



Marielle Franco
14 March 2018
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

MARIELLE FRANCO

WHEN **MARIELLE FRANCO** told her partner, Mônica Benício, that she was toying with the idea of running for Rio de Janeiro City Council, Benício's gut reaction was 'bad idea'. As a bisexual Afro-Brazilian woman raised in a slum, Franco incarnated several of Brazil's most vulnerable and marginalized demographics, and speaking out in favour of these long-oppressed groups was sure to make her some powerful enemies.

'I knew that if she won a seat it would be a really hard position,' recalled Benício at a hole-in-the-wall café in the northern Rio neighbourhood of Tijuca. 'But it never occurred to me that it could cost Marielle her life.'

Brazil is a notoriously dangerous place for environmentalists and members of the country's landless peasants' movement, who often pay with their lives for daring to defy potent interests in the largely lawless Amazon region. But Rio de Janeiro, Benício reasoned, was another story. Although crime in the so-called Marvellous City is rampant and often deadly, Rio hadn't seen a high-profile political assassination in many years.

And so Benício was disappointed, but not unduly worried, when Franco, her on-and-off partner for some 14 years, decided to run for city council in 2016. Franco went on to make an impressive showing, securing the fifth-highest vote tally among the city's 51 council members.

She had been serving for a little over a year when, on 14 March 2018, still-unidentified assailants opened fire on the car she was travelling in, killing her and her driver, Anderson Gomes. She was 38 years old.

Franco was born in 1979 in the Maré, Rio de Janeiro's largest slum, a dense warren of buildings perched on the edge of Guanabara Bay. The state is conspicuously absent from the Maré, as it is from the majority of the city's other thousand-plus *favelas* or slums. Young men with AK-47s slung over their shoulders – so-called *soldados*, or soldiers, in the employ of the drug-trafficking gangs that have long been the Maré's de facto strongmen – ostentatiously ply their trade on the sidewalks.

Like so many other families who have settled in the city's slums, Franco's family has its origins in Brazil's hardscrabble north-east. Her mother, Marinete da Silva, moved to Rio from the north-eastern state of Paraíba; her father Antônio's family also hails from the region.

A devout Catholic who bucked the odds stacked against her by attending law school, Da Silva kept her daughters on what she described as a 'short leash'. Franco was often left in charge of her younger sister, Anielle, and began contributing to the household at the tender age of 11.

A promising student, Franco signed up for an intense, year-long preparatory course for Brazil's college entrance exam, run by the NGO Redes da Maré.

'Marielle was a good student – focused and interested and curious,' the director of Redes da Maré, Eliana Sousa Silva, told the author. 'It was very clear she had goals for her life.'

But it also proved a tumultuous time for

‘FRANCO INCARNATED BRAZIL’S MOST MARGINALIZED DEMOGRAPHICS’

Franco. ‘She started waking up to what it meant to be black, what it meant to be a woman, what it meant to come from the slums,’ said Eliana.

Halfway through the course, Franco got pregnant and dropped out, giving birth at age 19 to her only child, Luyara. She re-enrolled the following year, passed the college entrance exam and was given a scholarship to study Social Sciences at Rio’s Pontific Catholic University. She’d go on to pursue a master’s in public administration, writing a dissertation about security in Rio’s slums.

In 2007, she went to work as a parliamentary assistant to Marcelo Freixo, a state representative from the left-leaning Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), whose investigation into Rio’s brutal paramilitary gangs resulted in repeated death threats and

a 24/7 security detail. During the nearly 10 years Franco spent with Freixo, she worked on the Legislative Assembly’s Commission for Human Rights, an experience that gave her a broad understanding of the scope and tenor of human-rights abuses in the state. It was here that Franco heard firsthand the harrowing tales of abuse against those who belonged to the demographic groups that she would come to regard as defining her – women, Afro-Brazilians and homosexuals.

‘When you’re LGBT, when you’re black, when you’re from the *favelas*, like both of us are, and you have the capacity to run for office, you realize you have a responsibility to,’ said David Miranda, Franco’s fellow PSOL member and Rio City councilman. ‘You see, you have to do it to open up opportunities for people like us.’



But Franco’s nuclear family didn’t support the idea of a run for office any more than her partner, Mônica, whom she met on a vacation back in 2004. They moved into an apartment together in 2016. The two were engaged to be married in 2019.

Franco regarded the 2016 City Council race as a practice run, and few were more surprised than she when she scored nearly 47 000 votes, making her the fifth most popular candidate for the office that election cycle. But the transition from parliamentary aide to councilwoman proved rocky, according to Miranda, who shared a desk with Franco.

‘It’s a place that’s dominated by straight white men, and they really do everything they can to make you feel like you don’t belong,’ he said, recalling the racist, classist and homophobic insults lobbed at her by conservative colleagues.

But although her legislative initiatives met with limited success in the little over 15 months that she served, Franco did succeed in bringing visibility to the causes she championed. The week before she was killed, she delivered a blistering speech on one of her most enduring topics – rampant police violence in *favelas*.

‘Marielle was the kind of person who was extremely confrontational with the powerful but really respectful with people in weaker positions, like, for example, the cleaning people or service people,’ said Glenn Greenwald, a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and Miranda’s husband. ‘She was such a force of nature that when I first met her, I came away a bit shaken, a bit intimidated – and I’m not someone who’s easily intimidated.’

Greenwald said he often thinks about how Franco’s powerful presence may have got under the skin of her conservative colleagues, ‘who are not used to be challenged – particularly by a black, LGBTQ woman from the *favela*.’

On 14 March 2018, at roughly 9:30 pm, the car in which Franco was returning home from a public event in northern Rio was peppered with bullets. She was hit four times in the face and died instantly. The slaying of Franco and her driver unleashed a massive outpouring of grief that reached around the globe, triggering protests across Brazil and abroad. But despite the unprecedented international response, police investigators made little progress towards solving the case, which observers say has all the signs of a carefully orchestrated hired assassination. ‘It is incontestable that Marielle Franco was summarily executed for her political activity in the defence of the causes she defended,’ prosecutors said in a statement cited by *The Guardian*.

In March 2019, police arrested two suspects in connection with Franco’s murder – the first sign of progress in the investigation.

‘It’s obvious there are very important figures behind her murder who are sure they can order something this barbaric with impunity,’ said Benício, who has dropped her work as an architect to devote herself to pursuing justice for Franco and Gomes.

But whoever ordered the killing, and whatever their motive may have been, Benício says it’s clear that it has backfired. ‘Before Marielle was killed, not a lot of people knew of her,’ she said, glancing down at the portrait of Franco tattooed on her forearm. ‘But now the whole world knows about her, and the truth is that, in death, Marielle was able to touch so many more people than she was when she was alive.’



A protest following the killing of Marielle Franco