

Political violence in Baixada Fluminense: political power and power to kill*

Violência política na Baixada Fluminense:
poder político e poder de matar

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Abstract

This article analyzes violence against political actors in Baixada Fluminense, a region comprising 13 municipalities located in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro. The central hypothesis of this study is that violence, especially lethal violence, constitutes a central instrument for the organization of power relations and delimitation of areas of control and political influence in Baixada Fluminense. A related hypothesis suggests that, based on the victims' profile, political violence in Baixada is exercised within and between political elites connected with armed groups, notably militias.

Keywords: Baixada Fluminense; politics; power to kill; violence; militias.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a violência contra atores políticos na Baixada Fluminense, região que reúne 13 municípios localizados na Região Metropolitana do Rio de Janeiro. A hipótese central considera que a violência, sobretudo a violência letal, constitui instrumento predominante na organização das relações de poder e na delimitação de áreas de controle e influência política na Baixada. Uma hipótese correlata a esta avalia que, a partir do perfil das vítimas, a violência política na Baixada se exerce intra e entre elites políticas articuladas a grupos armados, com destaque para as milícias.

Palavras-chave: Baixada Fluminense; política; violência; poder de matar; milícias.



Introduction

For many decades, Baixada Fluminense, a region that spans across 13 municipalities¹ located in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro, has figured into the social imaginary and in the news reports as a region characterized by strong criminal influences in politics and in the local economies and consequently, by the high incidence of violent crime within its borders. If we take the rates of intentional lethal violence as a parameter, for example, we will find that the region possesses higher indices than those verified in the capital and in the state as a whole (Rodrigues et al., 2022). The largest massacre in the history of Rio de Janeiro occurred, precisely, in Baixada Fluminense.² Evidently, Baixada Fluminense cannot be defined by the violence that is imposed on its territories, which are very unequal in size, density, socio-economic indicators, and social profiles. Nonetheless, given the ways in which violence manifests in the region and penetrates the power relations, it is necessary to observe it with close attention.

Baixada has gone through many economic cycles in its history, which were determinant for the configuration of its municipalities. It was an important route for the drainage of agricultural production from the countryside of the state of Rio de Janeiro at the end of the Empire and at the beginning of the Old Republic (First Brazilian Republic). Later, it became a large hub for the production of sugarcane and citric products. With the decline of the old rural properties and their agricultural production capacity, it was this scenario of a “wave of the land dividing agent” (Alves, 2020) in which the properties were distributed into smaller portions of land and sold. Since the second half of the 20th century, it was consolidated as a sort of area, a

bit rural, a bit urban, in which its municipalities became commuter towns for the proletariat labor force and for the low strata of the service sector employed in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Throughout all of these changes, its territories were redefined, and its population increased exponentially. In contrast, what seemed to be permanent, up to the present day, is the nexus between the constitution of local political powers and the use of violent means.

In the past, the work of killers and extermination groups made personalities appear, who through the updating of the coronelist legacy, which still found resonance after the New State (The Third Republic), had large local prominence, even arriving onto the national political scene. This is Tenório Cavalcanti's case who, also known as the “the man in the black hood”, gained notoriety precisely because of his personal relationships in influential economic and political circles, above all, in Duque de Caxias, and for his violent operations in the land conflicts in the region and against his political adversaries. Tenório was the councilman of Duque de Caxias, later, he became state deputy and federal deputy. He gained national fame for always being accompanied by “Lurdinha”, his machine gun, which he would carry with him even going into public arenas, from the local legislative houses to the National Congress, in a very symbolic summary of the nature of the political power that led him to his public career.

Today, the context of Baixada Fluminense is, obviously, very distinct from that of the time of Tenório Cavalcanti, but the interpenetration between violence and politics that marked its time period continues to be one of the marks of the region. It is exactly this relation that we will explore in this article.

The general objective of this research consists in comprehending, in the studied region, the articulation between the dynamics of violence, mainly, the power to kill and the day-to-day politics. It is a historical problem (Leal, 2012; Alves, 2020) which has become more intense recently (Marielle Franco Institute, 2021). The general hypothesis of the research is that the political violence is related to the conversion of armed power into that of political capital, revealing articulations among the political powers own processes and the operating dynamics of the criminal armed groups in the studied region. Evidence that indicates the plausibility of this hypothesis is the fact that, in the case of Baixada Fluminense, for example, there are large concentrations of cases of political violence in dominated areas by the militias (Rodrigues et al., 2022, p. 32).

We understand political violence as whatever type of aggression or hostility committed against political actors, or in other words, career politicians, activists, movement leaders, members of social movements, and journalists who have relevant roles in local political context and have suffered violence resulting from these roles. In addition to these modalities, however, we consider that it is crucial to contemplate, in our approach, the public diffusion of practices, values, and representations that convey the use of force and intimidation as legitimate elements of political practice. We consider that within these discursive practices reside important support not only for the upsurge of political violence as well as the perennality of the high rates of criminal violence that has characterized the sociability in Brazil since the latter quarter of

the 20th century. The forms of funding of these dynamics are more clearly specified in the section that deals with the methodology that we have utilized.

We understand the concept of political actors in a broad sense and we also identify, within this category, activists from different branches of so-called organized civil society and from different groups and collectives whose central identities find themselves in defense of the rights of vulnerable groups and the preferred victims of violence and deprivation of rights. As we have conceived it, political violence should also be understood as the set of violent acts perpetuated against such actors, that may have been carried out because of their roles. Finally, the involvement of these actors is especially relevant, given our choice of paying special attention to the dynamics of local politics.

