

# ARMS DECREE AND THE EVANGELICAL BLOC

**Silvia Virginia Silva de Souza**

- *Challenges for advocacy in human rights* •

## ABSTRACT

*Based on the author's experience as an Advocacy Consultant at the Brazilian National Congress, representing Conectas Human Rights, an international civil society organisation in Brazil, that has been working for the past 18 years on implementing and maintaining human rights, this article presents a case study to analyse the position of the current evangelical bloc (Bancada Evangélica) in relation to decrees to ease gun control in Brazil (numbers 9.785/2019 and 9.797/2019). To this end, the current political context, that is the backdrop of these regulations, will be considered, as well as the constructive discourse surrounding the imposition of Christian values as moral and social values and possible contradictions in this discourse. Attention will be drawn to the escalation of penal norms for citizens' 'self-protection'. It also aims to analyse the discourse of some of the members of congress who make up this bloc and the influence they have in the formulation of public security policy, as well as the implications of these positions on advocacy as a form of working alongside civil society, on possible dialogue to maintain and defend fundamental rights.*

## KEYWORDS

Arms | Decrees | Evangelicals | Evangelical bloc

## 1 • The influence of evangelicals on current political and social conditions

The 2018 elections in Brazil, that raised the then-federal congressman Jair Messias Bolsonaro to the level of President of the Republic with significant support from the evangelical community, brought to a head conflicting positions in the shape of projects supported by evangelical politicians and their grassroots supporters.

During the campaign, the president elect, who believes in conservative ideas for habits and liberal ones for the economy, who is an open admirer of Donald Trump<sup>1</sup> and who is in favour of arms policies, never concealed his intention to approve laws that would culminate in increased sentencing and easing of the Statute for Disarmament,<sup>2</sup> making way for armed citizens as part of his public security policy. However, a contradiction lies in the fact that great leaders in Christian circles, principally evangelical ones, support a government project the principle of which is “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” on the basis of the idea that theoretically, armed citizens will be able to prevent the criminal actions of perpetrators who are also armed.

This principle is at the heart of the law of talion, created in ancient Mesopotamia,<sup>3</sup> to be found in the Code of Hammurabi (1750-1730 BCE) and in the text of the Old Testament, according to which the criteria for justice was reciprocity between the crime and the punishment. An offender should be punished to the same degree as the suffering they have caused. According to the Bible (Old Testament):

*When a man causes disfigurement in his neighbour, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, as he has disfigured so he shall be disfigured.<sup>4</sup>*

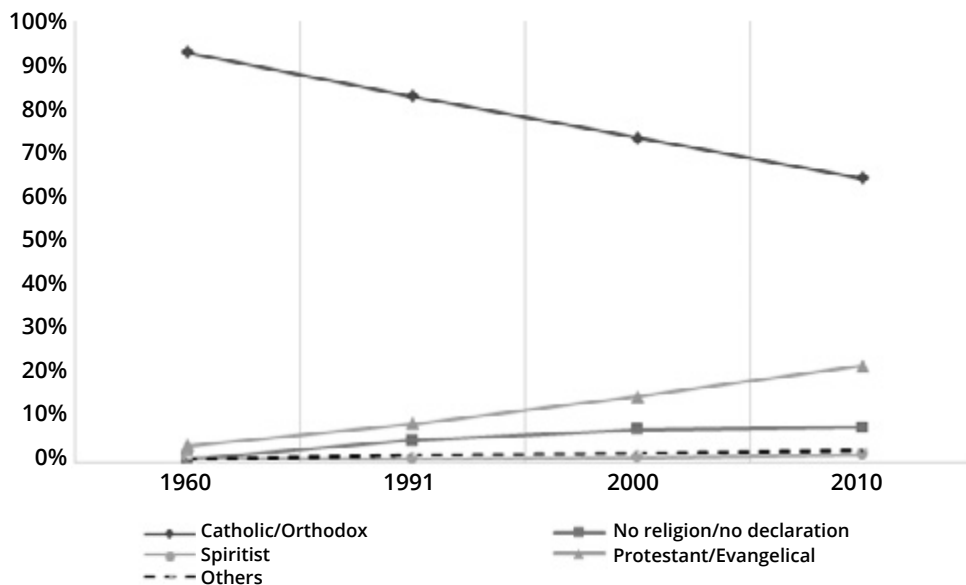
Centuries later, Jesus Christ revoked the law of talion at the Sermon on the Mount (New Testament) giving his followers guidance, the principle of which is forgiveness and the practice of non-violence.

