

Associativism “under siege”: violence and collective action in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas

Associativismo “sob cerco”: violência e ação coletiva em favelas do Rio de Janeiro

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Abstract

The article examines residents’ associational practices in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas in contexts of armed territorial control. Based on ethnographic research conducted in six different territories, we initially hypothesized that armed confrontations reveal “siege” dynamics, initially characterized as a “siege through terror” (in contested areas) and a “panoptic siege” (in areas under consolidated control). However, the observation of associational practices revealed greater variation, leading us to propose four forms of relations between community organizations and armed groups: partnership, tolerance, constraint, and parasitism. Engaging with debates on legitimacy and locally imposed regimes of order, we conclude that these typologies point to emerging trends in political violence, particularly the increasing extortion of residents and their community organizations.

Keywords: political violence; armed territorial control; associativism; favelas; siege.

Resumo

O artigo analisa o associativismo de moradores de favelas no Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, sob contextos de controle armado. A partir de etnografias realizadas em seis territórios, partimos da hipótese de que os confrontos revelam dinâmicas de “cerco”, inicialmente caracterizadas como cerco pelo terror (em áreas em disputa) e cerco panóptico (em áreas de controle consolidado). Contudo, a observação das práticas associativas evidenciou maior variação, resultando na proposição de quatro formas de relação entre organizações comunitárias e grupos armados: parceria, tolerância, cerceamento e parasitismo. Dialogando com debates sobre legitimidade e regimes locais de ordem, concluímos que essas tipologias expressam novas tendências de violência política, especialmente no que se refere à crescente extorsão de moradores e de suas organizações.

Palavras-chave: violência política; controle territorial armado; associativismo; favelas; cerco.



Introduction

Historically, favela residents have lived under the “siege” (Machado da Silva, 2008) of armed state and non-state powers, which relate to this population through different forms of control and tutelage. This siege shapes:

[...] an experience of socio-territorial and political confinement that causes intense concern among favela residents regarding violent incidents that disrupt their daily routines and hinder the public expression of their demands. (Machado da Silva e Menezes, 2020)

Within this dynamic, local organizations faced various forms of persecution, silencing, and criminalization, yet they also resisted and fought for improvements and for the continued existence of their communities. In the present day, however, new dynamics of armed territorial control, articulated in different ways with the State and the sphere of institutional politics, have given rise to new modalities of siege. These, in turn, shape the possibilities for collective action in the favelas, entailing not only new obstacles but also new forms of resistance. It is precisely these challenges that we examine in this text.

This article presents the results of a collective study conducted in 2022 regarding the precarious living conditions of residents in areas dominated by drug trafficking factions and militia groups. In it, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork in six territories within the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, selected based on a typology: 1) territories consolidated under the control of a specific type of armed group (faction or militia) without confrontations; 2) territories consolidated under the control of a specific type of armed group (faction or militia) involving clashes; and 3) territories “in dispute”.¹ The

initial typology reflected our working hypothesis that, given the current state of criminal dynamics in Rio de Janeiro characterized by conflicts among various armed groups and the expansion of territorial control across the city (Geni and *Instituto Fogo Cruzado*, 2022) residing in territories contested by these groups has a greater influence on the type of siege experienced than living in territories controlled by militias or illicit drug trafficking factions.

In our analysis, we contrast the six ethnographies with the aim of producing a matrix to explain phenomena that share an analytical unity but differ in their histories.² To operationalize the contrast between the cases and produce the analytical matrix, we formulated guiding questions, including: “What is the relationship between militias and factions and the residents of the areas where they operate, as well as their local organizations?” It is this dimension that we will focus on here, seeking to identify the impacts of this territorial armed control on grassroots community organizations.

As an initial result, we arrived at two subcategories of siege. We define siege by terror as a form of territorial control based on the overt nature of armed violence, a violence that can erupt at any time, transforming local streets into “war scenes”. Consequently, the experience of living in these areas is marked by fear, insecurity, and unpredictability. This type of siege is experienced by residents of contested areas. In contrast, in territories under consolidated control, we classify the siege as panoptic, referencing Foucault’s (1977), concept, which describes the sense of potential continuous surveillance that leads people to act in accordance with shared norms and expectations, thereby disciplining their behavior. Although the panoptic siege may appear less violent than the siege by terror, Farias (2008, p. 189) emphasizes that the former can be

described as a form of "asphyxiation": its effects may be felt more gradually, yet they ultimately result in the same inability to breathe. We argue, then, that it is this distinction that would have the most profound effects on local social life and the residents' daily routines.

However, by focusing specifically on associational life among favela residents, we identify a wider range of possible relationships between community organizations and the armed groups exercising local territorial control. As a result of this specific analysis, we formulated four additional subcategories, which will be outlined and explored in greater depth in the third part of this article. They are: partnership, tolerance, restriction, and parasitism.