In this article, we emphasize political violence as the aggression and hostilities committed against people that exercise activities of political nature, be it in institutional politics, or be it in activism and social movements. It is fundamental, in the meantime, we take into account that state violence is one of the most expressive and recurring forms of political violence (Kleinman and Desjarlais, 1995; Das, 2020; Mbembe, 2018; Besley and Persson, 2011; Bardall, 2015; Butler, 2020). It is crucial, in addition to this, that we understand that state violence is one of the pillars that structures the forms of political violence that we analyze here. The state, meanwhile, is not a detached case from those of the day-to-day relations of personality, proximity, vicinity, nor of familial relationship.

The data which we present here are the results of sources that precariously document the processes by which the political violence modulates power relations that unfold in daily life and construct meaning that structures animosity and disputes. As Ayoub defines in his work on land conflicts in Pinhão, in the state of Paraná, “[...] conflicts engender relations and daily life and they possess a narrative and performative dimension, from the field of public communication, in which the categories used to talk about disputes are also ways of living and doing them” (Ayoub, 2021, p. 3). Those that mobilize like this, the power to kill, as an extreme manifestation of their violent forms of exercising political power, also participate in everyday political life, in close relationships in their means of exercising territorial control. These close relationships are often through the dimension of kinship, such as the construction of “family politics” (Oliveira, 2007) which, at times, are established as true dynasties that dispute local power and seek to establish themselves as hegemonic in this control.

Another lesson that the work of Ayoub (2021) offers us, even though his ethnography is developed in such a distinct context from those that we study, is the centrality of the land conflicts in the construction of the processes of political violence. The agrarian conflicts are the central part of the history of violence in Baixada Fluminense (Silva, 2008; Alves, 2003). The recent news about the hypotheses regarding the motives for the murders of Marielle Franco and Anderson Gomes, for example, refer to the subject of *grilagem de terras*³ in the activities of the militias. When we then study the dynamics of political violence which passes through the cases that we present here, we have determined that the comprehension of the phenomenon

through the rubric of “urban violence”, or “criminal violence” is not the most appropriate. Thus, we work with the conception of political violence which refers to the structural aspects, historically constructed, that penetrate daily life, in the ways of thinking and understanding the social hierarchies, the power relations, and the collective ways of living. The threads of these forms of political violence pass through land disputes, control of territories, armed power which is exercised through a continuity between the operation of the state and the presence of criminal groups, and through the modes of power of local political elite.

Seeking to resume the manner through which armed power and political power are coordinated in the contexts of political violence in Baixada Fluminense, without exhausting its meaning, we can talk about three sources of which the vectors of aggression and hostility emanate. Firstly, there is a structural dimension, relative to the violence from coloniality and from the patriarchy: racism, misogyny and LGBTQIA+phobia. This source organizes just as much the circumstantial and localized processes, as the interjected, subjectivized, subcutaneous modes of political violence. Because it regards a structural phenomenon, the data presented here are connected to the processes that go beyond the borders of Baixada Fluminense and that can find resonance in other contexts of political violence (Ayoub, 2021; Observatório da violência política e eleitoral (Political and Election Violence Watch); Instituto Marielle Franco, 2021).

Secondly, we have violence that takes place from a fertile ground of political hatred socially disseminated and heated through the actions of groups that occupy strategic spaces

of power (Rodrigues e Del Río, 2021). That way, there is the presence of political ideologies whose content is marked by the hatred of alterity and through the cult of violence (Stanley, 2022; Paxton, 2007; Ap-padurai, 2020; Rodrigues, 2022).

Thirdly, there is the centrality of the power to kill as an instrument of territorial management. It refers to, however, the permanence of *mandonismo*⁴ and of homicidal clientelism, as a legacy of the coronelist system (Leal, 2012; Carvalho, 1997; Alves, 2003; Rodrigues et al., 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2021; Fórum Grita Baixada and Centro de Direitos Humanos da Diocese de Nova Iguaçu s./d.). The analysis of this vector shows that, to a large extent, it is the local powers that organize the criminal networks, its connection to the state and its political economy of the violent deaths (Rodrigues et al., 2018). Organized criminality would not be, then, a divergence from established political order but rather one of its dimensions. The cooperation between the extermination groups and the local powers is historical, just as it is a fact that the militia business ventures possess indissociable affiliations with that of political power.

However, these are the components of the concept of political violence that we have assembled and that have worked as an anchor of analysis in the previous work that we have carried out (Rodrigues et al., 2018, Rodrigues et al., 2021, Rodrigues et al., 2022; Rodrigues., 2023). It is important to highlight a perception that, in a certain manner, has also operated as a base for our work and was reinforced through the results we have obtained until now. Far from being a joint component, resulting from a configuration of historically rooted forces, political violence appears to us

to be a structural element of Brazilian politics. It comes from the our republican past and has been re-configured, very consistently, despite all of the institutional changes occurring throughout our last process of redemocratization. Studying political violence is, in a sense, identifying and untangling the strings that make up the authoritarian network that insists on setting the tone of our politics. The choice of local politics as a main focus of analysis opens us up to the possibility of conducting this investigation in a more refined manner.

The central hypothesis with which we work with is that the centrality of the power to kill, in politics, is related to the interpenetrations between local political forces and criminal organizations which possess large bellicose and financial power (Alves, 2020; Beloch, 1986).

Methodology

The data that support our hypothesis were collected from the survey of journalistic news on cases that occurred in the analyzed region. Major and local news web portals, digital archives of the largest circulating newspapers that specifically cover Baixada Fluminense – *O Globo; Extra; Meia Hora; O Dia* – and websites of public institutions, such as city halls, municipal council chambers, the Public Ministry and the Civil Police were used. We also utilized an online instrument for journalistic clipping that monitors and exports reproduced material in journalistic communication outlets in printed and digital formats. Altogether, more than 2 thousand news reports were accessed.