*You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But, I tell you do not resist an evildoer. If someone slaps you on your left cheek, turn your other to him also. (...) You have heard that it was said, love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. ...<sup>5</sup>*

That said, some elements need to be taken into consideration in order to provide wider understanding of the position of the evangelicals in the currently political scenario in Brazil. An important factor is the exponential increase in the evangelical community. In the 2010 census, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) noted

that the percentage of evangelicals in Brazil had risen from 15.4% in 2000 to 22.2% in 2010, while the number of Catholics had suffered a decline, falling from 73.6% in 2000 to 64.6% in 2010.<sup>6</sup> It is estimated that in 2030 the evangelical community will be the largest in the country, where religion persuasion is known.

Population distribution, by declared religion – Brazil – 1960 - 2010



Source: IBGE. Demographic Census 1960 - 2010.

According to Ronaldo Almeida, at an FHC Foundation conference,<sup>7</sup> it had been envisaged that the increase in the evangelical community would reach a ceiling in the 2000s. However, the increase has remained constant and in several layers of society around the country, mainly among the poorest, less educated, non-white people. In other words, the majority of evangelicals are poor, black and live in underprivileged areas of the cities.

In the 80s and 90s the number of people living in the favelas suffered an acute increase due to internal migration and the rural exodus. The evangelical churches accompanied this movement and expanded into the underprivileged areas,<sup>8</sup> particularly the *Assembleia de Deus*, that opened a number of temples in underprivileged areas and is currently the church with the largest congregation. According to the census,<sup>9</sup> the *Assembleia de Deus* had 12 million members at that time.

Another element is the fact that most of the evangelical community live in underprivileged areas on the outskirts of cities, where high rates of inequality and vulnerability with regards to organised crime and local militia can be seen to be a trigger for supporting Jair Bolsonaro, who appears to offer an immediate solution to these people who lack public security and who have been abandoned by the state for some time now.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, evangelicals have their own language, including symbols and metaphors stemming from a particular understanding of the world. An example of this is the image of fighting the enemy, that is prevalent in evangelical culture and illustrated by the figure of God as the “Lord of the Armies”<sup>11</sup> who is at the forefront on the battlefield. It is also worth remembering that during his electoral campaign, messages were being sent to WhatsApp groups stating that Bolsonaro was the new ‘Messiah’ sent by God to govern Brazil. His middle name is ‘Messias’ and this was portrayed as a divine sign.

Therefore, the way evangelicals relate to the world is key to understanding the way many of them perceived “Captain Bolsonaro”, as he was called in the campaigns, as the leader chosen by God to save Brazil from alleged chaos, attributed to the Workers’ Party (PT)<sup>12</sup> and corruption.<sup>13</sup>

### 1.1 - Evangelicals and their project for power

Although Brazil is still a predominantly catholic/Christian country, the gradual shift in religious orientation – from catholic to evangelical – shown by the IBGE – is also reflected in politics and the Brazilian parliament. This situation appears to be a response to a project for power, led by the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, principally the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (IURD), founded by bishop Edir Macedo in the 1980s and the *Assembleia de Deus*, founded in 1911 by immigrant missionaries. Both churches are founders of political parties: the *Partido Republicano Brasileiro* (PRB) and the *Partido Social Cristão* (PSC), respectively. They put forward a number of candidates at every municipal, state and federal election.

