

Janduís: a leftist oasis in the outback of ambushes

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In the Potiguar outback, where hostilities are not limited to Quixotic bravery and cowardice, the city of Janduís has become an oasis for the ideas advocated by the PSOL. In November 2020, the population of just over 5.3 thousand residents not only elected the party's candidate for mayor – whose vice mayor is also a fellow party member – but also granted six of the nine seats in the City Council to the party. The electoral victory scenario was completed with the voting percentages: Salomão Gurgel (PSOL) got 56.06% of the votes, against 43.94% of his opponent, candidate Silvia Helena, from the PL-PSDB coalition, and accredited himself to continue the work of the then mayor Zé Bezerra, the first mayor elected by the PSOL in Rio Grande do Norte.

The context of the 2020 elections in Janduís could be the story line of a detective story. There was more than the impositions of the pandemic. In April, when the community traditionally gets involved in the Passion of the Christ spectacle, staged for more than 20 years by local actors and a cultural pride of the town, the murder of businessman Raimundo Gonçalves de Lima Neto stunned that Easter holiday. Netinho de Nilton, as he was known, was the victim of an ambush when he arrived at his farm in Campo Grande, a neighboring town to Janduís, which borders Paraíba. Netinho was a pre-candidate for mayor of Janduís for the PSOL and was emerging as the favorite in the voting intentions. He was 35 years old when he was the target of four shots fired by bandits who approached him at the entrance of the rural property that he had bought about a month before. Netinho, according to the Civil Police, was forced to get off the motorcycle he was riding and go in the direction of a bush, on the edge of the dirt road that

gives access to the farm. He was executed. The state deputy Sandro Pimentel (PSOL) has no doubts that this is a political crime.

– Netinho was a very dear person in town, a young, hardworking man, who had been with PSOL for a year. Of course he would win the election.

The murder, so far unsolved, despite the fact that the Homicide and Personal Protection Division of Rio Grande do Norte has assigned a police officer to deal directly with the case – which is not usual when dealing with occurrences in the interior of the state – marked the municipal elections in Janduís from then on.

The PSOL was divided between following up on the investigations into Netinho's murder and reconfiguring its electoral campaign in the city. It looked for an experienced name, already known to the population, not only as a real possibility of victory, but also as a precaution against other violent attacks that could compromise the course of the elections. Salomão Gurgel knows well what goes on in those backlands bordering Paraíba, whose origins are rooted in a disposition toward conflict.

Janduís only received its name in 1943, when it was still a district of Carnaúbas. The name is a tribute to a tribe of Cariri Indians who lived in the region before the general extermination of the native peoples promoted by the colonizers. Before this, it had other names as a village and one of them, São Bento Velho, referred to the devotion to the Catholic saint cultivated by the founder of the town, farmer Canuto Gurgel.

Alongside the religious and labor traditions, the population of Janduís also incorporated a confrontational posture to their way of debating and solving things. It didn't take long for the recurrent tumults and arguments that ended up in

“deeds of fact” to rename the place as São Bento do Bofete. With the passing of time, the bellicose tradition specialized beyond slaps and blows, and Salomão remembers that there is a side of doing politics in the outback that only gets into a fight if it is to kill. Because of what he has seen in his 72 years of existence, the new mayor of Janduís, when he put himself forward to replace Netinho in the dispute, sought votes with reinforced security and kept his residence and his work as a doctor in Caicó, one hundred kilometers from Janduís.

– Here we have an opposition that kills. We did the whole campaign with an escort, because gunmen do exist – says the mayor.

Salomão Gurgel is a protagonist of the fertile ground that Janduís became for leftist aspirations in the middle of the northeastern outback. During the dictatorship and while militating in the Communist Party, he went to study medicine in Moscow, in the then Soviet Union. At the end of the military period, already in the MDB, which “was the leftist party in RN,” he returned to Brazil to revalidate his diploma. He ended up replacing his brother, Sebastião Gurgel, who had fallen ill, in the dispute for the mayor’s office. He was elected mayor of Janduís for the first time in a six-year term, breaking the political hegemony of the Maia family, in command of the city since emancipation in 1962. The doctor would also elect his successor, Zé Bezerra, for the Workers Party (PT). Bezerra was the first PT mayor in Rio Grande do Norte, and Salomão would be elected again for the same party in 2004. Both left the party in the face of the tendencies of the center and the coalitions of Lula’s party. At the time of the announcement of his entry into the PSOL, in 2015, Salomão stressed that the decision was to “revalidate the struggle of the Brazilian left” and that his actions would not be only in Janduís, but in strengthening the party throughout Rio Grande do Norte. In 2016, Zé Bezerra would become the first PSOL

mayor in Janduís. Salomão now succeeds his friend in office and counts on the majority in the Chamber to expand the work of social inclusion and political awareness advocated by the PSOL.

The challenges in this outback flank for the project of the left are robust and gain missionary airs even in the face of a victorious and ascendant PSOL scenario. The region still coexists with labor exploitation, land concentration, and political oligarchies used to dominating the popular forces. Even in the electoral oasis, it is good not to forget that oppression is always on the prowl.