To conduct the searches, specific key-words were utilized, defined by the set of three types of descriptors: 1) those that correspond to the action, this is, the type of violence perpetuated against the victim; 2) those that correspond to the profile of the victim, or in other words, that concern his or her political activities; and 3) those that correspond to the location of the incident. In Chart 1, we have the syntax utilized in the searches.

The results found were systematized into a database where information is aggregated about the victim, his or her political and professional trajectories, the network in which they were inserted, and the dynamics of the aggression by which the victims suffered, divided between the following variables: name of the victim; the victim’s alias; age of the victim; the victim’s gender; color/race of the victim; political position which the victim held (if applicable); if the victim held political office before, which?; political alliances; political work of the victim when he or she died; the year of his or her candidacy (if applicable); city in which the political position was carried

out; region of incident (the occurred violent event); city where the incident took place; neighborhood of the incident; locale of the incident; complete address of the incident; year of the incident; date of the incident; dynamic of the incident; weapon used in the aggression; is there a suspicion of victim’s participation in armed criminal groups?; which armed group could be involved?; the armed group that dominates the location of the incident; sources of information.

We also made dossiers on the victims aiming for the best understanding possible regarding the circumstances in which the violence to which they were subjected occurred. Consequently, apart from the analysis of the cases of violence in themselves, we also investigated the networks of the relationships of the victims, what, in the majority of the cases, ended up revealing the involvement of them with various political, economic, and criminal groups. Given the limits of this paper, it will not be possible to explore all of the material contained in these dossiers, but some of the information contained in them

Chart I – Descriptors utilized in the searches through journalistic news of the cases of political violence

Set I - Action	“gunshot” OR “gunshots” OR “dead man” OR “dead woman” OR “homicide” OR “execution” OR “executed woman” OR “executed man” OR “attack” OR “assassination” OR “assassinated man” OR “assassinated woman” OR “aggression” OR “aggressions” OR “physical aggression” OR “stabbing” OR “punch” OR “kick” OR “frontkick” OR “stalking” OR “kidnapping” OR “threat” OR “extortion” OR “blackmail” OR “defamation” OR “swearing” OR “insult” OR “harm” OR “racism” OR “homophobia” OR “misogyny” OR “machismo (chauvinism)”;
Set II – Profile	“man candidate” OR “female candidate” OR “councilman” OR “councilwoman” OR “male mayor” OR “female mayor” OR “male deputy” OR “female deputy” OR “male senator” OR “female senator” OR “male politician” OR “female politician” OR “administrator” OR “advisor” OR “canvasser” OR “activist” OR “political leader”;
Set III – Location	“Queimados” OR “Japeri” OR “São João de Meriti” OR “Magé” OR “Nova Iguaçu” OR “Nilópolis” OR “Paracambi” OR “Mesquita” OR “Guapimirim” OR “Belford Roxo” OR “Itaguaí” OR “Seropédica” OR “Duque de Caxias”.

will be included in our analysis and will serve as the basis for our general understanding of the political context of Baixada Fluminense.

It is important to highlight that, in our studies, we do not view the political motivation of the analyzed crimes with the same logic as the police investigations. In them, we have perceived, by means of what is informed in our sources, to be recurring that the police investigations rush to discard the political motivations of the crimes as a means of avoiding the pressure from public opinion and from the political powers that, typically, is directed towards these types of aggression. Our underlying criteria are, however, the actual political activities of the victims. Thus, we reject only those aggressions for which our sources may point towards evidence well defined from other motivations.

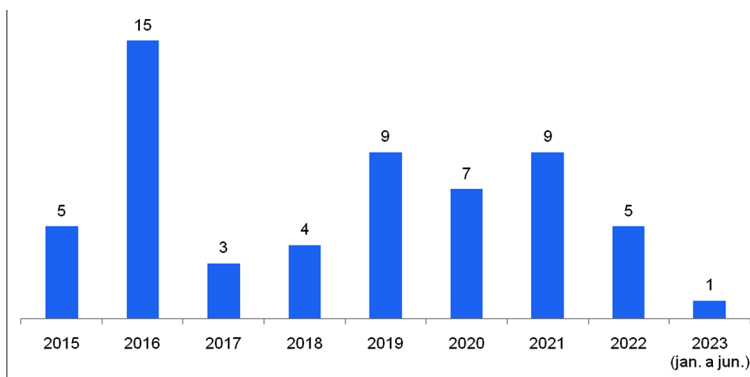
For the cases of execution, our historical series encompasses the period understood between 2015 and June of 2023. For the other cases of political violence, our database has records from 2021 to June of 2023.

Panorama of the cases and the profile of the victims

According to the definition of political violence with which we have worked and with the defined search parameters for the research, in relation to lethal violence, our survey found 53 cases of summary execution, three cases of larceny⁵ and two cases in which there was a kidnapping followed by an execution. We believe that it is important to not discard larceny cases because given the dynamics of local political violence, it is recurrent that the authors of the practices of execution seek to forge robbery scenes followed by death as a way of throwing off the investigations and hiding their political motivations.

Thus, we have a total of 58 assassinations of political actors between 2015 and June of 2023, all of them occurred in Baixada Fluminense. This means that, on average, every 53 days, approximately one political actor was assassinated in the region.

Graph 1 – Historical series of political executions in Baixada Fluminense between 2015 and Jun 2023



Source: own survey from the research.