Edir Macedo was one of the first evangelical leaders to publically support a presidential candidate. In 1989, he supported Fernando Collor de Mello, who was eventually elected president in those elections. In his book *Plano de Poder: Deus, os Cristãos e a Política* (Plan for Power: God, Christians and Politics) Macedo discusses “God’s plan” to transform Brazil into a great evangelical nation and calls on evangelicals to take part in this plan: “Through reading we shall deepen our understanding of a great nation designed and intended by our God and discover what our responsibility is in this process.”<sup>14</sup>

In his book, he also states that God’s intention is the formation of a great nation and calls evangelicals to party political mobilisation. According to Macedo, there is a divine plan to turn Brazil into a nation governed by evangelicals: “From the beginning of time He has made clear his intention as statesman and for the formation of a great nation.”<sup>15</sup> Based on this narrative, that relies on biblical phrases and stories, transported to the present day, Macedo constructs an apparatus of arguments that justify and call for the transformation of Brazil into an “evangelical nation” ruled by Christian values and principles.

This turning point in the behaviour of leaders of the Pentecostal evangelical churches happened in the mid 1980s. In 1986, many leaders abandoned the discourse that politics was a sinful environment that it was not suitable for Christians to become involved in and started to support candidates for the Constituent Assembly with the slogan “brothers vote

for their brothers” in order to elect representatives from their churches who would defend their religious values in the Federal Constitution that was to be drawn up.

The beginnings of the evangelical bloc were formed after these elections, with 33 members in the National Congress.<sup>16</sup> Since then, evangelical representation has grown more and more and the relationship between evangelical leaders and central representatives of the Executive Power have been getting closer. In 2009, the then president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva gave in to pressure from the evangelical bloc and promoted changes in the National Plan for Human Rights (PNDH). Passages that allowed for support to bills for the decriminalisation of abortion and the creation of a mechanism to prohibit religious symbols in public places were removed.<sup>17</sup>

In 2011, Edir Macedo participated in Dilma Rousseff’s inauguration ceremony.<sup>18</sup> In 2014 she was present at the inauguration of the Templo de Salomão,<sup>19</sup> now the headquarters of the IURD in the city of São Paulo. This temple is an imposing piece of architecture, with 74 thousand m<sup>2</sup> of built on area. It takes up an entire block and is the equivalent to 18 stories high. It also contains a memorial with the history of the original Solomon’s temple, destroyed in 586 BCE. Moreover, the construction is an important physical representation of the economic and media power behind this Church.

Bolsonaro, in turn, communicates with this public and wins votes by incorporating Christian values into his discourse, in favour of family, morality and common decency and through the support of evangelical leaders like Edir Macedo, Silas Malafaia and others. He uses Christian rhetoric and quotes verses from the bible in his speeches. During his campaign he spread the slogan “Brasil above everything and God above everyone.”

## 2 • The arms decree: a government project for public (in)security

The Brazilian political system is composed of two chambers, the Chamber of Deputies, with 513 members and the Federal Senate with 81 senators. It is common for these two to form groups of parliamentary fronts and themed blocs who bring together politicians from different parties who share ideas, beliefs and objectives.

The Evangelical Parliamentary Front of the Brazilian National Congress<sup>20</sup> officially has 195 members of congress and 8 senators as signatories,<sup>21</sup> a reasonably significant number given that the total number of parliamentarians is 594. This bloc, presided over by the federal congressman Silas Câmara (PRB/AM), an evangelical pastor at the *Assembleia de Deus*, is strongly aligned with Jair Bolsonaro’s government projects and is part of his ‘allied base’ in the National Congress.

On 7 May 2019, the president issued decree number 9.785/2019,<sup>22</sup> easing control on the possession and carrying of guns in Brazil. In addition to being an unconstitutional act, inasmuch as it encroached on the legislative authority of the National Congress, previously, on 15 January 2019, decree, number 9.685,<sup>23</sup> had already been issued to modify the regulatory

decree of the Statute of Disarmament (decree number 5.123 of 21/07/2004). By means of this decree, Bolsonaro's government transferred the onus for ensuring personal safety to common citizens, the duty of which is the legal responsibility of the state, according to the Federal Constitution.<sup>24</sup> They did this on the grounds of giving citizens the right to defend themselves.

