



SILENCED VOICES: Orislândio Timóteo Araujo

by Cathal Sheerin

In 2012, the small, near-forgotten town of Bom Jardim (Maranhão State, northern Brazil), elected Lidiane Leite, twenty-two, as mayor; her only employment prior to taking office had been as a door-to-door milk seller. Those who raised concerns about her suitability for public office soon had their doubts confirmed as chaos enveloped public finances and schoolyard-style scheming and bullying replaced politics. With her hands on



Illustration by Maxine Young

Orislândio Timóteo Araujo

the budget, Leite spent most of her time partying in the state capital, São Luis, and bought herself cars, designer clothes, and champagne. We know all this because she chronicled it all on Facebook and Instagram. In 2015, with local services in Bom Jardim starved of cash and investigators closing in, Leite went on the run; and true to character, she recorded her flight on social media. Thirty-nine days later, Leite handed herself in, and is now wearing an electronic tag while she is being investigated for allegedly embezzling four million dollars of public money.

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Brazilian politics is riddled with corruption. And although the scale and sums involved are greater at the national level (in 2014, forty national politicians were implicated in a bribery scandal involving Petrobras, a state oil company), at the local level it's much more bloodthirsty.

Two hours' drive down the road from Lidiane Leite's Bom Jardim sits the town of Buriticupu, the mayor of which—José Gomes (popularly known as Zé Gomes)—is another controversial figure. Allegations of dodgy financial deals with fake companies follow him around and he refuses to make his mayoral accounts available for scrutiny by council members. On November 18, 2015, the blogger Orislândio Timóteo Araujo (known online as Roberto Lano) posted a memorable text about the mayor's most bizarre construction project to date. Entitled "Zé Gomes Builds a Bridge from Nothing to Nowhere," it read:

More than a year ago, Mayor Zé Gomes of Buriticupu built a bridge which is, without any doubt, a great symbol of mismanagement by a government uncommitted to the public good. The construction in question is to be found less than one kilometer from the city center in a zone close to a dam. There, in the middle of nowhere, providing absolutely no service, sits the bridge. It doesn't have a plaque saying how much it cost or which company won the bid to build it. As one councilman said, "First we make a bridge, then we build a road, then we create two towns on either side of the bridge, and then we install a river."

This brief paragraph was accompanied by a photograph showing an ugly concrete bridge sitting absurdly in the center of a field. It was the last blog entry that Araujo would publish; three days later, on November 21, 2015, he was shot dead in the town square.

Araujo had been riding his motorbike around town with his wife when the killer—another motorcyclist—approached him. "The gunman was very professional," said the lead investigator two days after the killing. "He turned off his engine, dismounted his bike, and let off a shot without hesitating. Then he rode off at slow speed as if



nothing had happened.” According to the investigator, the killing showed all the signs of being a contracted hit and was likely connected to the blogger’s work: “He made enemies easily.”

Araujo was well-known locally. He was a nightclub owner, a radio DJ, and a political campaigner, but he was best known for his merciless criticism of local political corruption. As well as criticizing the mayor, the blogger set his sights on Flávio Dino, Maranhão’s governor, and Ricardo Murad, the state’s former health secretary, who currently is under investigation for allegedly using public money to finance his electoral campaign.

Maranhão is a dangerous place to be a blogger. Araujo’s murder came only two weeks after the murder of another Maranhão blogger, Ítalo Diniz. Like Araujo, Diniz wrote about local corruption and had targeted the same public figures. Earlier in 2015, Diniz had told journalists that he had “received threats from mayors, councilmen, their cronies and security.”

In 2012, Deció Sá, a reporter who worked for the state newspaper *O Estado do Maranhão* and wrote about corruption on his personal blog, was killed in a professional hit; of the seven men currently on trial for the crime, one is a military police captain.

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According to statistics provided by Brazil's National Association of Journalists, twenty-three journalists and bloggers have been murdered in Brazil since 2008, with few investigations into these crimes resulting in prosecutions. On the rare occasions when these murder cases reach court, it tends to be those who carried out the killings who are tried rather than those who ordered them. This is hardly surprising: local government officials are often the leading suspects in these investigations, and courts, especially those outside the main cities, are frequently subject to intimidation by politicians and local criminals.

As this is being written, no one has been arrested for the murder of Orislândio Timóteo Araujo. Calls for those responsible for the crime to be brought to justice may be sent to the following address:

Federal Minister of Justice
Exmo. Ministro Sr, José Eduardo Cardozo
Ministério da Justiça
Esplanada dos Ministérios, Bloco "T"
70712-902-Brasília
DF Brasil

Fax: + 556133226817/3224 3398

You may want to use this [sample letter](#). Please also send a copy of your letter to your nearest Brazilian diplomatic representative. In Washington, D.C., it is:

The Honorable Luiz Alberto Figueiredo Machado
Ambassador of Brazil
3006 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington DC 20008
Fax 202-238-2827 email: pd.washington@itamaraty.gov.br

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