

Fight Like Marielle

A slain Brazilian councilwoman inspires more women to enter politics

AS THE TALL BLACK WOMAN STOOD AT A LECTERN SPEAKING ABOUT VIOLENCE AGAINST women on International Women's Day, a man's voice yelled from the audience, defending the military dictatorship in Brazil. Rio de Janeiro City Councilwoman Marielle Franco paused, set down her written speech, held on to the lectern with both hands and lifted her head to look into her heckler's eyes.

"I will not be interrupted! I will not tolerate a citizen who comes here and doesn't know how to listen to an elected woman!" she fired back, and as she did, she stressed the word *elected*.

That was the last time Franco would address the city council.

On March 14 of this year, as she was leaving a black women's empowerment meeting and heading home to her partner, Mônica Benício, Franco was murdered along with her driver by a gunman who shot the car nine times. The next day, her coffin was displayed at the Rio City Hall. Millions of Brazilians wept over the burial of a woman whom many had regarded as the future of their country. The United Nations denounced her murder; Pope Francis phoned consolations to her mother; ex-President Lula da Silva expressed grief over the murder.

"They tried to bury us, but didn't realize we were seeds," repeated tearful young women in Rio de Janeiro, Paris, New York and other cities, where they turned their mourning into strength, picked up her flag, drew her face on walls and wore T-shirts reading, "Fight like Marielle."

Franco grew up poor, became a mother in her teens and survived domestic violence, but she

MAURO PIMENTEL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

MÍDIA NINJA



Brazilians demonstrate in front of the Municipal Chamber in Rio de Janeiro (opposite) after the assassination of councilwoman and activist Marielle Franco (above).

went on to become an intellectual. She studied sociology on a full scholarship from Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro and got a master's in public administration from Universidade Federal Fluminense. Working as a human rights activist, Franco opened her office door to black women, the LGBT community and poor people. If those who walked in looked hungry, she opened the fridge and got them something to eat. Her campaign slogan was "I am because we are," an Ubuntu saying that can also be translated as "humanity toward others."

In 2016, in Franco's first run for city council, more than 46,000 voters chose the black bisexual feminist activist, a woman born in a *favela* (an overcrowded Brazilian slum), to represent them. She was the only black councilwoman in a city where more than 50 percent of the population is black, but where political representation does not reflect demographics. She served on Rio's human rights commission for nearly a decade, and was in charge of an investigatory committee overseeing the recent military intervention in Rio.

In a country where abortion is still punishable by jail time except in cases

of rape, risk to the woman's life and fetal anencephaly, Franco first focused on legalizing the procedure in Rio de Janeiro—unfortunately, to no success. Her legacy also includes campaigns against sexual harassment and a project to aid working mothers by allowing child care facilities to remain open overnight. She presented an astonishing 116 proposals in only 15 months in office.

In November 2017, Franco started the group Women in Politics to promote diverse candidates regardless of their sex or color. Its motto is "One woman [rises and] pulls the other."

"She was the sunflower; we're the seeds," says Flávia Cândido, one of Franco's former assistants. A sunflower was the symbol of Franco's campaign, and there were sunflowers in her office every day.

Franco's legacy has led to more black women and more women in general in leadership roles. As of this year, Brazil is ranked 153 out of 193 countries for women in government. After Franco's murder, international donations of \$10 million (U.S.) poured in to Brazil to foster and support black women aspiring to political leadership. They are the seeds from Franco's flower.

One seed is Renata de Souza, Franco's former chief of staff. She's running for Rio de Janeiro's state assembly on the issue of violence against women. Almost one-third of Brazilian women said they suffered some form of violence, from threats to attempted murder, in 2016. In 2015, a Brazilian woman was killed every two hours. De Souza says she decided to run for office "because we're being killed. There'll be many of us fighting for diversity, for the courage to fight against the killing of the black, poor population. We will stand for a fair and inclusive society."

Afro-Brazilians comprised 71 percent of murder victims in Brazil in 2016. Between January 2016 and August 2017, 124 human rights activists were killed. In January 2018 alone, 154 people were killed in the course of police action in Rio de Janeiro state.

"How many more will have to die for this war to end?" Franco asked a day before she was murdered. The investigation into who killed her is still ongoing. Investigators call this one of the most challenging cases they've faced. Meanwhile, on social media feeds, people count the days until Franco's murderer is brought to justice.

The upcoming October election will be a tough battle for women. It's the first election since the controversial impeachment of Brazil's first woman president, Dilma Rousseff.

"It is a moment of political courage," says Tainá de Paula, who is also running for Rio's state assembly.

"We won't back down," agrees Talíria Petrone, a councilwoman in Niterói who is running for congress, despite threats she has received.

On March 8, as Franco delivered her last speech, she was offered roses. "The roses of resistance bloom from the asphalt," she said. "We receive roses but we'll have our fists clenched against those who want to have a say about our lives." While the audience applauded, she closed her eyes, welcoming the support. Her last words caught on tape were simply: "Let's go together and occupy everything!"

Rio's city council members voted to rename the council's lectern after her. It awaits the voices of other elected black women. And in the streets, human rights activists, colleagues, friends and voters are still yelling, "Marielle is here!"—for Marielle Franco refuses to be interrupted.

—SOFIA PERPÉTUA