – an average of 18.6 per year.

| Political assassinations |           |             |                  |       | Years in office | Average cases/year |
|--------------------------|-----------|-------------|------------------|-------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Government               | Activists | Politicians | Indirect victims | Total |                 |                    |
| Left-wing                |           |             |                  |       |                 |                    |
| Lula I                   | 40        | 46          | 0                | 86    | 4               | 21.5               |
| Lula II                  | 32        | 31          | 0                | 63    | 4               | 15.8               |
| Rousseff I               | 47        | 76          | 4                | 127   | 4               | 31.8               |
| Rousseff II              | 24        | 47          | 0                | 71    | 1.4             | 50.7               |
| Right-wing               |           |             |                  |       |                 |                    |
| Temer I                  | 3         | 20          | 2                | 25    | 0.3             | 83.3               |
| Temer II                 | 45        | 94          | 2                | 141   | 2.3             | 61.3               |
| Bolsonaro                | 72        | 131         | 1                | 204   | 4               | 51                 |
| Total                    | 263       | 445         | 9                | 717   |                 |                    |
| Number = 717             |           |             |                  |       |                 |                    |

**FIGURE 18** Political assassinations, by government in office.

NOTE: Data without precise month information was disregarded. This is relevant here, since there were two presidents in 2016 (Rousseff in the first half and Temer in the second half).

SOURCE: Brazilian Political Assassination Database (BAP–Cebrap), 2003–2023

A striking pattern emerges: 56.1 cases per year during right-wing governments versus 25.9 assassinations per year while the left was in office. This means the rate of political assassinations increased by 116.6% under right-wing administrations. This cannot be attributed to reporting bias, regional variations or random fluctuation, and suggests that governments' political orientations shaped conditions enabling or constraining political violence.

Federal government orientation influences the rate of political assassination in three ways. First, federal rhetoric shapes the broader political landscape, either legitimizing or delegitimizing violence as a political tool. Bolsonaro's celebrations of firearms, praise for dictatorship and stigmatization of left-wing activists may have produced a political opportunity favourable to political violence. When national leaders celebrate violence and demonize opponents, local actors receive implicit permission for lethal action.

Second, the federal government's control agencies for protecting contested territories and vulnerable populations – such as the National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples, the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources, the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation and the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform – experienced systematic defunding and dismantling under the Bolsonaro administration. This removal of protection from activists operating in land conflict zones directly enabled the violence against them.

Third, federal governments affect state-level prosecution priorities and resource allocation for investigating political crimes. When federal authorities signal that political violence investigations are low priority – through budget cuts to control agencies, appointments of officials hostile to human rights enforcement, or public criticism of investigations – state authorities politically aligned with the president's party follow suit. The doubling of assassination rates under right-wing administrations reflects the federal government's creation of conditions permissive of local political violence.

Nevertheless, rates of violence increased substantially in Rousseff's first term (31.8 per year) and dramatically in Rousseff's second term (50.7 per year). The second spike should be interpreted cautiously, as it covers only 16 months and coincides with intense political crisis and governmental changes. The reasons for this increase are rooted in a broader political crisis, rather than Rousseff's policies, as she faced a critical juncture. All governments are confronted by difficulties, but some periods involve crises so severe that they fundamentally alter political dynamics. Politics is normally shaped by elections and routine governance, but crises can disturb or overwhelm institutional capacity. Political crises help explain the spike in Rousseff's years and the sustained elevation during the Temer and Bolsonaro presidencies.

In the 20 years under examination, Brazil experienced ongoing political crises, including three that were critical: two during Rousseff's administrations, and the 2023 coup attempt. The first woman to hold Brazil's presidency, Rousseff was removed from office through impeachment. The crisis began in 2012 and persisted for years.