Thus, the article is divided into three parts, in addition to this introduction and the concluding remarks. In the first part, we present a brief conceptual discussion regarding the connections between crime and politics, drawing on the debate concerning the legitimacy of social order imposed through armed territorial control. In the second part, we revisit the brief history of the relationship between *favelas*, politics, and crime in Rio de Janeiro through three "acts": from "negotiated control" to "pacification"; the period of militarized oversight during "pacification"; and the post-pacification era, marked by mass killings and the proliferation of militias. In the third part, we explore the current moment through the categories of partnership, tolerance, restriction, and parasitism, applied to various territories, types of armed control, and forms of association (cultural collectives, non-governmental organizations, residents' associations, and religious organizations). Finally, in the concluding remarks, we outline how siege's typologies regarding associational life point to new trends in the landscape of political violence against *favela* residents.

Armed territorial control and social order

The "problem" of *favela* residents' associational life, to paraphrase the "problem" of the *favela* (Machado da Silva, 2002), stems from concerns over the possible legitimacy gained by the crime embedded there in regulating the local social order. From the formulation identifying armed groups as a "parallel state" to the more recent debate regarding crime as a normative entity (Feltran, 2010, 2020) or as a form of "governance" (Arias, 2006; Arias and Barnes, 2017; Lessing and Willis, 2019), the aim is to understand the conditions under which the persistence of these armed groups in such localities is, or becomes, possible.

One of the important theoretical frameworks for the debate on the relationship between members of illicit drug trafficking factions and *favela* residents is the work of Machado da Silva (1999, 2008, 2010) and the concept of violent sociability. According to the author, this relationship involves, on the one hand, criminals as "bearers" of a social order, and on the other, a population occupying a subordinate position. The subordinate position of *favela* residents is "accepted" because they know they are weaker than their tormentors and that any act of defiance risks physical, often lethal, retaliation. This ideal-type formulation does not seek to represent reality with exactitude, but rather to highlight the asymmetrical power relations existing between these two groups. From this perspective, however, the aim is not to discuss the legitimacy of the social order imposed by armed groups, but to acknowledge the subordinated position of the residents.

From another perspective, authors such as Arias and Barnes (2017) and Lessing (2021) point out that, in exercising territorial control, criminal groups act as a normative authority, presenting themselves as political agents and serving as mediators between the population and the State. Thus, armed groups exercise “criminal governance” over these territories, with consequences for the full exercise of citizenship by their residents. Feltran (2020), in turn, analyzing the peripheries of São Paulo and the activities of the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC), argues that the “crime tribunals” conducted by the faction form part of the plural repertoire of normative practices coexisting in peripheral areas alongside what he terms state justice, selective police justice, and divine justice. In brief, the authors listed here argue that, by operating within a moral and political dimension, armed groups occupy a position of legitimacy, even albeit one shared with other orders and intersected by other powers.

In this debate, we consider it important to acknowledge that the presence of an armed force necessarily implies an absence of freedom of political choice, a premise of the liberal definition of the rule of law, even when considering only its purely declarative dimension (Marx and Engels, 2007). Thus, the debate regarding the legitimacy of this social order imposed by crime seems less significant to us than the fact that it has become a normative and regulatory force in social life, something that directly and radically affects the residents' ability to organize themselves and represent their interests. The ethnographic perspective we adopt in our research leads us to assume that *favela* residents live under a state of siege, that is, they are subjected, in both subjective and objective terms, to a violent, coercive force and constantly live in a state of apprehension regarding acts of violence (often unpredictable ones) that disrupt local movement and daily routines. In this sense, crime is an

integral part of social life, establishing itself as an order, even though not the only one, that regulates the routines and social relations within these territories. Rather than merely determining whether residents perceive the criminal order as legitimate, our interest lies in understanding how they deal with this inescapable force on a daily basis, and how their local organizations act to mediate, circumvent, or submit to these forces.

However, to understand these possibilities for relationships among armed groups, *favela* residents, and their organizations, it is necessary to briefly revisit the processual perspective inherent in these dynamics, something we do in the next section.

Favela, politics, and crime in three acts

Act 1 – From “negotiated control” to “pacification”

Favela residents have historically faced repression regarding their autonomous forms of community organization, even though these have been vibrant and diverse since the very emergence of these settlements (Leeds and Leeds, 2015; Perlman, 1977; Zaluar, 1985). In particular, *favela* residents' associations have a history marked by repression, persecution, and criminalization, but also by agreements, negotiations, victories, and acts of resistance. Machado da Silva (2002) defined this dynamic of losses and gains as “negotiated control.”

Like many social movements following the return to democracy, *favela* residents' associations in Rio de Janeiro have experienced periods of expansion and strong representation over the last 60 years, as well as periods of weakening and loss of legitimacy. The explanations for this phenomenon are

interconnected (and are often not unique to this type of associational life): the strengthening of institutionalized participation at the expense of "grassroots" movements, accusations of authoritarianism, corruption, and complicity with criminal groups, and competition with other social actors for the role of mediator, among others. Another important dimension involves the constraints on collective action imposed by the armed forces operating there: police, drug trafficking gangs, and militia groups (Machado da Silva and Leite, 2007; Rocha, 2018). A study conducted by the Human Rights Commission of the Legislative Assembly of Rio de Janeiro in 2005 analyzed data on 800 leaders of *favela* residents' associations between 1992 and 2001, concluding that, during this period, 300 leaders were expelled from their communities due to conflicts with local drug traffickers and 100 were murdered (Leite, 2005, p. 382).

