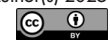
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The representative organizations of the security forces in Brazil and Portugal as transmission belts of the far-right parties

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Abstract

The growing influence of far-right parties and their connections with security forces poses a significant threat, particularly given the security forces' monopoly on legitimate violence and the far-right's inherent distrust of democratic institutions. This article challenges the assumption that the trade union movement uniformly opposes far-right ideologies. Instead, we show that many representative organizations within the security forces actively support far-right initiatives, with police forces especially susceptible to such influence. Drawing on documentary evidence from Brazil and Portugal, our case studies reveal that far-right parties do not necessarily reject intermediary organizations, such as trade unions and professional associations, but rather strategically use them as 'transmission belts' to further their agenda. This article contributes to reconsidering the transmission belt concept and suggests pathways for future research in this area.

Keywords

far-right parties, Lusophone countries, representative organizations, security forces, transmission belt

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Introduction

Given the recent rise of far-right parties, the relationship between security forces and these parties may be perceived as a potential threat. Security forces, both police and military, whose roles now tend to blur (Kraska 2007), aim to achieve state objectives through the legitimate monopoly of violence. Therefore, their association with political parties that mistrust intermediary institutions and incite intolerance raises special concern.

In this article, we examine the relationship between the representative organizations of security forces and far-right parties in Brazil and Portugal. The two countries' cases are very diverse but allow us to identify commonalities. Nationalist and authoritarian principles, while central to far-right ideologies, are also distinctly reflected within security forces, particularly through their symbols, professional socialization processes, and hierarchical structures. We aim to demonstrate how intermediary organizations, such as trade unions and professional associations, set up to give voice to the interests of their members, have been exploited by far-right parties for their interests.

We investigate the hypothesis that far-right political parties attempt to utilize security force representative organizations as a 'transmission belt', highlighting the need for further research on this subject. According to the transmission belt concept, these organizations may act as extensions of the parties' agendas, similar to the role trade unions played in communist regimes (Chan 1993; Zhu et al. 2011). Our country's cases suggest that far-right parties are not only adopting a model of interaction with intermediary organizations similar to those seen in communist regimes, but that this interaction is complex and operates as a two-way process.

This article is organized into four sections. First, we present the literature on representative organizations of security forces, on the relationship between political parties and intermediary organizations and a literature review addressing the relationship between far-right parties and security forces. We then focus on the relationship between far-right parties and representative organizations of security forces in the two countries. The case studies are approached using four questions: How are security forces structured, how are they organized, how are far-right political parties organized, and how are influential far-right political parties within security forces and their unions/associations? Finally, we discuss the two cases, highlighting the conclusions and providing clues for future research.

Literature review

Representative organizations of security forces

The ILO Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention (Convention no. 87, from 1948) states, in Article 9, that 'The extent to which the guarantees provided for in this Convention shall apply to the armed forces and the police shall be determined by national laws or regulations'. While there seems to be a tacit recognition that there is a trend for workers of all kinds to organize (Offe & Wiesenthal 1980), the reason for leaving the decision on extending the right to organize to the security forces is the fear of violent and uncontrolled protests.

Wildcat strikes occurred sporadically throughout the 20th century, such as the 1919 Boston Police Strike in the United States, where officers demanded the right to unionize and better working conditions, and the 1923 Victorian Police Strike in Australia, involving about half of Melbourne's force seeking better pay and working conditions. More recently, similar incidents have occurred in Brazil, leading to urban chaos when police forces chose to engage in insurrection. Wildcat strikes were reported over the past decade in the Brazilian states of Pernambuco in 2014, Espírito Santo in 2017, and Ceará in 2020. The police called for higher salaries and changes to promotion rules across different ranks and hierarchies. However, to the best of our knowledge, unauthorized strikes by union boards still lack analysis from the perspective of the union movement.

The literature on representative organizations of security forces remains scarce and faces the obstacle of overcoming the highly diverse global panorama due to the aforementioned dependence on national law. Representative organizations of security forces have received little attention from police and military studies, and most of them are centered on Anglo-Saxon countries (Adams 2008; Berry et al. 2008; Fisk & Richardson 2017; Harris & Sweeney 2021). There are at least two reasons why the literature has paid little attention to them, particularly through a cross-country approach. First, there is historical isolation (Pratr 1987) that starts to change when security forces become political actors through their campaigns for better wages and working conditions (Lipset 1969), that is, mainly through police unions and military associations. Second, the right of security forces to organize is not universal; thus, the diversity prevailing among countries is an obstacle to their study.

In any case, there is a greater body of literature by police officers than military officers, who can only organize into professional associations in some countries. One of the few articles on military organizations relates to Australia and was written in the 1980s, pointing to a trend of convergence from a traditional system to an established civilian industrial system due in part to post-war technological and social changes, namely greater access to civilian employee practices (Pratr 1987).

Police trade unions have existed for more than a century and tend to be conservative (Harris & Sweeney 2021; Steden & Melhbaum 2019), especially opposing disciplinary reforms (Fisk & Richardson 2017). This feature seems to have led some countries to prevent police unions from foundation, considering that even though they do not always enjoy the right to strike, police trade unions tend to be highly unionized (Berry et al. 2008; Rego et al. 2023), thus reflecting an important potential for mobilization.