In 2012, the Supreme Court delivered its judgement in the Mensalão (monthly allowance) scandal, an accusation of corruption related to Lula's first term, convicting numerous Workers' Party leaders and allies.<sup>29</sup> The judgement was sensationalized through live transmission and news coverage by television channels, magazines and newspapers. A year later, in June 2013, a cycle of protests took place in the country, with right-wing and left-wing movements simultaneously taking to the streets in huge numbers at the same time.<sup>30</sup>

The Rousseff government was shaken by both events, unable to recover the levels of political support it had enjoyed before the crisis. A new corruption scandal (nicknamed Petrolão) fuelled unrest in 2014,

when a judicial investigation (Operation Car Wash) targeting Rousseff's ministers and supporters of members of congresss gained traction and national attention. Despite the continual crises, Rousseff won a second term, by a narrow margin, in the 2014 elections. The 'patriotic field', composed of right-wing movements, protested about alleged electoral fraud, and March 2015 saw the start of the largest cycle of demonstrations in the country's history. In the following months, right-wing and left-wing movements protested in opposite directions, on alternate days, in a new cycle of demonstrations. Right-wing forces in the streets and in the political system focused on the president's impeachment. Political violence appeared throughout these protest cycles, including attacks on state and capital properties and symbols by left-wing movements, anti-terrorist tactics against demonstrators, and physical confrontation between left-wing and right-wing sides.<sup>31</sup>

Rousseff's years were times of organized political mobilization against the Workers' Party, delegitimizing the president and her party's rule. This process peaked with Rousseff's impeachment in August 2016, and Operation Car Wash led to Lula's imprisonment in 2018.<sup>32</sup> Workers' Party members and left-wing social movements claimed that Car Wash selectively criminalized left-oriented politics while ignoring right-wing corruption. In 2021, the Supreme Court annulled Lula's convictions.<sup>33</sup> The distrust in professional politicians engendered by these events allowed so-called outsiders such as Bolsonaro, a former military officer, to emerge as an alternative for many voters in 2022. With their legitimacy undermined, implicated politicians came to be seen as disposable, making them more vulnerable to violence. Simultaneously, actors sought ways to resolve disputes without politicians' intermediation, including through open violence. This political juncture therefore drove the use of violence as a way to solve political conflicts.<sup>34</sup>

The highest levels of political assassination occurred when the right-wing took office, transforming the crisis-induced increase under Rousseff into a sustained period of heightened violence. Neither Temer's interim government nor his subsequent presidency were peaceful in political terms. Temer inherited the political crisis but his short periods at the head of the government were particularly lethal, with an annual rate of 83.3 assassinations in the three-month interim period and 61.3 during the subsequent two years, far exceeding any previous government. The assassination of city councillor Marielle Franco in Rio de Janeiro on 14 March 2018 made the country, and the world, aware of this trend. The crime quickly produced local, national and international headlines. Franco – a gay black woman from a *favela* – became a symbol of resistance, and the press reported extensively on the case.



An image of slain Brazilian rights activist and politician Marielle Franco is projected onto a building in São Paulo on the fifth anniversary of her murder in 2023, symbolizing the ongoing struggle against political violence in the country. © Miguel Schincariol via Getty Images





A mural in Belém honours the murdered indigenist Bruno Pereira, drawing attention to the threats faced by Brazil's environmental defenders under weakened federal protections. © Maira Erlich/Bloomberg via Getty Images

The upward trend in lethal political violence during the Temer administrations continued during Bolsonaro's presidency, consolidating high political violence as the new normal. From 2018 onwards, there was a conspicuous lack of policies to protect political activity, particularly for those on the left of the political spectrum and in contentious land areas. The Ministry of Justice and Public Security, in charge of guaranteeing protection for political activities, did not protect activists, and state agencies responsible for protecting environmental areas, *quilombos*, the landless and Indigenous communities were systematically dismantled. The Ministry of the Environment lost its protective function, facilitating business expansion in protected areas. Additionally, the Bolsonaro administration set up a clandestine surveillance structure for activists, academics, opposition politicians and journalists, intensifying the climate of intimidation.<sup>35</sup>

Bolsonaro's rhetoric may have encouraged political violence by stigmatizing political opponents as non-citizens ('non-patriotic' enemies of Brazil), celebrating guns as symbols of masculinity and sovereignty, and praising dictatorship-era torturers as heroes.<sup>36</sup> Bolsonaro issued about 40 executive decrees expanding civilian access to firearms. A 2022 survey showed that nearly 3 million guns were in civilian hands during his presidency.<sup>37</sup>

High-profile cases of political violence during this period included the murders of indigenist Bruno Pereira and British journalist Dom Phillips in the Vale do Javari Indigenous territory (Amazonas) in June 2022.<sup>38</sup> As in the Franco case, international outrage and media attention followed, and the killings highlighted the dangers activists and defenders of the environment and Indigenous people faced under Bolsonaro's administration, particularly in Amazonian regions where federal protective presence had been withdrawn.<sup>39</sup>

Political assassination rates were maintained at a level of 51 per year during Bolsonaro's term. The upward trend in political killings was interrupted by the pandemic (2020–2021), when social interactions declined to their lowest levels, preventing many political activities from occurring and, in this way, protecting politicians and activists. Nevertheless, when social activity in Bolsonaro's last year (2022) recommenced, political killings rose again.

