

"Today, it is unfashionable to admit that military rule brought good as well as evil"

BRAZIL'S FRAGILE DEMOCRACY

by Marc Levinson

The events surrounding the tragic illness and death of President-elect Tancredo Neves have led some observers to ascribe a new political maturity to Brazil. Neves, the grandfatherly figure who was to become the first civilian president most Brazilians had ever known, never took the oath of office. Instead, it fell to an unlikely and unpredictable politician named José Sarney to break the string of generals who have ruled the country since a bloodless military coup in 1964. During the five weeks of Neves's lingering intestinal ailment, Sarney ruled as acting president with the collaboration of the country's entire political and civilian leadership. Now, without a figure of national unity to rely upon, Sarney—a former head of the military governments's party, who only last summer became a convert to the democratic opposition—holds in his hands the fate of the government that Brazilians have labeled hopefully the New Republic.

It is a responsibility that would have challenged even the far more popular and conciliatory Tancredo Neves. The trouncing Neves gave Paulo Maluf, the candidate of the military government's Social Democrat party, in the electoral college last January delighted Brazilians, who saw it as the ultimate thumbing of the nose at the generals. His calm, measured approach reassured the public and the military alike. But Brazil's new democracy is far shakier, and its political maturity far more doubtful, than either the widespread enthusiasm for Neves or the early support for his successor would suggest.

The joy over the military's departure led many to forget that thousands of Brazilians had expressed similar joy on April 1, 1964, the day after President João Goulart was overthrown. Goulart, a self-styled populist with no consistent political philosophy, had steered an erratic course that not only turned the urban middle class into his implacable foe, but alienated many of his former supporters in the trade union and peasant movements. Military leaders were more reluctant to depose the chief of state than were civilians, many of whom actively urged a coup. The Catholic and business organizations that have been among the most bitter opponents of the military in recent years were among its most fervent supporters in 1964 and egged it

on. It was not until Goulart refused to punish naval mutineers in Rio, an action that was seen to endanger military discipline, that the military did intervene.

Modern history isn't much discussed in Brazil, and little has been published about the coup and its aftermath. Many young Brazilians know the details only from *Jango*, a 1984 film that somehow got past the censors despite its suggestion that Goulart was the victim of a plot hatched by multinational corporations, the U.S. government, and the Brazilian rich and their reactionary lackeys in the Army. In fact, the soldiers were greeted as liberators who would put an end to the political turbulence that had plagued the country for years. The Brazilian coup was the first of many in Latin America over the next decade, and in every case the cause was the same: Civilian politicians, unwilling or unable to cooperate in governing, called on the Army to choose sides. The question facing Brazil in 1985 is whether the politicians have learned their lesson.

A POWERFUL DEPENDENCE

It is unfashionable to admit that military rule brought good as well as evil to Brazil. The repression and the brutality of the military regime are undeniable, and the economic injury done to Brazil's poor in the name of economic development will take years to undo. While per capita income grew at 5.1 per cent a year between 1960 and 1981, the situation of the lowest economic groups has worsened. For that, and for the \$100 billion foreign debt José Sarney has inherited, the military deserve full credit.

Less obvious and less remarked, however, are the political changes the military have wrought. More than anything else, the promise of the generals was a promise of political stability, and that part of their promise has been fulfilled.

In 1964 the new military government faced political chaos. Fights broke out regularly on the floor of Congress. Corruption was rampant. The power of state governments, traditionally a divisive force in Brazil, was excessive, with some state governors controlling military police forces larger than the local Army garrison. Regionalism ran strong, to the point that Army troops normally served in the areas where they were recruited and felt greater loyalty to their local superiors than to commanders in distant Brasília or Rio de Janeiro. Every Brazilian president for decades had come either from the industrial center of São Paulo, the mining state of Minas Gerais, or the southern ranching

Marc Levinson is a journalist specializing in business and labor relations, with a particular interest in Latin America.

state of Rio Grande do Sul, excluding the rest of the country from political influence. Rather than letting civilians mess things up again, the military high command decided to stay in power and set matters right.

If there is one main theme to the actions of the Brazilian military, it is centralization. It is an achievement most Brazilians do not recognize, and one many state and local politicians, now nearly powerless against the federal influence, wish to undo. The constitutional convention that Sarney has promised to call in 1986 will give them the chance to do so. Finding a form of federalism that works—a federalism flexible enough to satisfy 130 million people spread over 3.3 million square miles, while containing the regionalism that has plagued the country since colonial days—may be the toughest task the new government faces.