Furthermore, police trade unions have also made important contributions, not only to improving their working conditions and wages, but also to building relationships between police forces and communities, taking into consideration, for instance, how the police perceive themselves and how other citizens see them just as regular workers (Adams 2008; Durão & Argentin 2024). These very different circumstances have led to the existence of diverse types of police unions: progressive, conservative, reformist, and watchdog organizations (Berry et al. 2008). Professional associations that enjoy a legal framework that is generally more accessible but also does not give them the right to negotiate seem to be of the progressive type (Montgomery 2021; Yilmaz 2022).

In short, the existing literature on police unions is, at best, limited after having been of some relevance in the 1970s and 1980s (as demonstrated by the 2008 special issue of

the Police Practice and Research journal). In general, police unions appear to exert a significant influence, largely because of their high unionization rates. This influence was both positive and negative. While these unions are often perceived as a threat to order and are often associated with conservative and defensive positions, they are also often associated with a path of dignity and empathy toward other workers (Rego et al. 2023). Professional associations seem to follow a similar trend but adopt a more cooperative nature. In any case, influencing organizations with these characteristics requires taking over institutions that have the capacity for mobilization.

Political parties and intermediary organizations

The relationship between political parties and workers' organizations is old and structural in democratic societies. This relationship is mainly associated with the close cooperation between left-wing parties and the trade union movement. One of the ways this relationship has manifested, particularly within communist and socialist traditions or in contexts where these parties played a significant role (Martínez Lucio 1990), is through the concept of the 'transmission belt'. This model, however, is often not regarded as applicable to other ideological frameworks.

The concept of transmission belt, particularly in relation to trade unions and civil society organizations, has been widely examined within Marxist frameworks. For instance, Albareda (2018) explores civil society organizations as intermediaries between citizens and policymakers, finding that only about one-third of European Union (EU)-active organizations align with the ideal transmission belt model. Cohen (2011) points to a paradox in leftist activism, arguing that politicized workplace activists, especially those from revolutionary movements, may have inadvertently undermined workplace resistance by focusing on issues beyond the workplace itself. In addition, Martinez Lucio (1990) critiques the reductionist view of unions as mere transmission belts in Spain, highlighting their broader political roles beyond collective bargaining. From a Marxist perspective, as Kelly (2011) notes, trade unions functioning as transmission belts are insufficient to change the political system and this top-down approach can potentially deepen the divide between leadership and members.

We can thus say that the definition of a transmission belt refers to the mechanism through which a political party communicates with workers' organizations to consolidate its power. In other words, rather than these organizations advancing based on the decisions and interests of the workers, they function as part of the party's political action. The appropriation of this concept with other actors, as seen with Albareda (2018), essentially highlights the focus on the top-down mechanism. However, it is important to recognize that this top-down process also implies that workers' organizations are not passive agents in this process. They do not simply 'receive' the ideology, but actively contribute to it.

Along with the undermining and weakening of institutions in collective industrial relations (Martínez Lucio 2015), the relationship between political parties and workers' organizations has been subject to erosion. Today, political parties tend to speak directly to citizens (Mudde 2019), eliminating the need to use intermediary organizations, while

the trade union movement is going through a membership crisis that makes their support less attractive.

In short, the relationship between political parties and intermediary organizations, such as trade unions, has weakened over time, though it has historically been seen as a transformative mechanism. The transmission belt model has typically been studied in relation to left-wing party dynamics. However, the rise of far-right parties seems to reintroduce this concept into contemporary debate, encouraging its reconsideration despite its apparent improbability.

Far-right parties and the security forces

What we refer to here as far-right parties spans both radicals and extremists (Mudde 2019). The differences between the various types relate to the extent to which they reject democracy. While radical parties stand against the rights of minorities, extreme right parties are against democracy per se (Mudde 2019). Furthermore, the radical right is sometimes labeled populist and known for its nativism (nationalism combined with xenophobia). Nevertheless, all far-right parties seem to share nationalist and authoritarian principles.

What remains unclear is the relationship between the far-right and neoliberalism, with the far-right sometimes opposing and sometimes being a willing partner (Worth 2023). Many Marxist scholars argue that neoliberalism, far from being inherently democratic, creates the structural conditions that allow far-right authoritarianism to flourish. Harvey (2005), for instance, famously contends that neoliberalism's dismantling of state welfare and the commodification of public goods exacerbate economic inequality, generating widespread social discontent. This discontent, particularly among the working class, is then channeled by far-right parties, which offer simplistic, nationalist solutions to complex economic problems. In this sense, neoliberalism serves as an economic engine for far-right authoritarianism by intensifying class antagonisms and weakening the protective institutions of the welfare state, thereby pushing disillusioned citizens toward authoritarian solutions. Bruff (2014), in his turn, proposes the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism to describe the system where the state increasingly resorts to coercive measures to impose neoliberal reforms, bypassing or undermining democratic institutions. In this model, the authoritarianism of the far-right is not a departure from neoliberalism but an integral feature of its survival, particularly in times of crisis.