In this context, the actions of community leaders sought to produce what we previously referred to as "moral cleansing" (Machado da Silva and Leite, 2008; Silva and Rocha, 2008; Rocha, 2013). The phrase "them over there, us over here" was repeated by many leaders to describe this distancing, even though there were various situations where it was impossible, such as when leaders were called upon by public officials to negotiate with drug traffickers regarding access to the territory for the implementation of state social programs (Silva and Rocha, 2008). This attempt at "moral cleansing" was central to the effort to escape the criminalization that also targeted, repressed, and silenced community leaders.

However, the post-democratization moment also marked the emergence of other social actors claiming the role of representatives for *favela* residents. Cultural collectives, solidarity networks, non-governmental organizations, and the like began to engage in public debate, acting as mediators in the

pursuit of better living conditions with state institutions, while also representing the plurality of identities present within *favelas*. Social and cultural projects became agents of negotiation, often relegating residents' associations to the background (Rocha, 2013, 2018). Coupled with criminalization, the emergence of these "new actors" undermined the standing of residents' associations as legitimate representatives of *favela* residents.

While the post-democratization period was marked by the diversification of *favela* associational life, the era of the Pacifying Police Units (*Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora*—UPPs) marked a turning point in the public security policies implemented up to that moment in Rio de Janeiro's favelas. This project had major repercussions on local politics and on the relationship of community leaders with public authorities and local armed groups, as will be analyzed in the next act.

Act 2 – On militarized tutelage in "pacification"

The policy of "pacifying *favelas*" consisted primarily of an ostensive and permanent Military Police presence in these territories. Through the establishment of bases for local operations, the UPPs, the few documents underpinning these "pacification" efforts promised a new form of policing and engagement, alongside the guarantee of the "peace" required for public and private initiatives in these areas. With the purported end of the dominance of local drug-trafficking groups and/or militias, the "civilizing mission" of "pacification" proved attentive to the ways in which collective life in the *favelas* is regulated, particularly regarding the formulation and articulation of public issues. The militarization (Leite et al., 2018a) driven by the police occupation was combined with other

socio-technical initiatives, such as the creation of the UPP Social program in 2010. Furthermore, the promotion of local forums involving representatives from public and private bodies and the local population staged the creation of spaces for dialogue where the new parameters of this regulation would, or ought to, be established (Carvalho, 2014).

Thus, the forums and UPP Social acted as mechanisms for the “transition” from one regulatory regime to another, offering guidance to residents on how to use shared spaces, the provision and regulation of cultural and collective goods and services, conduct within the private sphere, and so on. Learning about these rules was understood by policymakers as an essential step toward “pacification”; in other words, from this perspective, the production of “peace” would require a pedagogical-civilizational effort (Leite, 2018; Rocha, 2018). The governmental logic underpinning the operations of this police-social program dictated that, in order to be integrated into the city within its new contours, *favela* residents would need to undergo a transformation. Whether in the way they voiced criticisms, formulated collective projects, or engaged with public services, this population lacked the necessary prerequisites for exercising citizenship, whether understood as access to rights or participation in the market. Only through the “pacification” process would *favela* residents undergo changes (as a “conversion”) and finally be capable of exercising their citizenship, a dynamic that gave the “pacification” project contours similar to those of policies aimed at indigenous populations: a combination of violent actions and practices of tutelage, according to Oliveira (2014).

Thus, the first two acts in the history of *favela* residents' organizations presented here would be characterized by “negotiated control”

and “civilizing” tutelage. With the decline of the UPPs, we move to the current phase of this rapid historical overview.

Act 3 – After the pacification

Starting in 2013, against the backdrop of the protests that took place in June, the problems surrounding the pacification project began to be discussed in the public sphere. The disappearance of bricklayer Amarildo Dias de Souza³ is as a starting point for the worsening of the UPP crisis (Vital da Cunha, 2015a). Various groups of family members of state violence victims also began denouncing other acts of violence, such as the killing of the young man Johnatha de Oliveira in 2014, in Manguinhos, and that of Eduardo de Jesus, a 10-year-old child, in Alemão the following year.

Following this period, a series of events reshaped the relationships between crime, the State, and *favela* residents. Between 2016 and 2017, criminal factions broke their alliances, reorganizing the criminal landscape, resulting in intensified disputes between drug trafficking gangs, a rise in cargo theft, and a substantial increase in homicides in the city of Rio de Janeiro (Hirata and Grillo, 2019; Machado da Silva and Menezes, 2020). Since 2018, the year of the federal intervention in public security in Rio de Janeiro,⁴ a new era of large-scale police operations and mass killings resulting in record death tolls has unfolded, continuing to the present day. This period can be interpreted as a moment of consolidation for the management of *favela* and peripheral populations, grounded in the intensification of state violence. In this context, militarization spreads as an ordering element of social life (Leite et al., 2018b) and war establishes itself as the prevailing mode of