That some dispersion of power is needed is evident. Today the hand of the federal government is everywhere. Indeed, through sometimes violent attacks on local governments and on self-help organizations such as trade unions and Roman Catholic “base communities,” the military fostered the belief that it alone could deal with problems. “The last twenty years of misrule have sharpened this historical tendency to believe that the responsibility of bearing the heavy burden of a society incapable of taking care of itself falls upon the government,” jibed the acidly antimilitary magazine *Senhor* in 1984.

Federal officials, often former military officers, control everything from coffee exports to licenses to manufacture computers. The prices of products from rice to automobiles are fixed by the government. So is most investment, since the largest commercial bank, Banco do Brasil, is in government hands. Even the most humble cafe displays a poster with the toll-free number of the federal Secretariat of Supply and Prices, which receives complaints of overcharging. Political power has flowed toward Brasília as well. Federal senators have replaced governors as the key political actors. In a series of carefully orchestrated moves, the military succeeded in weakening state control over military police units, removing a major source of power for the twenty-three governors. At the same time, it centralized most taxing authority, forcing the states to plead for money to pave roads and build sewers. Leonel Brizola, the socialist governor of Rio de Janeiro state and the leftist politician most feared by the military, learned this lesson well in 1984. Under new laws, all revenues from the oil wells off the coast of Rio de Janeiro go to the federal government; in order to negotiate a share for his state, Brizola had to agree to hold his tongue.

Massive expenditures on telecommunications have further weakened local forces. Long famous as a country where the phones did not work, Brazil is now knit together by excellent telephone and telex networks. Power need not be delegated; federal officials can react to problems throughout the country and can, if necessary, rush to the scene via the extensive domestic airline network. Satellites and microwaves bring TV Globo’s nightly newscasts to Amazon villages and isolated ranches, letting the federal minister of mines and energy or the president of the federal coffee administration dominate the news in a way that, say, the governor of Mato Grosso do Sul or the mayor of Recife no longer can.

Psychologically, the result of all these changes is a pow-

erful dependence on direction from the top and an induced passivity at the bottom. People expect to be told what to do. The director of a national park won’t try new ways to control litter without approval from headquarters; unauthorized initiative got his predecessor fired. On National Vaccination Day, uniformed officers board intercity buses and vaccinate all children aboard; neither permission nor information is asked of their parents. The governmental paralysis that characterized the old regime quickly afflicted the new: Almost no one finds initiative to be worth the risk.

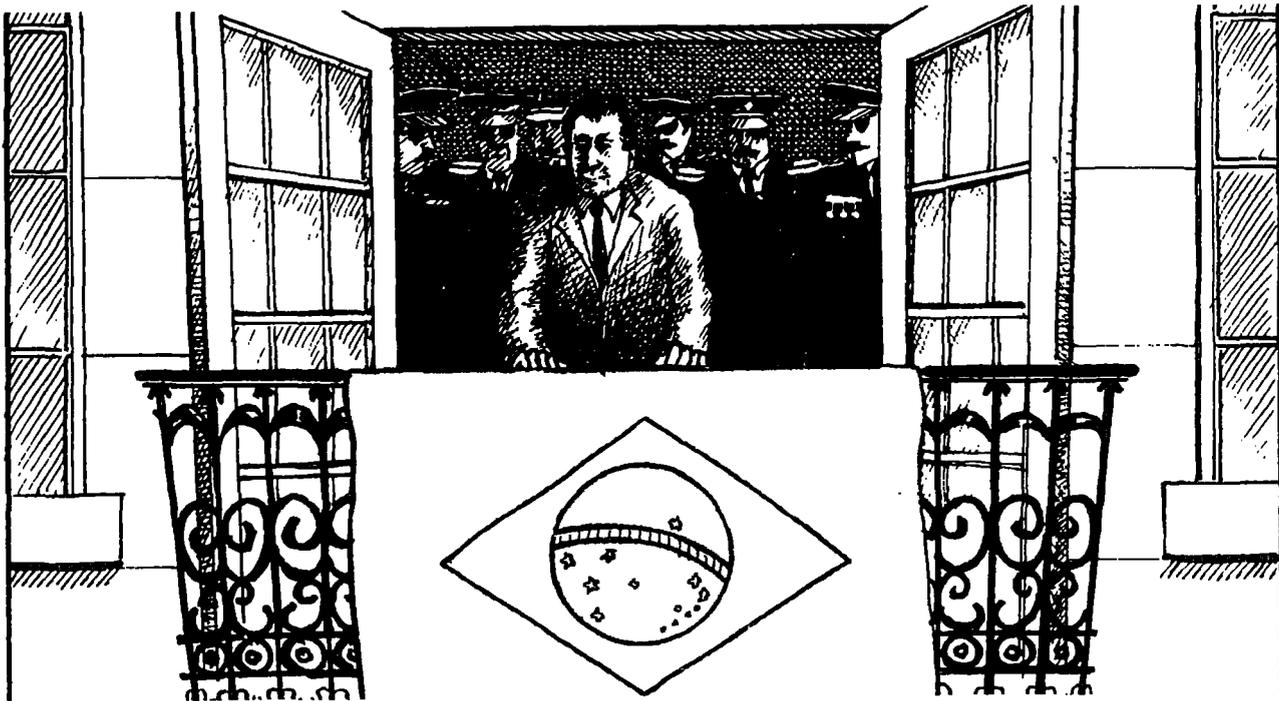
Reform of political parties was an essential part of centralization, and it is here that the constitutional convention is most likely to undo the generals’ handiwork. Soon after taking power, the military forced the fusion of small and regional parties into the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), which was to be the only legal opposition. In 1979, shortly after the MDB, despite government interference, managed a strong showing in the 1978 congressional elections, a new party reform law was designed to weaken the opposition. Political parties were required to develop broad geographic and class bases, party coalitions and ticket-splitting were prohibited, and candidates of one party could no longer drop out of an election in favor of another party. The net effect was to keep parties from conspiring to defeat the military. While regional interests competed for power within the parties, impoverished Northeastern peasants, who in the 1950s had elected their leader to Congress, could no longer do so without first building a national base or joining another party.