While there is a growing body of literature exploring the relationship between the far-right and neoliberalism, which highlights the need to consider a broader range of sources to fully understand this complex issue, the literature on the relationship between far-right parties and security forces remains scarce. The analysis tends to be made from an ideological and not a party perspective, highlighting the causes and rise of extremist behavior and violence (Beirich and Potok 2009) as well as the trend to consider the existence of police prejudice (Channing 2020). Furthermore, it is commonly assumed that far-right parties are opposed to intermediate-worker organizations. This is because far-right parties perceive themselves as speaking on behalf of the people, and trade unions and other representative structures are facets of the established institutions that they criticize.

In any case, right-wing ideology and right-wing extremism play a special role in some professional groups, such as security forces, in which we include both the police and military. Existing research on the relationship between the right-wing and security forces may be limited and exploratory; however, it is long-standing and covers different countries.

The first example comes from the United States, where the police are locally organized. Lipset (1969) demonstrated that despite the general understanding that the police should be politically neutral, their role as public employees inevitably involves them in local politics (p. 77). Furthermore, the author highlights that, despite police contact with radical groups not being accepted, evidence indicates that a considerable number of individual police officers join or support right-wing and bigoted movements. The reasons behind this distinctive relationship between police forces and right-wing ideology may be attributed to both their professional roles and social backgrounds (Lipset, 1969, p. 83). Police with lower levels of socioeconomic status and less education display a greater likelihood of having intolerant attitudes, while their sense of being a low-status outgroup also explains their political position. Furthermore, as police officers typically receive lower salaries than other professionals, there is a perception of moral inadequacy stemming from how police officers are still expected to enforce the law and risk their lives, whenever necessary. However, they receive little prestige and relatively low salaries compared to other professional groups with less authority (Lipset, 1969, p. 80).

A second example arises from research focusing on the far-right Greek party Golden Dawn. This political party is reputed as a force against both left-wing protests and undocumented migration, deploying violence as if this might substitute the police and attract substantial electoral support from police forces compared to the general population (Papanicolaou & Papageorgiou 2016). The reasons for this are complex, as they result from historical, organizational, and situational factors. Papanicolaou and Papageorgiou (2016) explored the consequences: 'If important parts of Greece's national police service are becoming colonized by a far-right ideology, then elements of that ideology – extreme nationalism, notions of racial purity, and glorification of vigilante-style violence as a means to promote those ideas – are becoming more likely to underpin the character of everyday policing and the use of police discretion to the detriment of vulnerable or politically undesirable groups (p. 398). This also becomes a cause for concern when considering how police identities and their political orientations are likely to influence other individuals engaged in careers in arms (Robb Larkins 2023), given that they constitute a kind of 'police kinship' (Jauregui 2017).

A third example comes from recent research on the Spanish case portraying how military forces provide 'a prime source of far-right electoral revenue' (Villamil et al. 2023: 29). Villamil et al. (2023) argued that given the 'shared values over nationalism and authoritarianism, there is an ideological affinity between the military and far-right parties', or what these authors termed an 'elective affinity' (p. 7). The authors empirically analyzed this relationship following certain incidents, for example, a WhatsApp group among retired generals supporting VOX and expressing violent intentions to non-nationalists and leftists (Villamil et al. 2023). They concluded that not only is the military more likely to support the far-right, but citizens living close to military facilities also display a greater likelihood of backing the far right (Villamil et al. 2023).

In short, the relationship between far-right and security forces lacks research but has been approached and explored in some pioneering research. The influence of the far-right over the police emerges as particularly challenging as, more than other political

parties, far-right parties are known for their opposition to democratic institutions and values, such as minority rights and the independence of democratic institutions. Consequently, the association of such an ideology with a professional group that holds the state's legitimate monopoly on violence poses a significant threat.

Country cases

The present study features two national cases, Brazil and Portugal, to illustrate the distinct influences of far-right parties within the representative organizations of security forces. Although Brazil was part of the Portuguese Empire until 1822, the two countries have socio-economic and political differences, with Brazil having more than 200 million inhabitants and belonging to the Global South, and Portugal having about 10 million inhabitants and belonging to the Global North.

However, both democratic societies are experiencing the presence of the far-right in power. Brazil has a captain in power during Jair Bolsonaro's presidency from to 2019–2022 (Gontijo & Ramos 2020). The Social Liberal Party (PSL) through which Bolsonaro reached the highest office in Brazil in 2018, went from an almost insignificant position to becoming the most voted party. In the previous election the PSL had not even reached one million votes, contrasting with 2018 when the party secured over 11 million votes, ensuring the election of 52 representatives affiliated with the party.[1] After winning the presidency, Bolsonaro distanced himself from the PSL and, at one point, was unaffiliated with any party. Although on a different scale and in a less complex political landscape, in Portugal, the far-right party Chega (literally meaning 'Enough') also experienced a sudden rise led by a figure who is equally popular and appears indistinguishable from the party, André Ventura. Founded in 2019, it secured a parliamentary seat in its first year. Three years later, it strengthened its position with 8 seats in the subsequent elections and, by 2024, became the third-largest party in the national Parliament, winning 50 out of 230 seats.[2]

This article incorporates recourse to documentary sources. These include newspaper articles, posts from political parties and security force organizations on their websites, information published by national institutions, and academic literature on the topic, specifically academic dissertations and published studies. Furthermore, this analysis was complemented by information collected through interviews with activists as part of larger research projects conducted by the author/s in these two countries in recent years.