At the end of 2022, when presidential elections took place, political assassinations grew alongside political polarization. And during the electoral campaign, the phenomenon reached beyond politicians and activists to voters. The most notable case happened in Confresa (Mato Grosso) on 7 September, when a Bolsonaro supporter killed a Lula supporter with a knife and axe blows after a discussion about the elections.<sup>40</sup>

The turbulence persisted after Lula's victory in November. Refusing to accept defeat, Bolsonaro's supporters started an insurrection, aiming to prevent Lula's inauguration on 1 January 2023. Demonstrators across the country blocked highways and camped outside military installations, demanding military intervention. One Bolsonaro supporter attempted to detonate a bomb at Brasília's airport on 24 December, intending to create enough chaos to justify military intervention.<sup>41</sup>

This anti-democratic mobilization culminated in an attempted coup d'état on 8 January, when political violence spread across Brasília. Thousands of Bolsonaro supporters invaded and vandalized the Three Powers Plaza, where the presidential palace, the Supreme Court and Congress are located.<sup>42</sup> Although there were no political assassinations, subsequent judicial proceedings indicated that the plan was to reinstall Bolsonaro as president and assassinate Lula, Vice President Geraldo Alckmin and Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes.<sup>43</sup>



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**E**ven though Brazil has been a democracy since 1985, this research reveals the disturbing persistence of violence as a systematic mechanism for resolving political conflicts. The overall conclusion is that lethal political violence has become normalized in Brazil, with 1 228 cases in the two decades between 2003 and 2023 and an average of 61.4 annually, or 5.1 per month. The data presented in this report shows three long-term patterns that help explain when and why lethal political violence occurred during this period.

First, electoral timing matters, but differently for politicians and activists. Politicians face more danger during local elections, when municipal offices and resources are disputed, while activists are hit more during federal elections, when the national policies they campaign for are at stake. Second, lethal political violence intensifies in economic frontiers. The North and the Central-West regions are zones of, in particular, violent conflicts over land. While resource extraction rapidly expanded in this area, the presence of state institutions to mediate conflicts did not follow at the same pace. Third, governmental political orientation shapes lethal political violence levels. The most striking finding of this research is the outstanding difference in lethal political violence according to the political orientation of governments: assassination rates nearly doubled under right-wing administrations compared to left-wing ones. The most lethal periods occurred when these processes aligned unfavourably, during local elections in frontier regions under right-wing governments. Conversely, the least lethal periods occurred in non-election years in consolidated regions under left-wing governments.<sup>44</sup>

For politicians and activists, the level of violence they face also depends on the issues with which they are primarily engaged. The two most significant are land conflicts and institutional political disputes. These are the primary drivers of political assassinations in Brazil.

For politicians, states with intense local political competition over candidacies and state resources and opportunities, notably Rio de Janeiro – where organized crime has penetrated politics – had a high concentration of cases. For activists, more cases occurred in economic contested arenas, mainly in frontier regions, sites of natural resource extraction and areas replete with land ownership conflicts. This geographical pattern reveals the state's failure in two areas. In the economic frontier zones, state authority is too weak to enforce the law when dealing with illegal extractive actors. In urban zones, especially Rio de Janeiro, non-state armed actors exercise control over territory using violence. Put another way, parts of the country are operating under limited state sovereignty.



The Prazeres neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro. In urban centres such as Rio de Janeiro, non-state armed actors exercise control over territory using violence.

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While it is unsurprising that firearms are the main instrument of lethal political violence, given their wide availability, two findings provide cause for concern about the way assassinations are perpetrated. First, assassinations tend to be executed publicly without apparent fear of legal consequences. Second, political lethality is typically professional rather than passionate, suggesting a market for political assassination services. Such professionalization is particularly evident in small municipalities. The existence of this market means political actors can consider assassination as an option with predictable costs and low risks. This affects political competition and deters newcomers from entering politics.