According to the *Instituto Sou da Paz*,<sup>25</sup> the most serious alteration presented in the decree is the broadening of the professional categories for which it is deemed 'necessary' to carry a gun. Categories that stand out are those of elected politicians, people living in rural areas, lorry drivers, journalists, marksmen or people who collect guns, lawyers and guardianship councillors, among others. According to estimates this measure means the number of people who could potentially carry a gun on the streets, at work and in public spaces has increased substantially:<sup>26</sup> There are 492,498 self-employed lorry drivers;<sup>27</sup> around 18.6 million people living in rural areas;<sup>28</sup> and 30 thousand guardianship councillors throughout the country.<sup>29</sup>

## 2.1 - Incongruently fighting death with guns

In a country like Brazil where there are high rates of violence and inequality, the aforementioned decree could lead to more fatal murders, intensifying a crisis by contributing to an increase in conflicts over land disputes involving rural workers, *quilombola* and indigenous communities, farmers and representatives of agribusiness. According to the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra*, in 2017 higher death rates have been reported in conflicts in the countryside since 2003:<sup>30</sup> Seventy one people died, the highest numbers being in the north of the country in the states of: Pará (21) and Amazonas (17).

The 2019 *Atlas da Violência*,<sup>31</sup> published by the *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada* (Ipea), revealed that in 2017 Brazil reached the highest level of lethal violence in its history. There were 65,602 murders, an increase of almost 48% in just one decade (2007-2017). Of this number, 35,783 were young people aged between 15 and 29 years old, an alarming piece of data that points to the premature death of a "lost youth".<sup>32</sup> There was also a significant increase of 30.7% in the number of women murdered during the decade under analysis. According to the research this corresponded to 13 murders a day in 2017, most of which were committed in the domestic environment in the 'safety' of the home.

Finally, in the year analysed it was also seen that 75.5% of the murder victims were black people, indicating an increase in the inequality of race-related deaths in Brazil. According to Ipea, in the period from 2007 to 2017 the death rate among black people grew 33.1% while that of non-black people showed a small increase of 3.3%. An analysis of the variation in the past year alone shows that while the death rate among non-black people was relatively stable, with a reduction of 0.3%, that of black people grew by 7.2%. This means that the fatality rate of the black population has been gradually increasing each year according to the data analysed, while the death rate among non-blacks remains stable. In short, the data reveals a policy of death that targets principally the black community. In a cross-reference of this data with the aforementioned evangelical community, who are mostly poor, black

and live in underprivileged areas, we see a paradox in that increased oppression is arising in precisely those classes who are most oppressed.

According to the study *World Health Statistics 2018*,<sup>33</sup> published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in May of the same year, Brazil has the seventh highest murder rate in the Americas, with an indicator of 31.3 deaths for every 100 thousand inhabitants.

Based on this data, it seems to us that it is contradictory to promote almost unrestricted access to guns as a public security policy. In addition, by opening up the possibility of millions of people being in possession of guns, the decrees in question (numbers 9.785/2019 and 9.797/2019) also mean: an increase in the number of guns per citizen from 1 to 5; an increase from 5 to 10 years of duration of validity for gun licenses and even an increase in gun potency from 400 to 1,620 joules of kinetic energy<sup>34</sup> allowed for the general public which means people can have and carry guns that were previously prohibited, such as the 9mm, .44 Magnums, semi-automatic 12 gauge sawn-off shotguns and single-shot T4 rifles.

In this context, it was publicised that<sup>35</sup> the gun manufacturer Taurus had communicated to the financial market<sup>36</sup> on 8 May 2019 that it was ready to sell type T4 rifles to the general public and that it had received over two thousand orders that could be met in up to three days. The ensuing national commotion alerted a number of sectors of society and resulted in a reaction from the National Congress that culminated in the proposal of legal action for unconstitutionality, on the part of political parties that opposed the decrees, see table below:

| Action   | Author | Rapporteur        | Decree in question              |
|----------|--------|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| ADI 6119 | PSB    | Min. Edson Fachin | Decree n°. 9.685, on 15.01.2019 |
| ADI 6134 | PSOL   | Min. Rosa Weber   | Decree n°. 9.785, on 07.05.2019 |
| ADI 6139 | PSB    | Min. Edson Fachin | Decree n°. 9.785, on 07.05.2019 |
| ADPF 581 | REDE   | Min. Rosa Weber   | Decree n°. 9.785, on 07.05.2019 |

Source: Author's elaboration.