We commence by providing a concise overview of the respective national profiles before focusing on the impact of far-right parties on security force organizations over approximately ten years. We organized the data according to four key questions: How are the security forces structured? How are the security forces organized? How are far-right parties organized? How influential are far-right parties within the representative organizations of security forces?

Brazil – A consolidated Bullet Bench within the Federal Parliament

How are the security forces structured? In Brazil, public security forces are distributed across the Federal Union, State governments, Municipalities and the Federal

District. They were founded and endowed with the capacity to act to ensure public order, prevent violence, and establish mechanisms to resolve security problems in society (Lima 2022). At the federal level, there are three main police organizations: the Federal Police, the Federal Highway Police, and the Federal Penal Police.[3] Each of the 26 states and the federal district has its own civil, military, and penal state police. Together, the total number of police forces, including some more specific forces, stands at 86 police organizations working across the country and deploying just under 700,000 police officers (Lima 2022).

Of this number, 406,384 public security agents belong to the Military Police and 91,926 to the Civil Police, meaning that there is one civil police officer for every four military police officers (Lima 2022). Both represent the police force at the state level, which means that they respond to their state government and the public security secretary nominated by the elected governor. Civil and military forces conduct most public security-related tasks: while the former performs investigative and judiciary operations, the latter is responsible for patrolling the streets (Neme 1999). Unlike the vast majority of police forces worldwide, neither of these two police forces, the Civil and Military, operate in a complete cycle. Each police force holds responsibility for some crimes and ongoing misdemeanors. This explains why there was only one civil police officer for every four military police officers.

How are the security forces organized? Although civil servants gained the right to unionize in Brazil following the transition from military dictatorship (1964–1985) to democracy through the 1988 Constitution, military forces were always legally prevented from organizing. In contrast, civil and federal police succeeded in setting up unions and even held the power to strike until fairly recently.

Each state has several Civil Police unions and associations, some of which have decades of history. Since striking is a constitutional right in Brazil, it is not uncommon for strikes to last months, especially in the public services sector. The Civil Police had previously organized strikes on a frequent basis (Farias 2012). Nevertheless, police officers' rights to strike were revoked in 2012 as a consequence of a prolonged strike.

In 2012, the National Federation of Federal Police Officers (Fenapef) organized one of the largest strikes held by the Federal police. Spread throughout the country, the strike action involved more than nine thousand agents who had participated for approximately 70 days.[4] This strike led the Supreme Court of Brazil to ban the right to strike in any form or modality for all public servants working directly in the field of public security, allegedly because of the risk of maintaining public order and national security.

The Supreme Court ban did not prevent police forces from engaging in various protests. In 2020, a significant number of police officers in Ceará participated in a spontaneous strike, resulting in tragic loss of life. During the 13-day police strike in February, 312 homicides were recorded in the state, representing a 178% increase compared to the previous year.[5] Other wildcat strikes have subsequently occurred in other states The riot in Ceará is also particularly significant in the recent history of police strikes in Brazil, especially due to the incident where a senator, riding a backhoe, was shot while attempting to disperse mutinying police officers in front of a barracks.[6]

Military Police also engage in wildcat strikes, such as those held in Bahia in 2019.[7] In any case, the Military Police, for whom the ban on unionization and strike action has never been relaxed, adopted a solution around class-representative associations. The 1988 Constitution stipulates a legal right to find associations by any group of citizens (regardless of whether civil or military), as long as they hold lawful purposes, which excludes paramilitary associations. Therefore, Military Police have been setting up traditional professional associations, which today number hundreds and are scattered throughout Brazil.

How are the far-right parties organized? Since the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, the far-right political wave gained social support (Gontijo & Ramos 2020). The current political landscape, comprising 29 parties, includes several representatives of the far-right. The main party was the Partido Social Liberal (PSL), which gained prominence in the 2018 Bolsonaro general elections. It is noteworthy that a significant number of politicians elected from the far-right or appointed to political positions declared themselves without any party affiliation in an attitude designed to express distrust of the democratic political system, which definitely favored the conservative and the anti-PT wave rising in Brazil. Bolsonaro himself, after leaving the Social Liberal Party (PSL), and unsuccessfully attempting to found his own party named Aliança pelo Brasil spent two years without being affiliated with any political party.[8] Bolsonaro only joined the Liberal Party (PL) in 2021 which is now considered a major exponent of the right-wing, alongside other significant parties within this spectrum such as the Republicanos (whose most prominent leader is Tarcísio de Freitas, himself with an Armed Force career, was Minister of Infrastructure in Bolsonaro's government and is currently the governor of São Paulo), the Progressistas (PP), and União Brasil.

The term 'far-right' in Brazil is applied to describe political ideologies that espouse conservative, nationalist, and patriotic values as well as strong stances on law and order, and often authoritarian policies. This ideology is championed by libertarian movements, such as the Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL), and individuals who explicitly draw inspiration from the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil. This was also influenced by neoliberal Chilean politics.

The far-right wave provided an opportunity for the continued candidacy of police officers from military to non-military career backgrounds across local, state, and federal levels. Furthermore, the number of police officers standing for elections has increased ever since.