As we can see, the year of 2016 – an election year for the municipality – is that in which the highest number of assassinations is registered of political actors (15) in the period of time studied. For the next year, a certain oscillation is observed, having a drastic reduction in the quantity of deaths in 2017 but with an increasing quantity of cases beginning in 2018 and maintaining this elevated quantity from 2019 to 2021. Therefore, in the second electoral cycle of the series, in the place of a peak in the election year, we have an increase in cases in the previous year, having even more cases in the following year of the elections – in the first year of the municipal political terms –, which is only changed throughout the year 2022 and in the first semester of 2023. Continuing to monitor the cases of political executions in Baixada Fluminense, it will be possible to observe if the years of municipal

elections have any influence on the oscillation of the impact of this type of violence, in the event that the deaths rise again in the second semester of 2023 and throughout 2024.

In that which is referred to as the non-lethal forms of political violence, according to the records from our database, what we see for these types of violence only events occurred between January 2021 to June 2023; we have a total of 38 cases: 14 cases occurred in 2021; 14 cases occurred in 2022; and six cases occurred in the first half of 2023. Adding up all of the assassinations to the other forms of political violence, we arrive at a total of 92 cases of violence against political actors that occurred in Baixada Fluminense between January 2015 and June 2013, which is to say that every 33 days we have one victim for every incident of political violence.

Table 1 – Non-lethal violence against political actors in Baixada Fluminense between Jan 2015 and June 2023

Year	Types of violence	Number of cases
2021	Attack on human life	6
	Threat	4
	Attack	1
	Depredation of political space	1
	gunshot injury	1
	Invasion of political space	1
	Subtotal 2021	14
2022	Attack on human life	6
	Threat	4
	Attack on the campaign trail	2
	Physical aggression	2
Subtotal 2022	14	
2023	Physical Aggression	3
	Attack on human life	2
	Depredation of political space	1
Subtotal 2023 (until June)	6	
Total		34

Source: own survey from the research.

In relation to the profiles of the victims, from the onset, we can say that there is a very evident pattern: they are, majority, white men of middle age. This profile differs greatly from that which was encountered, historically, in the preferred victims of intentional lethal violence in general all throughout Brazil, black youth. One of the factors that helps us explain the high incidence of cases of political violence among white men, certainly, is the low access that woman and black people have to institutional politics in Baixada Fluminense. According to the data that we have collected from the

Superior Electoral Court (TSE), only 27% of all of the candidates for councilman in the region, between 2004 and 2020, were women. In the last five municipal elections (2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020), only 54 women were elected adding up all of the municipalities of Baixada Fluminense, a number that corresponds to only 7% of all of the elected politicians. In regard to black people, unfortunately, the data from TSE does not allow us precise verification, since for the majority of the candidates, there is no information in regards to color and race.

Table 2 – Sex of the victims of cases of political violence occurring in Baixada Fluminense between Jan 2015 and June 2023

Sex	Number of victims
Men	77
Women	14
N/A (not applicable)	1*
Total	92

Source: own survey from the research

* The only case in which it was not possible to fill out the variable for sex was of one political space that was invaded.

Tabela 3 – Cor/raça das vítimas de casos de violência política ocorridos na Baixada Fluminense entre Jan 2015 e June 2023

Color/race	Number of victims
White	51
Black	27
No Information	13
N/A (not applicable)	1*
Total	92

Source: own survey from the research

*The only case in which it was not possible to fill out the variable color/race was of a political space that was invaded.

Table 4 – Age range of the victims of cases of political violence occurring in Baixada Fluminense between Jan 2015 and June 2023

Age range	Number of victims
20-29	6
30-39	18
40-49	26
50-59	19
60-69	2
70-79	1
No information	17
N/A	3*
Total	92

Source: own survey from the research

*The three cases in which it was not possible to fill out the variable age and, therefore, make the variable age range were a case of invasion of political space and two cases of depredation of political space.

When we return our focus on the political parties to which the victims were affiliated, we perceive that no other legend specifically was predominant. Of the 92 cases in our database, for the 40 in which we were not able to obtain data on the political part of the victim or if he or she was affiliated with some legend or there wasn't this sort of information. There were cases, also, in which the variable is not applicable, such as in the cases of violence against groups of people or political spaces. Therefore, we find that the distribution is pulverized among various parties. In the mean-time, there is a greater quantity of victims with links to parties that can be identified as belonging to the political spectrum that goes from the right-of-center to the right.⁶ In a certain manner, this reflects a hegemony of political parties of this area in

Baixada Fluminense. According to data from TSE that we systematized, political parties from the left or left-of-center only 180 (24%) were elected of the 764 councilmen elected in the region in the last four elections.

In what is refers to the political activities of the victims, the majority of the aggressions are connected to the position of councilman, having fallen victim: 14 candidates for councilman; 13 councilman in office; six advisors of the councilmen; five substitute councilmen; four ex-candidates for councilman; three ex-councilmen; one canvasser for a councilman, and one family member of a candidate for councilman, adding up to more than half (47) of all of the cases found (92). It is worth noting that, at least, one ex-councilman, one substitute councilman, and one candidate were also community leaders.

Table 5 – Political parties of the victims of the cases of political violence occurring in Baixada Fluminense between Jan 2015 through June 2023

Political party	Number of victims
MDB	6
PSDB	4
AVANTE	3
DEM	3
PTC	3
PCdoB	2
PDT	2
PL	2
PP	2
PROS	2
PSB	2
PSL	2
Solidariedade (Solidarity)	2
PHS	1
PMB	1
PMN	1
PRB	1
PRTB	1
PT do B	1
PTB	1
PV	1
REDE	1
Republicanos (Republicans)	1
SD	1
UNIÃO	1
no political party affiliation	1
Total number of valid cases	48

Source: own survey from the research.

