Democratic Messages From Brazil

Theodore Jacqueney

Brazil grows good coffee and grotesque military despots. Now increasing numbers of courageous Brazilians are trying to recultivate democracy. Under the military regime that has ruled Brazil for the last fourteen-and-a-half years, torture and executions have been widespread, although the predations of the notorious "death squads" have abated in recent years. Perhaps ten thousand people, however, remain in political exile. Nearly five thousand more are official "nonpersons," with political and civil rights annulled, passports and travel rights withdrawn, and employment or business opportunities curtailed.

Today, civilian pressures on the military regime are mounting. Every major Brazilian city has sprouted committees calling for amnesty of political prisoners and exiles, and for the restoration of the rights of citizens who had them annulled. Although similar popular aspirations for political prisoner amnesties and domestic liberalization have been growing in other Latin American tyrannies from Chile to Cuba, in no other nation have these issues struck such a strong public chord. Amnesty campaigns have been launched by Brazil's only legal opposition party, the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB—which won a majority of the popular vote in the November election), as well as by the National Catholic Bishops Conference and organizations of lay Catholics, dissident military officers, women, and students.

One appeal from Brazil for American help was brought to the United States recently by a radical lawyer, Mrs. Terezinha Zerbini, the president of Brazil's Feminine Movement for Amnesty. The wife of a general stripped of his political rights after the 1964 military coup, Mrs. Zerbini, aged fifty, is the mother of two grown children. "Constitutional law was broken to prevent structural reforms" that were meant to confront the extreme disparities between rich and poor in Brazil, Mrs. Zerbini told me in an interview in New York in November. "The violence was done to prevent communism. Yes, there were Communists in Brazil. But there were also churchmen, students, workers, and people who sincerely believed in liberal democracy. The destiny of all of them was the same—repression. People have lived castrated by their fear."

Mrs. Zerbini said she did not become politically active until 1975, when she attended the United Nations International Woman's Year conference in Mexico City as the representative of eight women trying to use the attention given the conference to form a Brazilian women's movement calling for amnesty. "The single request of the Brazilian women's amnesty movement at the conference was amnesty for all political prisoners, male or female, all over the world," she recalled.

There are now only 200 known political prisoners in Brazil, Mrs. Zerbini estimated, and an additional 125 people who have "disappeared" but whose seizure is not acknowledged by the police. The death of popular Brazilian journalist Vladimir Herzog in the national police headquarters after he was arrested in October, 1975, spurred nationwide indignation, she felt. Leaders of Brazil's Catholics, Protestants, and Jews participated in an ecumenical service for Herzog at the São Paulo Cathedral that drew some twelve thousand people and received national attention. "It is sad that some have to die that others may live, but after his death the police were more careful not to be so openly violent."

The Feminine Movement for Amnesty has been involved in a variety of issues besides amnesty, including support for strikes by automobile workers, medical interns, and primary school teachers, said Mrs. Zerbini. Possibly one of the most important political demands by Brazil's harassed democrats—a call for a constituent assembly to write a new constitution and restore liberal democracy—is also supported by her group. "The constituent assembly is the only peaceful way out of the present situation. The first step must be a general and unrestricted amnesty. It is impossible to restore democracy to my country without those who lost their rights participating in the work of elaborating a new constitution."

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Mrs. Zerbini was invited to the U.S. by the League of Women Voters in an effort coordinated by the Washington Office on Latin America, a church-sponsored organization that campaigns against human rights violations in Latin America's right-wing dictatorships. I asked her what message she brought concerning how Americans could help people in Brazil working for amnesty and human rights.

“Spread the word about our problems in your press, to your congressional representatives, and lend us your solidarity,” she responded. “It is not possible for the United States to be an island of peace and democracy when violence and dictatorship reign in our hemisphere. Today it is the neighbor’s house that is on fire, but tomorrow it could be your house. Defend your rights, so that what happened in Nicaragua, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil does not happen here. If there would be a dictatorship in the United States, it would be very dangerous. Your country is so wealthy. The owners of this wealth could apply great force to repress the people. Do not think that it is impossible that the example of Germany, which also had a cultured people, could not happen here.”

Unfortunately, some of Mrs. Zerbini’s less admirable views on human rights and democracy also require reporting. Serious people who seek to assist the cause of democratic freedom and pluralism must assess which opponents of dictatorships help, and on which issues. For example, as Mrs. Zerbini was counting off her list of Latin American dictatorships, she mentioned Cuba and then told her interpreter to omit it. I was curious. I had visited Cuba in 1976 and interviewed, in secret, ex-political prisoners and prisoners’ families. I reported on grossly inhumane, long-term internment in Cuba of many people jailed for nonviolent political or philosophical expression and kept in prison unless they recanted those views (Worldview, January-February, 1977). Former Cuban political prisoners and other dissidents told me that they supported many of the revolution’s social and economic reforms, but opposed the regime because they believed these reforms could also be accomplished through a liberal democracy with free elections. I asked Mrs. Zerbini why she had listed Cuba as one of the dictatorships and then changed her mind. Didn’t she think that Cuba also is a dictatorship, an unhappy model for her as she works for democracy in Brazil?