How influential are the far-right parties within representative organizations of security forces? In Brazil, several of the most influential Military and Civil Police associations and unions have expanded their political activities to electoral dynamics, with declared support and financing for particular candidates. There is an explicit objective to turn police associations into 'political schools'. This clearly emerges, for example, in the close relationships between these organizations and political leaders, who often appear in institutional public spaces, sharing and celebrating common achievements, important remarks, and interests.[9] Association leaders intend to get police officers into elected

political positions to convert influence, power, and money into benefits for corporations and the associations themselves. Candidates and elected officials can then attract more members to police associations while also setting legislative agendas favorable to police force interests.

At the state level, security force associations and unions can secure central roles for police candidates as well as support civilian political candidates who defend police interests. It seems clear that the Military Police, in particular, make recourse to associations as a means to enter electoral politics and operate active pressure groups to negotiate bills and parliamentary amendments in favor of security forces' interests. This may be observed, for example, in parliamentary proposals that seek to strengthen association activities, such as the Proposed Amendment to the Constitution (PEC) 443/14, which attempted to attribute the right to police officers and military firefighters to be represented by their associations in judicial or administrative cases.[10]

Consequently, some of the main associations encourage their members to support security force candidates, or others who align with the police agenda. For example, it is common for associations to be present at official ceremonies and take to the stage alongside parliamentarians and already-elected politicians, as well as receive official honors in legislative chambers.[11]

It is important to highlight that, while this is not the case in many countries of the world (Rossi 2020), security agents can run for all elected positions (municipal, state and federal) in Brazil. Despite debates and legislative projects seeking to limit candidacies by public servants, including security forces, Brazilian police still retain high numerical representation in politics. In recent years, we have also seen a real increase in what we would call 'police electoralism, which is a wave of candidates resulting in the mass election of police officers (military, civil, and federal police, among other forces) to the most varied positions in national politics.

Between 2010 and 2018, more than 25,000 police and military individuals were candidates for elections, with 1,860 earning elections (Lima 2022). In 2018, 89.9% of police force candidates represented the right-wing, and in 2022, this number continued to grow, reaching 94.9%. More recently, 103 members of parliament who started their mandates in 2023 are (or were) members of public security forces, a cluster that is popularly known as the *Bullet Bench* (Bancada da Bala, in its original form). Of the 513 federal deputies, 44 are associated with public security. This group is close to the *Evangelical Bench* and renowned for its conservative agenda, raising the profile of extreme moral principles and legislative proposals that usually incorporate militarized points of view (Faganello 2015; Miranda 2019; Novello & Alvarez 2022). For example, in 2023, conservative groups (including the Bullet and Evangelical Benches) pooled efforts to approve legislation determining that indigenous peoples would only have the right to the land under occupation in 1988 when the Brazilian Constitution was enacted.[12] More recently, at the beginning of 2024, both benches coordinated to approve of a law forbidding temporary prison exits for inmates during holidays and other commemorative dates. Despite all the evidence regarding the social benefits of these temporary releases, the lobbying undertaken by some Bullet Bench leaders was stronger and helped secure their passage through the Senate.[13]

Portugal – The alleged police control by Chega

How are the security forces structured? In Portugal, security forces are divided into two main groups: military and civil forces. On the military side, the armed forces comprise three branches: the Navy, the Army, and the Air Force. The National Republican Guard (GNR, Portuguese acronym) represents a gendarmerie established in 1911 in the wake of the abolition of the monarchy. The GNR fulfills a preventive local role, including fiscal, border, and nature inspections, in addition to other duties.

On the civil side, there are a series of police forces, including the Prison Guards, the Judiciary Police, and the Public Security Police (PSP), which also incorporate diverse branches. Although today part of the civil security forces, the PSP held the status of a military force until 1985, which constituted an obstacle to their right to the organization.

Security forces were long associated with the dictatorship regime that spanned almost half of the 20th century (1926–1974), even though the political police were a separate branch despite the Carnation Revolution (1974) stemming from a military coup. Following the 1976 Constitution, the police became clear members of the new democratic polity (Cerezales 2010). A slow process of emancipation then took place, and police missions, in particular, came to be seen more as defending citizens than the state (Cerezales 2010; Durão 2008).

How are the security forces organized? The advent of democracy in Portugal in the wake of the 1974 Carnation Revolution led to a surge in demand from workers for the right to form free trade unions and umbrella union structures, which had formerly been prohibited under dictatorship. Consequently, security forces, particularly police forces, also exerted pressure on the right to organize.

A police group was launched to gain the right to unionize the Comissão Pró-Associação Sindical da PSP. This group staged several initiatives: a referendum, gaining solidarity support from the European Confederation of Police Unions, and submitting a claim to the ILO (which had declined). One important event marked this period of protest, the so-called Dry and Wet, as it became popularized by the press. This refers to a demonstration held in 1989 where, on the one hand, there was police protesting and, on the other hand, police repressing them with water canons.

After a long protest period, the police successfully gained the right to establish professional associations in 1990. About 10 years later, in 2001, a military association law was published.