The political positions connected to the municipal secretaries also had a relevant number of victims: five ex-secretaries, three secretaries in office, one undersecretary, and one executive secretary were targets of aggression.

One case that case arouse strangeness and doubts about the classification utilized to differentiate between the political activities of the victims is that which we classify as “blogger and administrator of news websites”. This type of figure, however, has become more and more common in the political scene in more

recent years, not only in Baixada Fluminense, but also in many regions of the state and of the country. This figure is someone who, not necessarily, has some political affiliation; also, who is not exactly a journalist by academic qualification, but that, from the administration of a page, channel, or news website can have some type of influence on the local political context, on occasion, through the presentation of complaints or unfavorable news about politics from the region. These figures, often times, leave these virtual platforms in order to

build political careers, with a focus that their posts elevate them to positions in which they can obtain some political capital. As we have pointed out in our publications (Rodrigues et al., 2021; Rodrigues et al. 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2023), the access to political capital also can mean the exposure to the risk of being a target of political violence employed in local disputes

of power. This was the case of the blogger in question, whose car was shot with firearm bullets in an attack.

Just as much as the professional occupations of the victims, besides journalistic material, we also consulted TSE's database, as much as the realization in which the news did not offer such information, since a large

Table 6 – Political Role of the victims in cases of political violence occurring in Baixada Fluminense between Jan 2015 and June 2023

Types of political involvement	Number of victims
Candidate for councilmen	14
Councilmen	13
Parlament Advisor	8
Ex-Municipal Secretary	5
Substitute Councilman	5
Ex-candidate for councilman	4
Campaign Trail	3
Candidate for State deputy	3
Ex-councilman	3
Municipal Secretary	3
Union Member/Union	3
Indirect Victim with no political role	3
Political Space	3
Municipal Public Manager	2
Political Supporter	2
Candidate for Federal Deputy	2
State Deputy	2
Mayor	2
Security	2
Political Activist	1
Blogger and Administrator of news sites	1
Body Guard	1
Ex-candidate for Federal Deputy	1
Ex-candidate for mayor	1
Ex-mayor	1
Family member of the candidate for councilman	1
Prosecutor of the Municipal Chamber	1
Municipal Undersecretary	1
Municipal Executive Secretary	1
Total	92

Source: own survey from the research.

part of the aggressions happened to people that held elected positions or have held them at some moment. In Table 6, we have all of the occupations that resulted in our selective database, with the indicator of the quantity of victims. In Table 7, we grouped, in four categories, the occupations with the highest frequency among the victims and whose roles are equal or at least very similar. The information found revealed that most

of violence happened to political actors who were, or are, politicians that had political terms underway, many civil servants – such as administrators, parliamentary advisors – and, mainly, merchants, business owners, security officers and ex-security officers. It is important to note that at least three victims were security officers – among them, two were suspects of being a part of militia groups, and one was assassinated while working.⁷

Table 7 – Occupation of the victims of the cases of political violence occurring in Baixada Fluminense between Jan 2015 and June 2023

Occupation	Number of victims
No information	25
Merchant	10
Military Police	8
Business owner	7
Other	4
Deputy	3
Not applicable	3
Professor	3
Security guard	3
Parliamentary advisor	2
Doctor	2
Reformed Military Police	2
Councilman	2
Ex-Military Police	2
Public Administrator	2
Administrator	1
Administrative agent	1
Traffic agent	1
Blogger	1
Shopkeeper	1
School Principal	1
Student	1
Ex-civil Police	1
Government employee	2
Firearms instructor	1
Journalist	1
Metal structure assembler	1
City Council Prosecutor	1
Total	92

Source: own survey from the research.

Table 8 – Professional occupation groups of the victims of cases of political violence occurring in Baixada Fluminense between Jan 2015 and June 2023

Occupation	Number of victims
Business person (merchants and local business owners)	17
Police and ex-police (military and civil)	13
Civil servants (administrators, assessors, and career civil servants)	8
Politicians in office (deputies and councilmen)	5
Other occupations	49
Total	92

Source: own survey from the research.

Table 9 – Professional occupation groups of the victims of cases of political violence occurring in Baixada Fluminense between Jan 2015 and June 2023

Large occupation group	Number of assassination victims	Number of victims of attacks against human life
Police and ex-police	9	3
Business owners	14	2
Government Employee	5	1
Politicians	2	2
Total	30	8

Source: own survey from the research.

Politicians in office, civil servants, business owners, police, and ex-police not only were the most prevalent victims of aggression in general, in terms of their political activities, as they were also the most likely victims of assassinations and attacks against human life. More than half of the cases of violence that resulted in death and those that had the intention to kill were those happening to political actors with these occupations, emphasizing, again, for those that comprise the group “business owner” and for those who belong and belonged to the police forces.

As explained above, the data allows us to infer that there is a correlation between most of the profiles of the victims and the main profile of the political elite who have had offices in the chambers and city halls of Baixada Fluminense: men, white, older than 40 years old, with large help from the local business community, mainly merchants (Rodrigues et al., 2021). In addition to this, the high number of police, ex-police, and even private security victimized by the political violence also have a certain correlation with the expressive quantity of candidacies coming from the domain of

security in Baixada Fluminense. As we have demonstrated in previous studies (*ibid.*), just like in the relations to the participation in pleas as much in what refers to its electoral success, candidates coming from careers in security (Military Firemen; reformed military officers; military and civil po-lice; and security guards) are over-represented in Baixada Fluminense in comparison to other areas of the state. In this way, we can affirm that the profile of the victims of the police violence in Baixada Fluminense, above all in relation to the assassinations, suggests a violence that is exercised intra and inter political elite and is apart of the processes of power disputes.