governing life in the city, a model that echoes our historical colonial matrix (Magalhães, 2021; Mbembe, 2003). It is against this backdrop that militias became a central, unavoidable topic of public debate in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Although militia groups have existed since the 1970s (Alves, 2003), it is during this period of the "UPP crisis" that new militia groups began competing for territory with members of criminal factions and among themselves. As a complex phenomenon, what we currently understand as a "militia" has a myriad of origins, one being the *polícia mineira* (a group of police officers and military personnel acting as hired killers for local merchants), which, in turn, descended from the death squads active primarily in the *Baixada Fluminense* (Rio Lowlands) (ibid.). In its territorialized version, the experience in Rio das Pedras, a *favela* located in the Jacarepaguá region, was a kind of "genesis," a successful model followed by other groups, which would act as opposition to drug trafficking groups (Mesquita, 2008; Misse, 2011; Pope, 2023b; Zaluvar and Conceição, 2007). According to Alves (2003), it is from the moment these death squads begin to engage in politics and elect legislators, thereby creating an institutional arm for their operations, that they transform into militias. Such institutional relationships generate networks of influence among police officers, politicians, community leaders, and state officials, which both ensure access to resources and mitigate the conflicts and risks inherent in this type of activity (Arias and Barnes, 2017; Hirata et al., 2020; Pope, 2023a). It is through their capacity for intermediation and "knowledge-based relationships" that militia groups manage to ensure the circulation of people and the maintenance of residents' daily routines, the renowned "tranquility" that is central to the acceptance and legitimation of the militias (Araujo Silva, 2017; Mesquita, 2008). Finally, militia members are known for trading in various "resources" and services that they exploit

monopolistically: security, extortion, housing, and the supply of water, gas, internet, supplementary transport, and cable television, among others (Cano and Duarte, 2012; Hirata et al., 2020).

The relationship between the UPP project and the restructuring and expansion of militias has already been described by Arias and Barnes (2017) and Rocha and Motta (2020). Between 2008 and 2015, of the 38 UPPs established, the majority were in areas controlled by the *Comando Vermelho* (CV), a few in areas held by *Amigos dos Amigos* (ADA), only one in a militia-controlled area, and none in areas held by the *Terceiro Comando Puro* (TCP). Thus, there was no direct confrontation by state agents in militia-controlled areas, a factor that helped militia members consolidate their hold on territories they already occupied and expand their dominion to other parts of the city. The current landscape of territorial conflict, however, cements war as a technology of governance in Rio de Janeiro.

Data collected by Hirata et al. (2020) for the year 2019 classify 35% of Rio de Janeiro's neighborhoods as "contested" territories (representing 25.7% of the city's territory and 41.4% of its population). These locations are the scene of armed clashes between various groups, including illicit drug traffickers from different factions, clashes between factions and police forces and/or militia groups, and conflicts between militia groups. It is worth noting that, according to the cited study, 45.5% of police operations take place in "disputed" territories; 40.9% in territories controlled by the CV; 7.1% in areas controlled by other factions; and only 6.5% in territories controlled by militias (ibid., p. 14), representing a "political advantage" for militia groups over drug trafficking factions, specifically the CV (ibid., p. 15).

In this sense, the current scenario appears, in some respects, far more complex than what we observed up to mid-2015. In the next

section, we aim to describe and analyze what it is like to live under siege “now,” particularly regarding the possibilities for associational life and local community action.

Associational life under siege

The data presented here describe how mutations in the types of sieges imposed on territories directly affect the relationships between armed groups, residents, and their organizations. However, specifically regarding the relationship between armed groups and different types of local-level associational life, the categories of “panoptic siege” and “siege by terror” proved insufficient to describe the various practices and logics guiding these relationships. The type of activity of the local organization,⁵ the role the armed group plays in mediating between the State and the local community, posing a greater or lesser threat to its “business model” (Hirata, Rocha, and Santos Júnior, 2024), and the group’s history in the area also influence the nature of the relationship between crime and associational life.

Thus, by comparing different territories and types of local associational life, we produced a matrix based on four categories: partnership, tolerance, constriction, and parasitism. They do not form a linear *continuum*, even though it is possible to identify varying degrees of conflict in the interactions within each of them. Instead, we view the distribution of these categories as a quadrant, or a Weberian-inspired ideal type (Weber, 2001), in which each analyzed case is situated within the space of this quadrant, combining different intensities of each pole. Thus, for example, a relationship classified as constriction may involve varying forms of tutelage: a milder form, representing merely a limitation, or a more intense one, leading to the

suffocation of the local organization’s activities. In this section, we delve deeper into the analysis of the ethnographic cases that illustrate these relationships.

Partnership

We define the relationship as a partnership when the grassroots organization, particularly in the reported cases involving residents’ associations, does not merely maintain a good relationship with the armed group controlling the territory but actively cooperates with it. This relationship is typically long-standing and reflects the armed group’s stability in controlling the area. Thus, among the territories covered by the research, we find this type of relationship in territories where militia control is consolidated, what we previously classified as a panoptic siege.

In one of the locations in Rio de Janeiro’s West Zone, the residents’ association serves as a key institution for local negotiations. With strong strategic political ties, its social effectiveness is demonstrated by its ability to secure specific state services, such as daily trash collection by the Municipal Urban Cleaning Company (Comlurb), and to obtain regularization for over 150 residences through the “Morar Carioca” program.⁶ The residents’ association is led by “long-time residents” who handle political mediation. Its influence is such that even local militia members must follow the association’s directives. In a sense, there is a division of labor centered on a shared project of local power: the residents’ association acts as the political arm, while the militia serves as the “security” arm, ensuring “tranquility” in the area.