Under pressure, the government spoke in a note via the Ministry for Defence, denying the possibility of ordinary citizens being able to acquire rifles.

Arguing that he was correcting these inconsistencies, the President of the Republic issued decree number 9.797 on 21 May 2019, changing some points contained in decree number 9.785 of 7 May. According to specialists,<sup>37</sup> this new decree does not resolve the previous unconstitutionality, but further increases the list of professional categories and retains the permitted kinetic potency of 1,620 joules per gun.

Therefore, the issue raised is how to conciliate, in the light of Christian principles, the use of guns and loving one's neighbour or, furthermore, that all human beings are made in God's image, an idea that is cherished in Christianity.

We observe, however, the construction of a new discourse. This is personified in the figure of “captain Bolsonaro” with theological elements of a spiritual war becoming more concrete.<sup>38</sup> These had previously been restricted to the field of spirituality. This new discourse justifies public security policies, with the aim of arming the “good citizen” in the fight against “evildoers”.

### 3 • The evangelical bloc and human rights: “A good criminal is a dead one”?

The evangelical bloc has emerged as the principal focus of the government in its search for support for the arms decree in the Chamber. With 195 signed up parliamentarians, the votes of this bloc will be decisive in the approval or total rejection of the decree. The leader of the government in the Congress, congresswoman Joice Hasselmann, announced in an interview that she would be trying to obtain the support of part of the evangelical bloc for the decree and that if any specific point was causing discomfort this would be debated in order to come to a consensus and approve it.<sup>39</sup> It is worth mentioning that the congresswoman is also a member of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front.

While this article was being written, the arms decree was being inspected by the National Congress<sup>40</sup> and on 18 June 2019 it was considered and suspended by the Federal Senate. By 47 votes to 28<sup>41</sup> the senators decided to annul the act. This was a huge defeat for the government. However, as the Brazilian political system has two chambers, the decree will now also go to the Chamber of Deputies, where the plenary of 513 representatives will vote for maintaining or annulling this instrument for good.

Congressman Silas Câmara (PRB-AM), the president of the bloc, communicated in a note that as yet the Parliamentary Front “does not have an official position on the presidential decree in question and the matter has never been debated by members of the Front.” Regardless, he stressed that “the ultimate defence of life and private property is a protestant tradition. These are intrinsic values in a truly democratic society.” In addition, he added that “Therefore, this means the creation of mechanisms to allow good citizens to efficiently protect their goods, their lives and their families’ lives.”<sup>42</sup>

It is important to stress that the current Brazilian government, self-proclaimed as right-wing, got into power by strategically introducing a public narrative on what they conceive to be human rights. Adages like “human rights for righteous humans” and “a good criminal is a dead one” became the buzzwords of some members of congress, representatives of the Executive Power and for many military staff allied with the president. Once the logic of this narrative was linked to the argument that citizens must have the right to protect their own lives by carrying guns, it became more palatable and justifiable for some evangelical parliamentarians to stand up for the decree.

This fact holds up under analysis of those who voted in favour in the Federal Senate. Of the eight senators who are in the Evangelical Front,<sup>43</sup> seven voted in favour of maintaining



the arms decree,<sup>44</sup> they are: Arolde de Oliveira (PSD-RJ), Izalci Lucas (PSDB-DF), Juíza Selma (PSL-MT), Luiz do Carmos (MDB-GO), Marcos Rogério (DEM-RO), Vanderlan Cardoso (PP-GO) and Zequinha Marinho (PSC-PA).

In discussions that took place in the plenary, Senator Luiz do Carmo caused a commotion when he talked about the murder of his daughter Michele in a robbery.<sup>45</sup> The senator has been a member of the *Assembleia de Deus* evangelical church for over 30 years,<sup>46</sup> and holds the view that his daughter could have escaped with her life if she had reacted to the robbery with a firearm.