As 1990 police law only ensured the right to information and consultation, the police never stopped demanding the right to establish trade unions. European solidarity again became important. The European Confederation of Police Unions submitted a complaint to the European Council alleging the violation of the European Social Charter. This pressure led to the passing of police union law in 2002.[14] Several proposals were discussed, with the final law approved by the two main political parties, the Socialists (PS) and Social Democrats (PSD). This law did not extend either to the right to strike or the right to affiliation with non-police confederations, thus preventing police unions from participating in the broader union movement. In addition, the law did not

establish any objective and predictable criteria for representativeness. Therefore, the number of police unions correspondingly increased over time, reaching 19 in 2019, which made negotiations (even more) difficult (Rego et al. 2023). Hence, in 2019, new legislation was passed to regulate the proliferation of police unions.[15] The current law sets quantitative criteria that enable only a few unions to hold negotiations and stimulate umbrella police structures. The right to strike is still prohibited for PSP[16] and for ensuring partisan independence (otherwise, police symbols cannot be used). Recently, the demand for the right to strike has again clearly emerged, specifically splashing across the front page of the main police union's website.[17]

How are the far-right parties organized? Portugal had right-wing parties in its political landscape during the democratic period. However, the advent of far-right parties only occurred in the 2000s, and they did not achieve national parliamentary representation until 2019, thus ending what some authors considered an exception in Europe.

The origins of the first far-right party date back to 1985. At that time, the Democrat Renewal Party/Partido Renovado Democrático (PRD),[18] a left-center party, gained several seats in the national parliament. After significantly losing ground in the 1990s elections, the party turned toward the far right by merging with a nationalist movement. Thus, we may identify 2000 as the year of the first far-right party in Portugal, the National Renovator Party/Partido Nacional Renovador-PNR, which changed to Ergue-te/Stand up in 2020.[19] The PNR/Ergue-te never succeeded in getting into parliament, but also in its nationalist and Catholic orientations and its close relationship with extremist movements. Since 2005, the party has held the same president, José Pinto Coelho, a close friend of Mário Machado, a criminally convicted neo-nazi. Other small far-right parties have existed, but with scant visibility.

The Portuguese political system reached a turning point in 2019. The far-right party, Chega, was founded and received one member from the national parliament. Its president is André Ventura, a public figure, a former member of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), and a TV football commentator. In the following elections, Chega elected 12 members of parliament out of 230 seats to become the third largest political force. This position is reinforced by the election of 50 members in the 2024 elections.[20]

How influential are far-right parties within representative organizations of security forces? The observable influence of right-wing parties on the Portuguese police force runs down four distinct avenues that collectively illustrate an increasing degree of permeability. First, it stressed its support for police protests and standing up for their honor. While other political parties also express support for police forces, far-right parties adopt a particular dynamic to draw attention to their support for the police, which happens even when police responsibility is yet to be assessed. One of the most relevant cases occurred in 2017, when 17 police officers were accused by the Public Ministry of racism and violence against the young inhabitants of a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Lisbon in 2015. Subsequently, the PNR staged a solidarity demonstration,[21] covered by the press, claiming that the Public Ministry was considering criminals as little angels and police officers as bad guys. In 2019, eight police officers were found guilty[22].

A second means of influence is through new union organizations. Police unions gained particular visibility in 2019 when their proliferation was highlighted by the media in conjunction with the overlap between the number of union members and the number of board members, which led to suspicions of opportunistic recourse to union times in some cases. Furthermore, Chega's president invited two police union leaders to stand as candidates for European elections.[23] In addition, in 2022, Chega announced the establishment of a union federation in keeping with a similar initiative by Spanish Vox.[24] However, no further steps were performed.

Third, the far-right became influential in the dynamic Facebook group setup in 2019. The Movimento Zero/Zero Movement-M0 (in direct association with the North American public security ideology known as Zero Tolerance) was launched in May 2019, gathering both police and guards, in addition to many other supporters, quickly reaching more than 50,000 followers, even when the total number of GNR and PSP staff did not exceed 45,000 individuals by 2022 (Rego et al. 2023). Chega declared its support for M0 at different times, with one of the most salient occasions in 2019 when Chega president gave a speech to a police demonstration wearing a M0 t-shirt.[25]

Fourth, it influences mainstream trade unions. The press reported the likelihood of a Chega member running under the leadership of the main police union, the ASPP.[26] Not only is this union one of the oldest police unions but it is also considered the most representative and holds the largest number of members.

As a result, the party leader recently made statements implying that he now controls the police force. While a wave of police protests took on particular relevance in early 2024, triggered by increasing the risk benefit payment received by the PJ and not to the PSP, one police union leader declared that the March general elections might be in danger, as the police are responsible for transporting ballot boxes.[27] Many public-opinion makers and politicians perceive this statement as a direct threat. Shortly after, the Chega leader popped up to pacify public opinion and ensure that the police would not constitute an obstacle to the elections,[28] as if controlling the police forces.

Other examples might be put forward, including Chega supporting illegal police actions, such as changing the announced location of a demonstration to ensure greater proximity to political debate and exerting pressure during the run-up to the March 2024 elections.[29]

Discussion and conclusion

The relationship between security forces' representative organizations and far-right political parties in Brazil and Portugal reveals significant commonalities. In both countries, police forces have the right to organize into trade unions, while military police can form associations. However, in Brazil, far-right representation is more prominent among the leaders of these security force organizations. By contrast, Portugal's far-right Chega party has gained influence in Parliament and over police forces, though on a smaller scale. Electoral involvement is substantially higher in Brazil, with many more candidates and elected officials from the security forces, which partly reflects the country's larger size.