Armed power is centralized in this dispute. Firearms were the main instrument utilized by the aggressors on the victims in the cases that we mapped, demonstrating the prevalence of armed power and the manifestation of the power to kill as a modulator for the practice of political violence in Baixada Fluminense. Gunshots from firearms were utilized not only in assassinations and attacks against life, but also in the cases of attacks on the campaign trail, for example. It should also be noted that, in the cases of threats made on online social networks and letters, death threats are also pre-sent, which could involve the use of firearms, given the characteristics of political violence in the region.

Table 10 – Means employed in the cases of political violence occurring in Baixada Fluminense between Jan 2015 through June 2023

Means employed in the aggression	Number of cases
Firearm	75
Physical Aggression	7
Cell phone messages	3
Social Media	2
Verbal	2
letter	1
White paint	1
No information	1
Total	92

Source: own survey from the research.

Violence, politics, and territory

A Fundamental aspect in the way in which violence and politics are connected in Baixada Fluminense is territorial. As the research on the region with this issue indicates (Beloch, 1986; Alves, 2020; Albuquerque, 2020; Paz, 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2018, Rodrigues., 2021, Rodrigues et al., 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2023), be it in the activities of groups that exercise the power to kill and seek to convert it into political and economic capital, be it in the movement of groups that have economic and political capital and hire or align themselves with those who have the power to kill, the control over the territories is essential for the stabilization and/or the expansion of its political and economic domains. Among the cases in which we have access, we have many narratives in which disputes are connected to political power (main around the office of councilman) and the activities of armed groups that operate in the illegal market, with an emphasis on the militia.

Given the large amount of police victims of political violence in Baixada Fluminense, the centrality of armed power and the general

knowledge that police officers are involved in the setups of illegalities with armed groups that operate in the territories of the region, we tried to identify, in our databases, each time that a police officer had been involved in one of the cases that we encountered, between 2015 and 2023, and the context of such involvement. According to the database, 38 police officers had been involved, in some form, in the incidents of political violence, be it as a victim, as an aggressor, or as part of the political relations of the victims. Altogether, police officers were victims; eight were identified as aggressors; and 16 others were identified as having some type of political relationship with some of the victims. Table 11 shows the police officers involved in the incidents of political violence in a segmented manner.

With a nominal record of these agents in our databases, we could deepen of analysis and at least, investigate their trajectories, so that it was possible to also identify a series of reports associated with them. Most of them are accused of involvement with militia groups. The police and ex-military police officers are those who had the most connected to these groups.

Table 11 – Police officers that appear in the incidents of political violence occurring between Jan 2015 and June 2023

Type of officer	Number of officers
Military police officer	30
Ex-Military police officer	6
Civil police officer	1
Ex-Civil police officer	1
Federal police officer	1
Total	39

Source: own survey from the research.

Almost half of these police officers worked in the two municipalities which, not by mere co-occurrence, they were those with the highest number of incidents of political violence: Duque de Caxias and Nova Iguaçu, which had, respectively, nine and eight police officers involved in the cases of the sort. In the period in which we analyzed, all of the municipalities of the region had, at least, an incident occurring

within its borders. The municipalities with the largest number of cases, with ample advantage were, as we affirmed: Duque de Caxias, with 21 cases; Nova Iguaçu, with 16 cases. These were also the cities with the highest number of recorded executions in our study. Only the cities of Guapimirim and Mesquita did not have assassinations on political actors in the analyzed period within their borders.

Table 12 – Police officers accused of involvement with militia groups which appear in incidents of political violence occurring in Baixada Fluminense Jan 2015 through June 2023

Type of officer	Militia	No Information	Total
Military police officer	18	12	30
Ex-Military police officer	5	1	6
Civil police	0	1	1
Ex-Civil police officer	1	0	1
Federal police officer	0	1	1
Total	24	15	39

Source: own survey from the research.

Table 13 – Types of political violence by municipality (Jan 2015 through June 2023)

Municipality of the incident	Type of political violence											Total
	Execution	Attack against human life	Larceny	Kidnapping and execution	Threat	Physical aggression	Attack	Gunshot injur	Attack on the campaign trail	Invasion of political space	Deprivation of political space	
Duque de Caxias	10	6	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	1	21
Nova Iguaçu	11	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	16
Magé	7	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	10
Nilópolis	5	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	9
Belford Roxo	1	0	0	1	3	2	0	0	2	–	0	9
Seropédica	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
S. J. de Meriti	4	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
Itaguaí	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Queimados	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Japeri	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Guapimirim	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Mesquita	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Paracambi	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	53	14	3	2	8	5	1	1	2	1	2	92

Source: own survey from the research.

Important data, that deserves being emphasized, is the fact that in relation to the totality of the incidences analyzed, in only six occasions did the victim suffer aggression in another city – which is that where the victim works. All of these cases were incidents of execution, there was only one incident in which the victim was kidnapped in the city where he worked and resided and was brought to a neighboring municipality.

Looking at an even closer level of analysis, we seek, in our research, to also verify if the cases of political violence encountered in our survey had occurred in areas (favelas, neighborhoods, and districts) where there is an overt presence or influence of armed groups and what is the nature of such groups – whether militiamen or criminal factions, that deal, predominantly, in drug trafficking. This search was made from the journalistic material itself which we accessed about the cases and the other news by means of which it may have been possible to verify if, when a certain incident of political violence occurred, the region of the incident had under its control or influence of some armed group and which armed group would this one be. They also served as a source of interviews held throughout the cycles of research developed with *Observatório de Favelas* (Favela Watch). Additionally, for the purpose of checking, we go back to the Historical Map of the Armed Groups for the occurred incidents between 2018 and 2021, the last three-year period analyzed by the researchs from the New Illegalities Study Group and by *Fogo Cruzado* (Crossfire).⁸ All of the sources were challenged and, in the existence of divergence – which happened in only three cases occurring between 2016 and 2017 –, we opted to favor the journalistic sources.