Another evangelical pastor who is very influential and who has come out in favour of the arms degree is the federal congressman Pastor Marcos Feliciano (PODE/SP). On 13 June, Feliciano participated in a live online broadcast, at president Bolsonaro's side in which he stood up for the validity of the presidential decrees. In his opinion, "houses in America do not have [boundary] walls. People ask 'why don't they have walls?' Because nobody is brave enough to break into an American's house because they know that every American has a gun."<sup>47</sup> Feliciano is a federal congressman, in his third term of office. He is a pastor of the *Assembleia de Deus* in Belem and is a respected preacher in Brazilian Christian circles.

However, there are divergent opinions among parliamentarians in the evangelical bloc. One example is Pastor Sargento Isidoro (AVANTE/BA), the most voted federal congressman in the state of Bahia and a member of the evangelical bloc. The congressman campaigned ardently against approval of the decree and wielded banners with statements like "Jesus said: love each other do not arm each other", "guns no, education yes" and "fewer guns, more books", which he paraded at committee meetings in the chamber and in the senate.<sup>48</sup> See following image:



Photo: Moreira Mariz/Agência Senado.

Congressman Sóstenes Cavalcante (DEM/RJ) is another dissenting voice in the bloc. In opposition to the decree the parliamentarian said that “I am talking to a number of members of congress and there are several who are going to support the Legislative Decree, as long as it is not presented by left-wing parties. We do not support the PT. If it is comes from the PT it will not have our support”.<sup>49, 50</sup> Sóstenes is an evangelical pastor connected to the *Assembleia de Deus* in Vitória em Cristo, with its headquarters in the state of Rio de Janeiro and headed by Pastor Silas Malafaia, considered to be one of the most influential evangelical church members in the country.

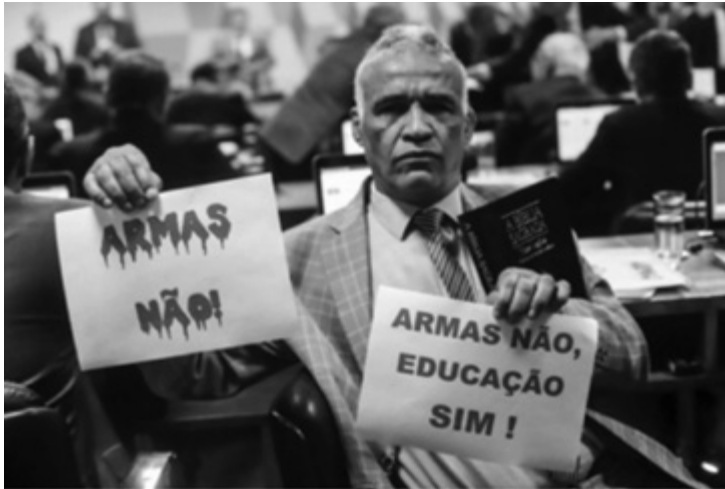


Photo: Mídia Ninja

Conversely, in an article written by the federal congresswoman Benedita da Silva (PT/RJ), who has been a member of the *Assembleia de Deus* evangelical church since 1968, she argues that: “Arming good citizens to combat violence is a simple and direct but delusional idea that survives by feeding off government incompetence and political demagogy.”<sup>51</sup> Benedita, who is ardently opposed to the decrees, has been in politics since 1982 and has always been affiliated to the Workers Party (PT). She arrived at the National Congress in the role of federal congresswoman in 1987, having helped to found the evangelical bloc and she participated in the 1988 Constitution. Unlike the typical conservative profile of this bloc, Benedita is a feminist, an activist in the black movement and defends minorities and progressive agendas.

Traditionally, the evangelical bloc acts on agendas that touch on the field of ‘morality and common decency’, and generally stand up for conservative points of view. They are against the legalisation of abortion under any circumstance and same sex marriage. They are also hostile to the gender debate and human rights agendas, principally those linked to social and political minorities’ rights to freedom.