In Brazil, the security forces have become a critical component of the political far-right. This movement, although not entirely new (Gontijo & Ramos 2020), surged with

the election of far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. The Bullet Bench, a political bloc within the Federal Parliament, has solidified as a lasting institution, composed of members from the military and evangelical communities. Since 2016, the number of police force candidates and elected officials has grown exponentially, with electoral competition becoming a central focus of police union activities.

In Portugal, dissatisfaction within the police – stemming from low wages, poor working conditions, and increased scrutiny over police violence and racism – has triggered frequent protests. The far-right's influence over the police has paralleled Chega's rise. Chega's leader has supported Movimento Zero, an online police protest group, and defended police officers even before responsibility for violent events was fully established. This suggests a calculated strategy to expand the party's electoral base by capitalizing on discontent. Notably, Chega did not criticize the proliferation of police unions, despite reports in 2019 that some unions had as many leaders as members (Rego et al. 2023). Instead, the party's leader invited unionized police officers to stand as candidates in elections.

In both countries, far-right parties actively encourage the political involvement of security forces, with unions and associations playing a key role in facilitating this alignment. These findings, summarized in Table 1, challenge the conventional assumption that far-right parties dismiss the role of intermediary organizations and that the union movement universally opposes far-right ideologies. On the contrary, they show that there is a bidirectional dynamic of influence, in which one side may become dominant: While in Portugal, Chega is trying to influence union leaders and speaks as though it controls the police unions, in Brazil, the security forces have already become a clear recruitment base for the far-right.

In democratic societies, security forces – both military and police – hold the state's legitimate monopoly on violence. However, like other occupations, they become political actors when advocating for better working conditions (Lipset 1969). In many countries, security forces face low wages and poor facilities, making these careers less attractive. New challenges, such as technological crime and increased migration, further complicate their work. Despite the fact that armed professionals are often barred from organizing in many countries, security forces tend to seek avenues to have their voices heard, at the very least through professional associations (Offe & Wiesenthal 1980; Pratr 1987). Social media has also facilitated alternative forms of protest that often compete with traditional union structures.

The cases of Brazil and Portugal show not only ideological affinities based on nationalist and authoritarian values (Villamil et al. 2023), but also that the representative organizations of security forces – both formal and informal – are being influenced by far-right parties and become contributors to the spread of their ideology. Far-right parties in both countries use these organizations as 'transmission belts' to communicate with security force members, recruit candidates, spread their ideas, and incite social unrest.

This article adopts an exploratory approach, utilizing publicly available data. Further research is necessary to better understand how far-right parties use security force organizations to transmit their political objectives (Chan 1993; Zhu et al. 2011) and how effectively these organizations serve that function.

Table 1. Synthesis of Brazil and Portugal cases.

Man features	Brazil	Portugal
Structure of Security Forces	Civil and military police (Federal, State and Municipal levels)	Civil and military police
Right to organize	Yes (Civil police can unionize; military police can form associations)	Yes (Civil police can unionize; military police can form associations)
Far-right political representation	Far-right parties have seats in the Federal Parliament– from those, 103 belong to the Bullet Bench	Chega party gained seats in the national Parliament
Electoral involvement of Security Forces	25,000 candidates and 1,860 elected	At least 2 candidates
Far-right alignement with Security Forces	The large majority of police candidates are aligned with far-right parties	Chega claims influence over police forces in particular
Key representative organizations	Police unions and military associations	Police unions and social media groups
Methods of far-right influence	Encouraging members to support security forces candidates	Supporting police protests; inviting police forces to be candidates
Notable trends	Increasing police electoral	Important salience of police protest and Movimento Zero and Chega support

Source: Authors' own creation.

Despite evidence from Europe showing that trade unions are resisting far-right advances – such as the 2023 European solidarity campaign with Italy's CGIL trade union confederation following the attack on its headquarters, and the 2024 anti-far-right demonstrations in Berlin, where unions played a major role – there is still a need to examine worker organizations from different perspectives.

Far-right parties utilize a range of mechanisms to expand their influence, including professional associations, trade unions, and social media groups. Their goal is to exert control over these fragmented structures (Martínez Lucio 2015), taking advantage of established platforms for the dissemination of information and ideas.

Three key conclusions emerge from the comparison between the Brazilian and Portuguese cases, which future research should not overlook. First, the diversity within security forces presents analytical challenges. Despite a basic distinction between civil and military forces, police forces – due to their civil and community-integrated nature – are more susceptible to external influences. Second, the organizational structure of security forces is fragmented, with claims being expressed through unions, voluntary associations, and social media groups. Far-right parties exploit this fragmentation (Martínez Lucio 2015) to exert influence, particularly through elusive social media

networks that deserve special attention. Third, the relationship between representative organizations and political parties is undergoing a profound transformation. While neoliberalism intensifies class antagonisms and facilitates the expansion of far-right authoritarianism, it does not necessarily mean that institutions like trade unions are completely excluded from the equation. Although far-right parties traditionally dismiss intermediary organizations, they also use these structures to achieve their political goals, transforming them into platforms for promoting far-right ideologies, either in the sense of authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff 2014), in the sense of an opponent to neoliberalism (Worth 2023), or other. Furthermore, far-right parties are increasingly engaged with sectors like the security forces, taking advantage of left-wing parties lack of involvement (Durão & Argentin 2024; Papanicolaou & Papageorgiou 2016).