With the exception of the events occurring in the online world and the incidents that had outcomes in official political spaces – for which we utilize the classification “not applicable” (N/A) –, in addition to those for which we were not able to precisely determine the location of the occurrence or whether the area in question was controlled by some criminal group – classified as “not identified” (N/I) –, we had a total of 52 cases in which we could identify the nature of the armed group that controls or exercises influence on the region of the event of political violence.

In Table 14, we can observe that most of the incidents of political violence in Baixada Fluminense were registered in territories controlled by the militias. Of the total number of cases encountered, more than a third (34) occurred in areas in which militiamen operate, while 144 occurred in areas whose control belong to criminal factions, and four cases followed one after the other in areas in which there is a simultaneous presence of militia groups and criminal faction groups.

In a manner of qualifying the data found even more, analyzing the reports offered by journalistic news on the cases, we also seek to identify whether there were suspects on the part of the police in the responsibility or the participation of the armed groups in the recorded incidents of political violence in our database. The Tables 15 and 16 show the results of the intersection made among the variables that concern the types of political violence, the information on which type of armed groups would be involved in the aggression, and which armed group exercises control or influence in the region of the incident of political violence.

Table 14 – Types of political violence occurring in controlled areas by armed criminal groups in Baixada Fluminense between Jan 2015 and June 2023

Type of violence	Types of armed violence				
	Militia	Faction	Militia and Faction	NA*	NI*
Execution	26	7	0	0	20
Larceny	1	0	0	0	2
Kidnapping and Execution	0	2	0	0	0
Attack against human life	6	4	0	0	4
Threat	0	0	0	8	0
Attack	1	0	0	0	0
Physical Aggression	0	0	2	0	3
Attack on the Campaign Trail	0	0	2	0	0
Depredation of political space	0	1	0	0	1
Invasion of political space	0	0	0	0	1
Gunshot wound	0	0	0	0	1
Subtotal	34	14	4	8	32
Total			92		

Source: own survey from the research.

*N/A – Not Applicable

*N/I – Not Identified

Table 15 – Types of violence versus armed groups suspected of involvement in the attacks

Types of violence	Armed group suspected of involvement			
	Militia	Faction	No Information	NA
Execution	23	5	25	0
Larceny	1	0	2	0
Kidnapping and execution	0	2	0	0
Attack against human life	1	4	9	0
Threat	0	1	5	2
Attack	0	0	1	0
Physical aggression	0	0	2	3
Attack on the campaign trail	0	0	2	0
Depredation of political space	0	0	1	1
Invasion of political space	0	0	1	0
Gunshot wound	0	0	1	0
Subtotal	25	12	49	6
Total			92	

Source: own survey from the research.

Table 16 – Armed group suspected of involvement *versus* armed group that controls or influences the region

Armed group suspected of involvement	Group that controls or has influence in the region				
	Militia	Faction	Militia and drug traffickers	Not identified	NA
Militia	21	0	0	4	0
Faction	0	11	0	0	1
No Information	13	3	4	24	5
N/A	0	0	0	4	2
Subtotal	34	14	4	32	8
Total			92		

Source: own survey from the research.

Historically, in the grammar of power that is conjugated in Baixada Fluminense, a logic reigns that is founded on the instrumentalization of violence. From the barons and colonels to the militia bosses and “bosses of the area”, arriving at the extermination groups, violence serves as a source of consolidating political power, accumulation of economic capital and territorial control. In the last decade and a half, at least, important changes have been developing in the standards of criminality in the region and, as a consequence, in the way violence has been exercised in it. In this period, many criminal groups emerged, they amplified their activities or migrated to their municipalities. Among them, the largest and most organized militia of the state, that expanded its operation, before restricted to the capital of the state, for Baixada Fluminense, in a fundamental move to understand local geo-politics. Advancing, firstly, through the occupation of cities and strategic bus stations connected to their original stronghold, located in the west zone of Rio de Janeiro, progressively, the group arrived in the main cities of Baixada Fluminense and added

to their criminal ventures: stealing of crude petroleum, earthmoving services, and the extraction and selling of sand, infiltrating the sector of civil construction and local politics. As expected, this migration towards Baixada Fluminense opened doors for alliances with different local criminal groups, but also resulted in conflicts by zones of dominion and influence.

This situation here that has emerged has amplified new arrangements and tensions that, at the same time, reflect and mold the political dynamics of Baixada Fluminense. Currently, the strong presence of, at least, three large militia groups is observed, which control distinct neighborhoods and locations in many cities, establishing connections and offering support to different political groups, many times, competing amongst each other. Together with the volatility of the relations and political alliances in the region, the advance and competition among these groups have resulted in a reorganization of the criminal networks and of the political interests, having a direct impact on the intensification of political violence.