In another case analyzed, also involving an area with an established militia presence and a panoptic siege, interviewees highlighted the role of militia members as community leaders (and vice versa), as illustrated in the following narrative:

I can't even say for sure if they fit the profile of militiamen [paramilitary militia members]; I think they were local community leaders who earned the community's respect and maintained that leadership role. Over time, issues regarding territory and violence escalated, and I believe these individuals began arming themselves to protect their area. I don't think that when they formed, they had any idea they would become a militia group. Because both [militia member's name] and [militia member's name], who were born and raised here, were never labeled as militia for a long time; in fact, [militia member's name] even became a city councilor and ran for deputy, ending up as a substitute. This militia-like structure came with the formation of militias in other places, which began to have its eye here in the [locality] and began to bring this militia-like structure to these people who were community leaders, respected people, whom the residents could turn to. (Resident, white, woman, 44 years old)

The narrative highlights the relationship between the militia members and the process of the locality's occupation and urbanization, specifically regarding the provision of basic services at a time when the State had failed to do so. It is also worth noting that, according to the narrative, the community leader spearheading the area's urbanization and collective improvements initially enjoyed local legitimacy, and, subsequently, something changed to give it the "guise" of a militia. In this case, as in another observed during the research, the partnership can be classified as a "symbiosis", a subtype of partnership in which the residents' association leader and the militia member are the same person. Classic examples of this symbiotic relationship are Josinaldo Francisco da Cruz, known as *Nadinho de Rio das Pedras*, and Jerônimo Guimarães Filho, known as *Jerominho*. Both began their political careers as community leaders, were elected city

councilors, and were accused of founding major militia groups in the city. *Nadinho* was murdered in 2009, and *Jerominho* in 2022.⁷

However, although the figure of the militiaman acting as a community and local political leader is strongly associated with the history of militias in Rio de Janeiro, we observe that recent shifts in criminal dynamics have altered the stability of the territorial control that enabled these figures to emerge. A context in which different groups alternate control over territory and militias expand into areas where they previously had no presence does not allow for the kind of stability that promoted symbiotic partnerships between militias and residents' associations.

Tolerance

Here, we bring together the types of relationships between organizations and crime characterized by non-interference, where criminal actors "let happen" the activities and/or actions of the organization in question. Relationships of tolerance linked to local cultural collectives and evangelical churches were observed in some settings; relationships of tolerance linked to local *terreiros* (Afro-Brazilian religious shrines) were also observed in one setting.

The issue of religious expressions in Rio de Janeiro's working-class neighborhoods has drawn significant attention in recent years, especially after the link between certain drug trafficking faction leaders and Evangelical religiosity became public, particularly regarding the well-known case of the *Complexo de Israel* (Cypriano, 2025; Vital da Cunha, 2024). In fact, the growth in the number of Brazilian citizens who identify as evangelicals has attracted widespread attention, due to the effects caused in the political, cultural and social fields (Vital da Cunha, 2021). For these reasons, we were

also interested in reflecting on the relationship between armed groups operating in the territory and the religious expressions and organizations existing in the territories researched.

Unsurprisingly, a strong presence of Evangelical temples and churches was identified in all the territories, with varying degrees of identification among members of armed groups with the identity of "Evangelicals" or "religious". In one of the territories, located in a neighborhood in the North Zone, territorial control is exercised by a drug trafficking faction whose relationship with Evangelical churches is well known.⁸ There was also considerable talk about the fact that one of the area's leading drug traffickers had converted to Evangelical Christianity, tattooing "Jesus Christ" on his forearm and expelling terreiro leaders from the locality. It is also worth noting that the area is contested, serving as a battleground for clashes between rival factions and between the local group and militia groups, which led us to classify the prevailing form of territorial control as "siege by terror." The invocation of elements associated with so-called "spiritual warfare", a feature of Pentecostal culture (Côrtes, 2021; Vital da Cunha, 2021), is common among members of the aforementioned faction, which is also present in another studied location where the same group maintains consolidated control. Thus, an affinity-based alignment between members of armed groups and the Evangelical faith was observed in the studied territories, involving both the faction in question and members of militias.

The affinity between Evangelical religious morality (referred to here in broad terms) and a set of values and political alignments revolving around authoritarianism and militarism has already been addressed in the literature and lies beyond the scope of this article (Cortês, 2021). Thus, it is worth reiterating that, regarding religious community organizations classified as

Evangelical, the stance of the majority of armed groups operating in the studied territories is one of tolerance (Rocha, 2025). However, it should be noted that we also encountered instances of tolerance toward *terreiros* and religious sites associated with Afro-Brazilian spirituality, shown both by militia groups and by members of the other illicit drug trafficking faction previously mentioned. In other words, even though there is a recognized affinity with Evangelical religiosity and, by contrast, persecution of *terreiro* communities (a topic to be explored later), there are also instances where the presence of these places of worship is tolerated,⁹ occupying the territory without significant interference.