In conclusion, further research is needed to explore the dynamics between security forces and far-right parties in greater depth. This should include identifying the central nodes within these networks and examining the profiles of the individuals involved. Special attention should be given to three key areas: the police, due to their vulnerability to influence as a civil and community-integrated force (Yilmaz 2022); social media-based groups, which remain elusive yet influential; and the bidirectional influence between far-right parties and trade unions, exploring how representative organizations may also shape far-right strategies.

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Notes

1. Cf. https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/eleicao-em-numeros/noticia/2018/10/11/psl-e-o-partido-que-ganhou-maior-numero-de-votos-na-eleicao-para-a-camara-mdb-e-o-que-mais-perdeu.ghtml
2. Cf. https://www.parlamento.pt/Parlamento/Paginas/ResultadosEleitorais.aspx
3. It is important to note there is also a Federal Railroad Police, which is almost inoperative due to the lack of active police officers (Lima 2022).
4. Cf. https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2012/10/15/pf-anuncia-fim-da-greve-de-70-dias-em-pelo-menos-15-estados.htm?cmpid=copiaecola
5. Cf. https://g1.globo.com/ce/ceara/noticia/2020/03/06/312-pessoas-foram-assassinadas-no-ceara-durante-motim-da-pm-diz-secretaria-da-seguranca.ghtml
6. Cf. https://brasil.elpais.com/politica/2020-02-19/cid-gomes-e-baleado-em-sobral-no-ceara-em-meio-a-tensao-com-policiais-grevistas.html
7. Cf. https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2019/10/08/policiais-militares-da-bahia-decretam-greve-por-tempo-indeterminado.htm
8. Cf. https://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2021/11/30/bolsonaro-se-filia-ao-pl-apos-dois-anos-sem-partido.ghtml; https://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2021/11/30/bolsonaro-se-filia-ao-pl-apos-dois-anos-sem-partido.ghtml
9. Cf. https://www.al.sp.gov.br/noticia/?id=384436
10. Cf. https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/450747-proposta-garante-a-pms-o-direito-de-serem-representados-por-suas-associacoes/
11. Cf. https://www.al.sp.gov.br/noticia/?id=336318, https://www.al.sp.gov.br/noticia/?id=384311, https://www.al.sp.gov.br/noticia/?id=457323.

12. Cf. https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/966618-o-que-e-marco-temporal-e-quais-os-argumentos-favoraveis-e-contrarios/
13. Cf. https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/politica/noticia/2024-02/senado-aprova-fim-da-saidinha-de-presos
14. Cf. https://www.pgdlisboa.pt/leis/lei_mostra_articulado.php?nid=3236&tabela=leis&so_miolo=
15. Cf.https://www.pgdlisboa.pt/leis/lei_mostra_articulado.php?nid=3238&tabela=leis&ficha=1&pagina=1&so_miolo=
16. Cf.https://www.pgdlisboa.pt/leis/lei_mostra_articulado.php?nid=3238&tabela=leis&ficha=1&pagina=1&so_miolo=
17. Cf. https://www.aspp-psp.pt/ (22.02.2024).
18. Cf, https://www.cne.pt/partido/ergue-te
19. Other few and small far-right parties existed but with scant visibility – cf. Cf. https://www.cne.pt/content/partidos-politicos-1
20. Cf. https://www.dn.pt/5894684530/subida-do-chega-entre-os-emigrantes-manteve-vantagem-da-alianca-democratica/
21. Cf, https://www.publico.pt/2017/07/15/sociedade/noticia/lider-do-pnr-acusa-ministerio-publico-de-enxovalhar-a-policia-1779270#&gid=1&pid=1
22. Cf.https://www.jn.pt/justica/interior/oito-agentes-da-psp-condenados-pelas-agressoes-na-cova-da-moura-10920329.html/. And more recently, the Chega leader confirmed his support for a police officer, a candidate for Chega in the 2019 election, suspected of defrauding the PSP–Cf. https://sol.sapo.pt/2019/07/07/candidato-do-chega-constituido-arguido-por-fraude-contra-a-psp/
23. Cf. Dois líderes sindicais da PSP nas listas da coligação Basta de André Ventura (dn.pt)
24. Cf. https://rr.sapo.pt/noticia/politica/2022/10/17/solidariedade-chega-quer-criar-federacao-sindical-para-trabalhadores-que-nao-se-reveem-na-esquerda/304062/
25. Cf.https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/pais/manifestacao-de-policias-discurso-de-andre-ventura-no-palanque-causou-mal-estar_v1187276
26. Cf. https://www.sabado.pt/portugal/detalhe/o-assalto-do-chega-ao-sindicato-da-policia
27. Cf. https://www.record.pt/fora-de-campo/detalhe/policia-diz-que-eleicoes-podem-estar-em-risco-quem-transporta-os-boletins-e-as-urnas-sao-as-forcas-de-seguranca
28. Cf. https://jornaleconomico.sapo.pt/noticias/nao-vai-acontecer-andre-ventura-garante-que-psp-nao-vai-boicotar-eleicoes-legislativas/
29. Cf. https://expresso.pt/sociedade/seguranca/2024-02-20-Protesto-nao-oficial-dos-policias-no-Capitolio-tinha-sido-combinado-horas-antes-em-grupos-privados-online-8378b346

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