

I Was Assaulted Live On Air. This Is Brazil in the Hands of Bolsonaro

The president's political movement regards journalists as obstacles and prefers intimidation and violence to civic discourse.

By Glenn Greenwald

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RIO DE JANEIRO — On Nov. 7, I was physically assaulted by a far-right, pro-Bolsonaro pundit, Augusto Nunes, at a television and radio studio in São Paulo [while we were live on the air](#).

This is the latest, and perhaps most vivid, example of journalists and news organizations in Brazil [being threatened](#), menaced and subjected to actual violence by the Bolsonaro movement, all for doing our jobs.

The episode illustrates how press freedoms and the democratic order in Brazil are endangered — not just with words, but violence — by this authoritarian movement that now wields power in the world's fifth-most-populous country.

Mr. Nunes had once been a prominent mainstream journalist as the editor in chief of the country's largest newsweekly, *Veja*. Seven weeks before he assaulted me, he responded on his radio program to a [series of journalistic exposés](#) I have published in *The Intercept* revealing corruption at the highest levels of the government of President Jair Bolsonaro.

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Seemingly out of nowhere, he called on a family court judge to investigate whether I and my husband, David Miranda, a congressman for the Socialism and Liberty Party, are taking proper care of our two adopted children. A judge should investigate, he argued, since we both work.

But that attack on our family did not come out of nowhere. President Bolsonaro has long featured anti-L.G.B.T. animus as a central weapon in his political arsenal and has repeatedly [used anti-gay attacks](#) against me. He and his allies have attacked other journalists and activists who oppose him.

During the last six months of *The Intercept's* reporting on Mr. Bolsonaro's government, the right-wing leader not only repeatedly and publicly [threatened me with prison](#), but also explicitly accused me and my husband of having a sham marriage, and of having adopted Brazilian children as a fraud, in order — [he claimed](#) — to enable me to avoid being deported. With that ugly history from the president himself, Mr. Nunes's attack as retaliation for the journalism I've been doing made complete sense.

On the program in which I appeared with Mr. Nunes, I told him on the air that his was an act of cowardice, because he'd never call for a similar investigation for the millions of heterosexual couples with children who both work, including his own bosses and colleagues. He then physically attacked me, and the [video of the attack quickly went viral](#) on social media within Brazil and outside of it. I was not hurt, but the reaction in Brazil to that incident speaks volumes about the imperiled state of press freedoms and democracy here.

While mainstream journalists and political officials from across the ideological spectrum denounced Mr. Nunes's attack, the leading figures of the Bolsonaro movement, including the president's two politician sons and his "guru," Olavo de Carvalho, explicitly [cheered it](#). That the violence against me should be worse the next time — not a slap but a closed-fist punch or worse — was a common theme.

The Bolsonaro movement, like most authoritarian factions, favors intimidation and violence over civic discourse — against their adversaries in general, but especially against journalists they regard as obstacles. Predictably, the climate for journalists since the 2018 presidential election has become [far more dangerous](#) than before.

Other journalists have suffered similar attacks. Patrícia Campos Mello, a journalist from the nation's largest newspaper, broke a [major story](#) during the 2018 campaign about illegal, unreported financing by Mr. Bolsonaro's rich supporters through WhatsApp messaging campaigns. She then spent months being [targeted](#) with credible threats of violence, along with a highly organized and well-financed fake news network spreading horrific lies about her.

In July, one of the nation's most famous and influential journalists, Globo's Miriam Leitão, was [forced to cancel](#) a public appearance after being deluged with threats following the president's attacks on her.

That same month, I was invited to speak about our journalistic exposés at a famous literary event in the town of Paraty that typically draws international authors and journalists. Event organizers were so concerned about the number of threats of violence aimed at me that they required me to arrive by a small boat rather than by land.

As we arrived, we had fireworks shot at us horizontally by Mr. Bolsonaro's supporters. Throughout [my speech](#), they continued to shoot fireworks at us, one of which landed in the crowd of 3,000 people and lit a flag on fire. Mr. Bolsonaro's supporters, including Congress members from his party, celebrated that aggression.

After a [Globo investigation](#) last month revealed the Bolsonaro family's links to the 2018 assassination of City Councilwoman Marielle Franco, the president [made good](#) on his pledge to cut off public funds to Globo. He's long threatened to do the same to the newspaper Folha, and even promised in the last speech he gave before being elected president that he would usher in a Brazil "[without Folha of São Paulo](#)."

When I was called to [testify](#) before the Congress in July about The Intercept's reporting, numerous members of Mr. Bolsonaro's party demanded that I be arrested before I left the building. Since we began reporting on The Intercept's explosive Brazil archive, neither I nor my husband has left our house once without a team of armed security guards and an armored vehicle.

Before his 2018 victory, Mr. Bolsonaro spent nearly three decades as a congressman on the fringes of political life because of his overt [support for the brutal military dictatorship](#) that ruled the country until 1985.

Recently, his congressman son, Eduardo Bolsonaro, and Mr. de Carvalho explicitly threatened a [return of dictatorship-era decrees](#) in the event that civic disorder necessitates repression — a state of affairs they clearly are eager to provoke so that their real, often explicit goal, the reinstatement of tyranny, can be realized.

That is why they want intimidation and violence in lieu of politics and journalism. They need that as the pretext for ushering in the repression they crave.

Fortunately, [Brazil's Constitution guarantees press freedoms](#) that are even more robust and specific than those guaranteed by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. As long as there is a free press, we are able to not just reveal corruption and wrongdoing by the nation's most powerful actors, but also to ensure that history is not rewritten, that the horrors of Brazil's [two decades of military regime](#) are not whitewashed or forgotten.

That's precisely why members of the Bolsonaro movement target us: They know that transparency and free discourse are the primary obstacles to returning Brazil back to its darkest days. The more they show their true face, the more resistance they have encountered. The job of journalists, the purpose of a free press, is to ensure that this truth remains clear.

Glenn Greenwald is a journalist based in Brazil and the author of several books, including "No Place to Hide." He is a co-founding editor of The Intercept and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his reports on global surveillance programs.

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