“Cuba chose a new option, a socialist revolution. The people struggled for this new conception with arms. The way the people of Cuba confronted the Bay of Pigs invasion—I don’t think there could be a more convincing vote, or statement in support of their government, than that the people had machine guns in their hands,” she replied.

“I have my doubts that there is a democracy there, but what I know of the people, they live happily. They have food, a roof over their heads, a right to education. And if this form of government makes them happy, like your American principle that individuals have the right to the pursuit of happiness, they have the right to pursue theirs, because they conquered it,” she continued, adding that during the International Woman’s Year conference in Mexico City, “the delegation that impressed me the most by its brilliance and by its consciousness that it was contributing something positive was the Cuban delegation.”

Mrs. Zerbini said that when she spoke of wishing for the freedom of all political prisoners everywhere, she included Cuba, but with this reservation: “The phenomenon of political prisoners must be seen with greater depth. Some struggle with ideals to change the structure of society, to push away predatory elites that impede the self-realization of the people. There are other political prisoners who were also put in jail because they did not accept the conquests of the people, and they threaten these conquests. The new society has the right to prevent them from getting in the way, from disturbing this process and the desires of the new society.”

During the course of her travels in the United States, Mrs. Zerbini told audiences that the struggle for amnesty in Brazil is most important because it might lead to the opening of the democratic process and the “reconquest of democratic freedoms.” She told me that “the struggle for amnesty in my country is the most important form in the direction of a democratic opening. Without amnesty I don’t see re-democratization.”

What did she believe to be the specific qualities of democracy? Did she consider as part of the civil and political characteristics of democracy such matters as freedom of speech, press, and political parties, and the right to regularly scheduled, contested elections?

Mrs. Zerbini responded emphatically: “Democracy as I understand it isn’t formal democracy.” (Of course, I thought—formal, bourgeois democracy, that time-worn and scorned phrase used by the regimes most opposed to democratic freedoms.) “Democracy means that people have access to the riches of their country. It means that people have bread, and a roof over their heads, and health care, and the right to organization and association, and to free information to enable them to choose their own destiny. This is the democracy that is good.”

Mrs. Zerbini said she is not affiliated with any other political party or movement in Brazil save her own, and was not involved in politics prior to 1975. She is, I believe, the kind of leader with whom people dedicated to advancing not just human rights, but pluralist democracy, must work with caution: in solidarity on issues of amnesty, for an end to torture and abuse and with a shared sense of burning urgency for an era of decent food, shelter, employment, education, and health care for all people, and with caution over whether what we mean by democracy is what she means by democracy.

Meanwhile, in Brazil’s November elections the opposition won a majority of the popular vote for the first time since the generals overthrew civilian government. Of course due to the rigged electoral system decreed by the military, which gives Brazil’s president the power to appoint a third of the senate and stacks congressional representation in favor of areas that traditionally sup-

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port the military’s ARENA party, the opposition will not have a majority in Brazil’s Congress.

Nevertheless, returns showed that more than 15 million voters supported Brazil’s only legal opposition party, the Brazilian Democratic Movement, compared to 10 million for the military’s ARENA party. The vote for the opposition is particularly impressive when one bears in mind that the regime counted the ballots and also banned candidates from speaking, advertising, or debating on television and radio in a country with a 30 per cent illiteracy rate and poverty so grinding that large numbers of people cannot afford to buy a newspaper.

In March, President (General) Ernesto Geisel will have completed his term of office, to be replaced by General João Baptista Figueiredo, the secret police chief, in Brazil’s peculiar presidential system of alternation of generals. Figueiredo promises a “slow and gradual” restoration of democracy, characteristically pledging to “arrest and break” those who oppose his snail’s pace reforms, while many Brazilians reportedly feel that their country needs above all to get away from leaders eager and powerful enough to “arrest and break” any more people.

Still, this election so clearly manifested popular sentiment for a return to democracy that a growing number of military officers may feel compelled to deliver it, although some military opposition to any liberalization policies is said to continue. It is also expected that new political leaders and even parties will now emerge seeking to restore democracy much less slowly than the ruling generals prefer.

I know leaders of movements for pluralist democracy from dictatorships of the right and left around the world who oppose all kinds of dictatorship because they want free, liberal democratic institutions in their countries. Just as I hope that Mrs. Zerbini will have the opportunity to meet them some day and be influenced by their rigorous democratic commitments, I also hope that they in turn may soon be heartened by progress toward the restoration of democracy in Brazil. Brazil was once the world’s third largest democracy. It could be again, and in so doing have a major impact on the cause of democracy and freedom not only in Latin America—Brazil’s population is probably greater than all the rest of Latin America combined—but throughout the Third World.

One of the last, and best, things Mrs. Zerbini said to me during this troubling interview was that “the fundamental element is freedom, because people can only bloom in conditions of total freedom.” On that we agree. We also agree that people with commitments to international human rights and democracy must devote special concern to the just cause in Brazil.