Regarding demographic patterns, this research did not have the scope to construct detailed profiles of perpetrators and victims. Nevertheless, the data showed that rates of lethal political violence were correspondingly higher among male political actors. Since political activity is mainly conducted by men, they tend to be more exposed to political assassinations. Paradoxically, gender-based institutional exclusion functions as a form of protection for women through reduced exposure.

Furthermore, institutional membership does not provide any protective benefit. Politicians who work within institutions, under media scrutiny and with access to legal resources, are typically killed at higher rates than activists. Being inside the political system does not make someone safer; in fact, it may make them a more visible target. Moreover, 60.2% of killed politicians were out of their offices at the time of their death, suggesting that leaving the office removes protective mechanisms without eliminating political risk.

Finally, lethal political violence is systemic rather than exceptional. Political assassinations are not confined to specific regions, particular victim types or isolated incidents. They occur nationwide (all 27 states recorded cases), affect politicians and activists, and happen continually rather than episodically. Their breadth indicates systemic violence embedded in political processes. Such widespread violence cannot be dismissed as an aberration; it must be recognized as a significant feature of Brazilian political life. The democratic institutional mechanisms are not working to channel all political disputes.

These research findings reveal a normalization of political lethality in Brazil. However, this is not unique to the Brazilian context. Research studies on Mexico and South Africa, covering almost the same period analyzed here, also documented high numbers. Considering only politicians, the Mexico study examined 500 political assassinations between 2000 and 2021.<sup>45</sup> South African research examining politicians and activists recorded 488 political assassinations between 2000 and 2023, far fewer than in Brazil but in a country with a much smaller population.<sup>46</sup> For this reason, recognizing patterns of lethal political violence and mechanisms is essential not only for understanding Brazilian democracy but also for developing effective responses elsewhere.



## Policy, protection and regulation

Based on these findings, this report proposes several evidence-based policy interventions to address lethal political violence in Brazil, a protection system for high-risk political actors, and two legislative initiatives.

First, systematic monitoring is essential for evaluating interventions, identifying emerging risks and maintaining public attention. Useful tools would include the following:

- A Brazilian Lethal Political Violence Database as a permanent federal resource, supplementing newspaper data with evidence from police records and judicial proceedings, and standardizing reporting forms for automated data collection on cases of lethal political violence from a wide range of news sources.
- A Lethal Political Violence Observatory with an interactive public website modelled on the Global Assassination Monitor, with an open API for researcher and governmental access.<sup>47</sup> It should have a searchable case database, interactive maps, temporal visualizations, victim profiles and a conflict-type analysis.
- A Lethal Political Violence Risk Indicator to predict high-risk contexts based on municipal characteristics, electoral timing and conflict escalation indicators.
- An annual Lethal Political Violence Index ranking states and municipalities, with public reports tracking political assassination trends.

Second, protection programmes for high-risk political actors should be evidence-based, targeting demonstrated risk factors rather than being distributed uniformly. They should be available to:

- activists working in contested zones;
- all candidates and incumbents in states and municipalities with higher lethal political violence risk; and
- leaders receiving credible death threats.

Third, legislative initiatives can draw on lessons from other types of crime requiring special attention, and reverse measures that fuel lethal political violence. These could include the following:

- Typifying political assassination as a specific federal crime with enhanced penalties. Currently, political assassinations are prosecuted as common homicides, making them hard to identify in judicial statistics. Brazil has successfully used this approach for other crimes requiring special attention (femicide, racism, torture). This can be done with specific measures, such as federal legislation defining political assassination as a distinct crime category with a specific legal definition and punishment.
- Regulating firearms access and creating illegal firearms accountability by reversing executive decrees facilitating civilian firearm acquisition and introducing new legislation to restrict concealed carry permits.



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- 5 The number of cases varies depending on the availability of information. Despite our efforts, some variables lack information for some cases, since news reports were short or incomplete. The press provides uneven information on different aspects of incidents, so some variables have more missing entries than others. We aim to fill them in the next phase of this research by examining the records of judicial hearings.
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