The data that we have systematized and analyzed indicate that violence, above all, through the power to kill, organizes the relations of local power and have great influence, on many layers, in institutional power. Violence is, however, an expression of the exercise of local power. In this exercise, the rationality of the businesses operated by the criminal networks in Baixada, is carried out with intense coordination with the processes of building political markets and with tensions, interests, disputes, conflicts, and negotiations that characterize the operation of local political and economic elites. Politicians, businessmen, and armed groups, especially the militias, are associated with “schemes” for the political and economic exploitation of territories and political assets aiming at a particular appropriation (Rodrigues et al., 2021). In this manner, the dynamics of violence that victimizes political actors in Baixada Fluminense, particularly its political elites, they can be interpreted as an important indicator of the existence of a real political economy of death. Those whose arms are directed towards politicians, in the context of disputes of power, also, probably, they utilize the power to kill daily to build local power, in a chain that connects politics and criminal businesses.

Conclusion

Armed violence is the reoccurring element in the daily political life in the context studied, mainly in what is referred to as Baixada Fluminense. The monitoring of the incidents of political violence saw a considerable deceleration in the number of incidents, mainly

in 2023. In this historical series, meanwhile, it suggests that there is a downward trend in the periods between the election process and others. Our study demonstrates, however, that it is necessary that we pay attention to the closeness of the municipal elections of 2024, when the networks of power usually establish their alliances and intensify their conflicts.

Our data that we analyzed throughout this article shows, consistently, just as much the contingency of political violence in the context of Baixada Fluminense as much as its penetration in the day-to-day power relations. The framework that results from our analysis suggests that there is a broadening of the reach of authoritarian norms of power based on the resurgence of political violence, mainly of hostilities and aggression based on the power to kill. These arrangements of violent power are historically installed in the studied region and seem to be gaining force. There is, in addition to this, fertile political terrain for the expansion of political language based on hate speech of alterity, the power of weapons, and in the desire to annihilate the other. The perspectives of consolidating democratic parameters of political power and institutional power seem to have lost in the last rounds to the advancement of violence, especially of the power to kill as an instrument of power.

The arrangement that blurs the lines between legal and illegal, in an overview in which police and illegal armed groups figure into the landscape of violence analyzed here, describes the framework in which the power to kill is, constantly, converted into economic capital and political capital. The scenes that we analyze describe disputes for power whose competitors, frequently, exercise their prerogatives from the access and the availability

of the power to kill. There is, in Baixada Fluminense, a history of political careers built, with its foundation, on this power, authorizing new local bosses and reproducing the power of the real political dynasties that build, with the use of the bullet, their hegemonies.

The data that we present express the centrality of the power to kill, in daily politics, and up-dates the meanings of other studies that have been denouncing, analyzing, and formulating critical tools in order to understand violence in Baixada Fluminense (Alves, 2020; Albuquerque, 2020; Belock, 1986; Silva, 2008; Fórum Grita Baixada (Scream Baixada Forum) and Centro de Direitos Humanos da Diocese de Nova Iguaçu (Center for Human Rights of the Diocese of Nova Iguaçu) s./d.). These results also point to an interpretation of these arrangements of political violence coordinated by structural and historical processes (Leal, 2012; Carvalho, 1997). They also facilitate the dialogue with other contexts

of political violence and the modes of locations of power that surpass the limits of Baixada (Ayoub, 2021; Observatório da Violência Política e Eleitoral (Political and Election Violence Watch), 2022; Instituto Marielle Franco (Marielle Franco Institute), 2021).

We consider, lastly, that political violence in the region and the centrality of the power to kill in the dynamics of politics are important aspects for the comprehension of the logic that organizes the illegal markets and the structured operated by the local homicidal networks. The intimate relationship between political power and armed power describes a scene in which violent homicide has a structural character, representing a phenomenon of order, and not that of disruption. Thus, it deals with a violent order, with strong traces of political authoritarianism that fully operates the democratic institutionality of local power in Baixada Fluminense.

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Notes

- (*) This paper is the result of research that has been developed since 2021 from a partnership between Observatório de Favelas, the Laboratório de Estudos sobre Política and Violência from the Federal Fluminense University (Lepov-UFF), the Laboratório de Análises da Violência from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (LAV-UERJ), and Witwatersrand University (WITs). They participated in the research, just as much in the activities of data collection as much as in the analyses presented here, a set of researchers to whom credit should also be given on the material presented here: Raquel Willadino, Elizabete Albernaz, Thais Gomes, João Trajano Sento-Sé, Andrés Del Rio, Daniel Octaviano, Isabele dos Anjos, José Mauro Pompeu, Paloma Oliveira, Junya Vicente Ferreira, and Laís Almeida.
- (1) Queimados, Japeri São João de Meriti, Magé, Nova Iguaçu, Nilópolis, Paracambi, Mesquita, Guapimirim, Belford Roxo, Itaguaí, Seropédica, and Duque de Caxias.
- (2) In 2005, military police assassinated 29 people in the municipalities off Nova Iguaçu and Queimados, an episode that became known as “*Chacina da Baixada*” – (Baixada Massacre).
- (3) A practice of falsifying documents in order to acquire land.
- (4) Mandonismo is a Brazilian term used in sociology and political science to describe a ruler of sorts, boss, or colonel who controls strategic resources and from the control of these strategic resources this individual impedes certain political and economic freedoms of the populations that needs those resources.
- (5) However, by definition, cases of larceny may have, as a main motive, material goods as their interest, in the specific cases that we have added to our base, even if the police have discarded the political motives of the crimes. For this reason, we consider it important to include these cases in our survey to avoid an underestimated framework.
- (6) Here we utilize the classification developed by Bolognesi, Ribeiro and Codato (2023).
- (7) This was the case of candidate for councilman in Duque de Caxias, assassinated by gunshots in the supermarket in which he worked (Nunes, 2020).
- (8) Available on <https://geni.uff.br/2022/09/13/mapa-historico-dos-grupos-armados-no-rio-de-janeiro/> accessed on: Nov 22 2023.

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