

Prominent Pentecostal Pastor Under Investigation for Corruption

Brazilian federal police sought to question a prominent pastor and carried out arrest and search warrants across the country on Friday as part of an investigation into possible corruption involving 1.6 billion *reais* (\$475 million) in excess mining royalties.

Silas Malafaia, one of Brazil's most influential evangelical preachers, is accused of laundering money through church accounts.

Police said the investigation, "Operation Timóteo," involved 16 searches and raids across 11 states, including 29 interrogations, four detention warrants, 12 arrests and the seizure of over 70 million *reais* (\$21 million) in assets.

The scheme, which the police said was run by an unnamed senior Mining and Energy Ministry official along with other public servants and law firms aimed to raise the value of royalties owed to municipal governments by mining companies.

A person familiar with the probe said among those affected by the scheme was Vale SA, the world's top iron ore producer. Vale did not have an immediate comment.

"Operation Timóteo" is the latest graft probe clouding the political climate in Brazil, where a larger corruption scandal involving state firms, contractors and hundreds of politicians.

Former President Dilma Rousseff, who was impeached in August, tried for years to get Congress to raise royalties, a move that regional governments endorsed but mining firms opposed.

Municipalities get about 65 percent of mining royalties through the so-called CFEM tax every year.

The probe began last year when a government ombudsman asked the police to investigate whether the tax records of the mining ministry official were consistent with his income. According to the police, the official might have earned at least 7 million reais from the scheme.

Malafaia, a Rio de Janeiro-based Pentecostal pastor with over 1.3 million followers on Twitter, has written books that have sold in the millions and his sermons are broadcast around the globe.

Malafaia was an outspoken opponent of Rousseff during her successful 2014 re-election campaign, urging his legion of followers to vote against her.

The pastor took to Twitter on Friday to blast the police operation against him, saying that he is currently in Sao Paulo but received a phone call from authorities informing him that they had raided his house in Rio.

Malafaia said that he receives donations from “countless people” and that “if some criminal offers me a donation, and I don’t know the origin of the money, that makes me a criminal?”
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