However, it is in public security policies that this bloc has adopted the most punitive positions, as seen in previous legislative period (2015-2018) with the formation of the “BBB” bloc (bible, bullet and beef), made up of parliamentarians from the evangelical,

arms and ruralist wings. This alliance involved adopting a system of exchanging votes on agendas that were relevant to any one of these groups and reinstated such matters as reducing the age of criminal responsibility, abortion as a serious crime and revocation of the Statute for Disarmament.

In the initial months of the new legislative period in Brazil it is noticeable that part of the evangelical bloc has identified the arms decree as a chance to stand up for a punitive approach to public security policies. However, the possession and carrying guns as an indiscriminate measure of protection rather flies in the face of the principles of loving one's neighbour, forgiveness and valuing life as divine creation.

#### 4 • New arms decrees

While this article was being written and in parallel with research on parliamentarians' viewpoints, the decrees presented in the introduction as the focus of this analysis were revoked by another four new decrees, published on 25 June 2019.

The new presidential act took place one day before the Supreme Federal Court (STF) was to judge the constitutionality of the regulatory acts through Direct Actions of Unconstitutionality (ADI) and the Action of Non-Fulfilment of Fundamental Precepts (ADPF) lodged by the following political parties: REDE; PSB and PSOL.

Drawing on a legal strategy, president Bolsonaro issued new decrees (numbers 9.844,<sup>52</sup> 9845,<sup>53</sup> 9846<sup>54</sup> and 9847<sup>55</sup>) revoking the previous ones, although the actual contents remained almost unchanged. In this way, the president made it unviable for the STF to judge the actions of unconstitutionality and so they were removed from the agenda, having been rendered meaningless. This move did not represent a change in the government's arms policy. It was merely the use of a legal manoeuvre to circumvent controls on constitutionality set out in the Brazilian legal framework.

The following table is a summary of all the president's regulatory acts in the first six months of his government in terms of formulating public security policies through arming the general public:

| Decree nº | Date       | Revoked by |
|-----------|------------|------------|
| 9.685     | 15.01.2019 | 9.785      |
| 9.785     | 07.05.2019 | 9.844      |
| 9.797     | 21.05.2019 | 9.847      |
| 9.844     | 25.06.2019 | 9.847      |
| 9.845     | 25.06.2019 |            |
| 9.846     | 25.06.2019 |            |
| 9.847     | 25.06.2019 |            |

Source: Author's elaboration.

Besides the issues analysed here, the successive issue of decrees in such a short space of time by the Executive Power on a matter that is constitutionally the responsibility of the Legislative Power, signals the fragility of Brazilian democracy and indicates the future possibility of ruptures and strained relations between the three Brazilian powers – Executive, Legislative and Judicial.

In only 200 days of government, the President of the Republic issued 237 decrees,<sup>56</sup> many of which were the target of Draft Legislative Decrees (PDLs) issued by parliament with the aim of blocking them. In a government system with a presidential coalition, as is the case in Brazil, the issue of successive decrees, particularly on matters pertaining to Legislative responsibility which subsequently demand action by the Justice Department to decide whether they are constitutional, is taking a toll on the relationship between the powers and is rendering democracy more vulnerable.

## 5 • Human rights advocacy and the challenges

Civil society organisations, like Conectas, that do advocacy at the Brazilian National Congress and stand up for human rights and the construction of public policies, particularly those concerning matters of public security, are faced with the challenging task of talking with the evangelical bloc and thinking of ways to build action strategies in parliament in the face of the specific and significant representation of this group. However, the political movements cited and the discourse presented show that this bloc is not entirely unanimous in terms of points of view on the area of public security.

Once we understand the complexity of the religious field, due to both the diversity of its players and to its discourse and interpretations, we can identify the cracks and even the contradictions that open up the possibility of dialogue. While this bloc is seen as representing a conservative and punitive stance, there are, in fact, evangelical parliamentarians who are breaking away from this discourse.