Still within the realm of tolerance, we observe the emergence of several cultural collectives in a West Zone neighborhood, an area characterized by territorial disputes and a state of siege imposed by terror. In this locality, various groups with diverse institutional affiliations and thematic focuses have mobilized around public space activities, such as freestyle rap circles, film screenings, and debates on memory, among others. According to accounts from members of these collectives, the activities they organize typically take place without any interference from the armed groups operating in the area – whether illicit drug traffickers or militia members. According to our interlocutors, the constant activity surrounding clashes and territorial disputes consumes all the time and attention of the armed groups, keeping these collectives "under the radar" – including when it comes to the collection of fees and other forms of extortion found in territories under more consolidated control (as we shall see later). However, interlocutors reported numerous instances where the activities of local cultural collectives were obstructed during armed confrontations, creating a difficulty shared by all neighborhood residents: the very insecurity in daily life that characterizes a "siege of terror."

Thus, while constraints on local associational life arising from the actions of armed groups and police forces are evident, these do not reach the level of the systematic constriction and parasitism, modalities we will explore next.

Constriction

Regarding the constriction of associative activities by armed territorial groups, we find a wide array of internal variations, ranging from mere constraints to the outright suffocation of community activities. Yet, the common thread linking the cases gathered here is the interference of armed groups in the activities of local organizations, thereby hindering or preventing the execution of their actions and functions.

In one of the surveyed locations, characterized by territorial control consolidated by an illicit drug trafficking faction and a state of panoptic siege, residents' associations and local community organizations evaluate every planned action, seeking to minimize the likelihood of interaction with members of the armed group. There is a twofold motivation for avoiding interactions with the traffickers. On one hand, like local residents, community leaders fear facing reprisals should they violate any rule, whether explicit or implicit; on the other, they seek to avoid the accusations and criminalization directed at *favela* residents and their organizations due to their forced proximity to drug traffickers. Consequently, local leaders avoid direct contact with members of armed groups, relying instead on various forms of mediation to maintain a "good relationship" based on a careful, and constantly renegotiated, distance. In an informal conversation, a local leader recounted that when donations are brought to the area by military police officers (such as during the period when a UPP unit was established there), he sets aside a portion

"for the drug trade boys" to reinforce good relations and avoid being accused of having "brought the police into the favela", a potentially dangerous situation. It is worth noting that the concern about "not bringing the police into the *favela*" persisted even during the occupation by pacification forces, a time when the police were, supposedly, already present within the community. In the case described, the president of the residents' association continued to fulfill his role as a community leader but had to carefully weigh every move to avoid a confrontation with local drug traffickers. Thus, while there was no outright obstruction of his work, there was a limitation that, ultimately, constrained the association's activities.

In other instances, within the same *favela*, we observed local leaders advising residents who turned to the residents' association for assistance to instead approach the local drug trafficking group to resolve issues that, at other times, would have been the association's responsibility. In one instance, a woman went to the association seeking information on how to obtain government assistance, as she was experiencing domestic violence and wanted to leave home. Local leaders informed her of various support networks and public policies available for her situation but advised her against pursuing those that required filing a police report regarding her husband's violence, as she "lives in an area controlled by criminals" and should not be accused of "bringing the police into the favela." The only way to deal with an abusive husband was to turn to traffickers itself. Ultimately, they explained that they could not accompany her to the drug-dealing spot, as they could not "get involved" with the traffickers. Thus, the need for constant "moral cleansing" among these leaders ends up severely limiting their representative roles and local leadership, since almost anything can be perceived by drug-trafficking groups as a risk

or a threat. This situation has persisted in the *favelas* for decades, creating a major obstacle to the political demands and struggles of *favela* residents.

While this type of restriction amounts, ultimately, to the suffocation of the activities of residents' associations and community organizations serving the favela population, we observed, during some of our fieldwork, a different and more radical form of suffocation directed at places of worship for Afro-Brazilian religions: the *terreiros* of the *povo de santo* (practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religion). This was one of the elements that most caught our attention among the research findings.

In the same *favela*, characterized by territorial control consolidated by a faction and a panoptic siege, there were numerous reports of restrictions on African-derived religious practices (involving death threats and the expulsion of practicing residents), as well as on the wearing of white clothing and protective beaded necklaces. However, reports indicate that these obstacles created pressures that led to the departure of these religious groups and their leaders from the area; the accounts spoke of threats, rather than expulsion or death. In this area, the matter is handled discreetly, and the local drug traffickers' affiliation with evangelical churches comes up casually, such as when a resident needed to negotiate something with the trafficker acting as the "*favela's* lead trafficker"¹⁰ and found him at a religious service. The suffocation of Afro-Brazilian religions in the area stems from pressure exerted by the armed group, though we found no evidence of direct persecution.

In another *favela* studied, also controlled by the same drug-trafficking faction but subject to a territorial dispute, and thus the scene of numerous armed clashes, an explicit ban on the practice of African-derived religions was observed. The local drug trafficking boss and his group destroyed terreiros, even forcing the

religious practitioners themselves to tear down the sites dedicated to their religious activities, ripped apart beaded necklaces, and smashed statues of saints and other artifacts used in their rituals. Even after the boss' murder, such practices remained in effect; at the time of the research, the opening of new *terreiros* and the placing of offerings in public spaces within the *favela* were prohibited. In this locality, one could say that the armed group controlling the territory imposes a siege by terror, manifested in the violence to which practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions have been and continue to be subjected, thereby completely suffocating this form of religious expression.

Through the narratives presented, we seek to demonstrate how the constriction of associative and community-based forms of organization in areas under armed territorial control ranges from mere constraint to outright suffocation, yet invariably results in the restriction of such activities. However, we also observed another phenomenon, one that particularly drew our attention and which, through different mechanisms, likewise leads to the constriction of associative activities. This phenomenon is parasitism, which we analyze below.

Parasitism

In a large neighborhood in the West Zone, characterized by consolidated territorial control by the militia and a panoptic siege, the relationship between militia groups and local organizations has proven to be potentially conflict-ridden; however, the levying of fees is the issue that stands out. Private events do not have a history of conflict of interest and are not monitored by the group, and can be carried out regardless of their nature. However, events held in public spaces, such as cultural activities, entrepreneurs' fairs, collective demonstrations,

among others, tend to be a source of conflict. One characteristic of the militia group operating in the neighborhood is the charging of fees for holding social activities, a practice that affects not only local organizations and collectives but also micro-entrepreneurs and informal workers, with fees varying according to the activity. According to one of the sources interviewed for the study, even beggars cannot ask for alms on the neighborhood streets without paying a fee to the militia. However, the levying of such fees constitutes extortion and results in the constriction of collective activities, as illustrated in the account below:

So, we always used to do that, and then, in the end, one of the things, there was another collective from downtown Rio, and they'd always say, "Hey, take it over to the West Zone," and I'd say, "Over in the West Zone... Here, you can sit on the Valongo Wharf and nobody will bother you. You can do whatever you want downtown, and nobody will bother you, but if you want to do a capoeira circle in [neighborhood name], you have to ask for permission. If you want to do any activity in [neighborhood name], you have to ask for permission, and it's not permission from the city hall. You can even ask the sub-prefecture, but they'll say 'talk to so-and-so' and then you'll have to lose BRL80.00, BRL100.00. (Resident, Black, male, around 30 years old)

Thus, even though such a levy is not exclusive to local associations, applying to anyone conducting any type of public activity in the neighborhood, it is evident that the local militia restricts the activities of local associations and organizations. This occurs both by regulating their operations and by stripping residents' associations of one of their primary functions: precisely that of mediating the use of local public space. It is worth noting that this mediating role also weakened in favelas where drug trafficking factions operate, particularly following the

Favela Pacification Program (Araújo Silva and Carvalho, 2015; Rocha, 2018), as we have demonstrated.

Research conducted in an area that had received a Pacifying Police Unit (UPP), deactivated in 2018 and now controlled by an illicit drug trafficking group, yet a territory under dispute and besieged by terror, demonstrated how the armed group levies fees for collective activities within the area (including political campaigns). According to accounts from local sources, the group made no distinction between partisan political events, activist political actions, and community or philanthropic initiatives: with payment, anything was permitted; without payment, nothing was authorized. In that area, we also identified that the drug trafficking gang operates in a "joint operation" with a militia group, from whom it adopted the practice of extortion. This situation caused great dissatisfaction among local community leaders and even made it impossible for certain institutions to remain in the territory, as recorded in the field notes of one of the authors:

In a somber tone, a resident recounted that a TV network was planning to cover the event, likely by sending a reporter, but she did not allow the coverage because she did not know what the state of [location name] would be. She further stated that political campaigns and social initiatives are banned in the favela by order of the drug trade and carrying them out requires paying a sum of money. When asked how she had managed to hold that event, she flashed a mischievous smile, demonstrating her shrewdness, and explained that she was only able to host the political gathering because she was inside her home rather than outside. In this way, she evaded monitoring by the drug traffickers. (Field note entry)

The two accounts presented here are among several we gathered regarding the collection of fees, and the control armed

groups exert over territories and their residents through extortion. We also gathered testimonies concerning markups on products sold within the favelas, coupled with prohibitions against purchasing goods outside the territory, and the exploitation of local markets, such as real estate and services, by these armed groups. We have termed this set of practices "parasitic entrepreneurship," though a detailed analysis of them lies beyond the scope of this article."

For the analysis proposed here, however, we wish to highlight the effects of this parasitism on local community-based organizations, a practice that, stemming from the financial dimension, engenders a new form of constriction on collective action. We also wish to highlight that extortion has long been associated with the activities of militia groups, including through the aforementioned symbiosis between crime and residents' associations, a practice that has spread to other criminal groups, such as factions. Thus, the militia business model is becoming a benchmark for all armed groups exercising territorial control, shaping a trend in criminal activity in Rio de Janeiro. The term "militialization of drug trafficking", a direct reference to the practice of "parasitic entrepreneurship", has become a buzzword in the debate on crime. But the effects on collective action are even more pernicious, as they represent yet another layer of limitation regarding the voices of *favela* residents and their ability to resist the subjugation imposed by armed controls and the confrontations provoked by police forces.