Party plurality within the bloc also points to opportunities for dialogue, given that these parties do not originate from one single political spectrum. Although there are more politicians from right-wing, centre-right and centre parties, there are also people representing parties that identify as belonging to the left-wing and centre left. This tells us that evangelical church members cannot all be placed in the same box. In the same way that we see different kinds of people among the evangelical church members in parliament, this is also clear in the thousands of evangelical churches, of many different denominations, all over Brazil.

The majority of evangelical church members in Congress are connected to *the Universal do Reino de Deus* and *Assembleia de Deus* churches. There are, however, oscillations in participation that could be employed in the strategies of civil society. Organisations and individuals working to defend human rights cannot ignore or underestimate the evangelical community. It is proving to be organised, diverse, consistent and able to decide an elective plea and thus define future policies to be adopted and influence their implementation.

In the case of the arms decrees it is important to note that although parliament opposes these instruments, by means of the Federal Senate, the central argument of the discourse has been centred around the formal unconstitutionality of the acts and not the inconsistency and inefficiency of this policy in terms of public security.

On 25 June a draft bill was presented (number 3.715/2019)<sup>57</sup> that broadens the scope for carrying a gun on rural property. The following day, this was approved in the plenary of the Federal Senate. Another draft bill (PLS n.º. 224/2017)<sup>58</sup> was approved in the same session lowering the minimum age from 25 to 21 for purchase of firearms for people living in rural areas. Subsequently both bills were passed to the Chamber of Deputies. The speed with which these bills are approved suggests a punitive stance in the Federal Senate, the majority of which is ideologically aligned with the President of the Republic with regards to public security.

Finally, the judicial strategy employed by Bolsonaro, of issuing seven decrees on arms in such a short space of time places human rights defenders in a rather vulnerable position when carrying out advocacy work in the national Parliament, because the president's manoeuvres undermine the principle of legal security, making it difficult to know which act we are opposing. This has been one of the greatest challenges for advocacy in the current legislative period, because in an atmosphere of unstable democracy, big setbacks tend to happen.

As a civil society organisation that has been working on defending human rights for 18 years, Conectas is seeking to make the international community aware of the vulnerabilities being instilled in Brazilian democracy by the Bolsonaro government, who rely on the support of the evangelical bloc. Consequently, the way in which the president does politics and governs is restricting civil society's ability to work because he is disregarding the legislative process, in a number of different ways and is hindering strategies of resistance and the defence of rights.

Despite the current situation, that is not at all in favour of advocacy, Brazilian civil society will continue resisting and developing new strategies of work, as well as denouncing human rights violations.

## NOTES

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1 • In a meeting with the United States president at the White House, Bolsonaro declared that he had always admired the USA, and even more so now Trump has become president of the country; Patrícia Campos Mello and Marina Dias, "Após Bolsonaro Abrir Mão de Benefício na OMC, Trump Apoia Entrada do Brasil na OCDE." *Folha de S.Paulo*, March 19, 2019, accessed July 18, 2019, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2019/03/apos-elogios-e-concessoes-de-bolsonaro-trump-apoia-entrada-do-brasil-na-ocde.shtml>.

2 • The Statute for Disarmament is a federal law in Brazil (nº. 10.826). It was sanctioned on 23 December 2003 by the the president at the time Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and established a public policy of disarmament of the general public. It was regulated by decree no. 5.123 on 1 July 2004 and this was then revoked by decree no. 9.785 on 7 May 2019. The most recent alteration was decree nº. 9.797 on 21 May 2019.

3 • Mauro Fernando Meister, "Olho por Olho: A lei do Talião no Contexto Bíblico," *Revista Fides Reformata* XII, no. 1 (2007): 58.

4 • Lv 24:19-20.

5 • Mt 5: 38-39; 43-44.

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11 • *Ibid.*

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**SILVIA VIRGINIA SILVA DE SOUZA** – *Brazil*

Silvia Virginia Silva de Souza is a Lawyer and Advocacy Consultant at Conectas Human Rights. She is studying for a postgraduate degree in Human Rights, Diversity and Violence at the Federal University of the ABC (UFABC).

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