Final considerations: deepening the siege

Santos Júnior et al. (2025) argue that interest representation by community organizations, for instance, in the negotiation of services

and the voicing of demands, has been constricted in territories under militia control. In these contexts, political mediation becomes a "commodity" monopolized by militias, which proceed to persecute, threaten, and commit violence against those attempting to engage in it outside their networks. Our ethnographic observations confirm this scenario but indicate that the distinction between drug trafficking groups and militias, while relevant, is insufficient to explain the variety of relationships among armed organizations and groups. We identify more diverse and situational modalities that go beyond both the trafficking-versus-militia dichotomy and our previous classification distinguishing between "siege by terror" and "panoptic siege".

The first type, termed partnership, occurs when there is cooperation between residents' associations and armed groups, sustained by the stability of territorial control. These relationships are found mostly in areas under the consolidated control of militias and have historical roots that, in the past, could border on symbiosis. Under the tolerance model, the armed group does not directly interfere with the organizations' activities, allowing them to continue. This dynamic was observed in contested territories, characterized by a climate of terror, where unstable control made it impossible to impose strict authority. Evangelical churches and cultural groups were frequent examples of this situation. Constriction, in turn, characterizes contexts in which armed groups intervene in community activities, restricting or preventing their operation. This modality appears in both areas of consolidated panoptic control and contested areas, suggesting that the armed group's modes of action and the profile of the community organization are decisive factors in the nature of the relationship. Finally, parasitism involves the appropriation of community resources through extortion and forced taxes. Observed in areas

controlled by both militias and drug trafficking factions, this practice has spread among different groups, indicating a process of mutual learning and an expansion of the repertoire of domination.

In summary, the findings of this research indicate that the relationship between community organizations and armed groups cannot be understood solely through the distinction between militias and drug trafficking rings, nor through dichotomous models of territorial control. The modalities of partnership, tolerance, constriction, and parasitism reveal diverse, context-specific forms of interaction, influenced by both the stability of armed control and the characteristics of the organizations involved. The growing prevalence of parasitism, in particular, suggests a convergence in the control and exploitation practices adopted by

different armed groups in the city, pointing to a trend of expanding mechanisms for the capture and restriction of collective action in working-class neighborhoods.

If the phenomenon of parasitism truly indicates a trend toward the governance of the poor by armed groups, *favela* residents are facing an even more serious threat to their organizations and their lives in general. Understanding the gravity of this situation allows us to nuance, on the one hand, the support from various segments of the working-class population for the state forces' policy of confrontation, such as in the case of the massacre in the *Complexo da Penha*, which left over 120 dead (G1, 2025). On the other hand, it highlights the urgent need to seek more appropriate strategies to combat the persistent problem of armed territorial control in Rio de Janeiro.

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Notes

- (1) The original research project lasted one year, due to the specific terms of the funding obtained. Therefore, the chosen methodological strategy was to assemble a team comprising researchers who were already conducting fieldwork in favelas, or who maintained local ties (as current and/or former residents) to the areas selected based on the criteria of the typology formulated as the research hypothesis. Thus, the ethnographies were conducted by researchers at different levels of academic training and at different stages of their fieldwork.
- (2) Unfortunately, within the scope of this article, it was not possible to explore the specifics of each territory in greater depth. For more information on each of the territories, see Carvalho, Rocha, Motta (2023).
- (3) In July 2013, Amarildo was stopped by a group of UPP police officers in Rocinha and taken to the unit's headquarters. After that, he was never seen again. Following the report filed by his family, the case gained immense visibility, and the "Where is Amarildo?" campaign became a symbol of the abusive and illegal conduct of state agents and the police violence occurring in favelas with UPPs.
- (4) The Federal Intervention in the Public Security of the State of Rio de Janeiro took place between February and December 2018, decreed by the Presidential administration under Article 34 of the Brazilian Constitution. This measure transferred the command of state security forces (Civil and Military Police) and prison administration to the Armed Forces (Brazilian Army), under the justification of curbing an institutional crisis and the rise of urban violence and organized crime in the metropolitan area.
- (5) While there are differences across territories, we focus on community-based organizations (such as residents' associations), religious and cultural groups, and non-governmental entities (such as NGOs and social projects).
- (6) Launched in 2009, the Morar Carioca program is an initiative of the Rio de Janeiro City Government, coordinated by the Municipal Housing Secretariat, aimed at the urbanization of *favelas*. According to official information, the program aims to promote the integration of these territories into the rest of the city, ensuring access to essential services and adequate housing. The interventions encompass infrastructure works such as water supply and sewage networks, drainage, street lighting, paving, and slope stabilization, as well as landscaping and the installation of public facilities for health, education, culture, and leisure.
- (7) Regarding *Nadinho* and *Jerominho*'s performance, see Franco (2019) and O Globo (2024).
- (8) For more information on the relationship between drug traffickers and religion, see Vital da Cunha (2014, 2015b).
- (9) Research has already identified that, in some cases, the relationship goes beyond mere tolerance, such as, in the *terreiro* studied ethnographically by Campos (2024), which is frequented by military police officers and militia members.
- (10) A "*favela* lead trafficker" (or *tráfico à frente da favela*) refers to the person currently responsible for managing matters related to the territorial organization of crime and the economic dynamics of the illicit trade. This is the person who represents the "boss," who is often in prison or in hiding. The lead trafficker can also fill the role of general manager.
- (11) We present a more detailed analysis of these practices in Carvalho, Rocha, Motta (2023), Motta (2024) and Motta (2026).

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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