Despite the military’s efforts, no fewer than six parties are now represented in the Congress. Three of these—the Brazilian Labor party, headed by Ivete Yargas, the niece of former dictator Getúlio Yargas; Brizola’s Democratic Labor party, an ostensibly social democratic competitor for the Vargas heritage; and the Workers’ party, headed by the São Paulo union leader Luís Inácio Lula da Silva—are in constant danger of extinction under the electoral rules. Yet another party, composed of Social Democrats opposed to presidential candidate Maluf, may well enter the fray. None of the smaller groups has nationwide strength; all have an interest in loosening the rules. If they do, the resulting proliferation of parties, many with narrow regional or class bases, could recreate the instability many Brazilians thought they were rid of twenty-one years ago. No fewer than thirteen parties held seats in the Chamber of Deputies elected prior to the 1964 coup.

“Neves may not support mass movements, but he will make some space for them to operate,” a leftist Brazilian academic observed not long ago. But the speaker agreed that a variety of mass movements holding seats in Congress is not what Brazil needs. “The present system gives us stability, and that is a good thing,” he allowed. “It’s difficult to know which is better, more democracy or stability.”

GOVERNMENT FOR PROFIT

Despite the obvious joy among the public over the military’s return to the barracks, the military is far from finished as a factor in Brazilian politics. As late as last October, with Maluf’s defeat a foregone conclusion, hard-line generals toyed with putting yet another general in office. Neves and friends quietly laid plans for civil war: If the generals



blocked the election, Neves would flee to southern Brazil, where influential governors and military commanders had pledged their support. Air Force and Navy colleagues vetoed the coup proposal, aware that they would be unable to govern in the face of a public opinion that could only be described as universal disdain. But it required the intervention of retired General Ernesto Geisel, who ran the country from 1974 to 1979, to persuade the military high command that Neves was not a dangerous leftist. The plotters were transferred, but the military, in close consultation with the presidential candidate, secured its future influence.

The military, and particularly the Army, saw the government as a for-profit venture, and for two decades used its control to provide sinecures for retired officers in such places as Petrobras, the national oil company, and Embraer, the aircraft manufacturer. These former officers, in turn, often function as informers for the Army's National Intelligence Service, whose tentacles stretch far into Brazilian society. An estimated fifteen thousand former officers now hold key positions in the state-owned companies that dominate the economy, and few of them owe loyalty to the country's new civilian leaders. Many have reaped major profits from the vast corruption the military engendered and have little desire to see government cleaned up. In addition, thousands of private sector leaders have attended the Superior War College in Rio and have close relationships with the military as a result.

Brazil is not Argentina, and Sarney does not face the

immediate danger of revolt that has limited the options of Raúl Alfonsín. But the influence of the armed forces, if quiet, runs very deep, and they have not had their reputation besmirched by military defeat. Decentralization will threaten the power they have exercised by controlling the federal bureaucracy. Yet for the foreseeable future, their views on everything from constitutional reform to service of the foreign debt will carry considerable weight. Cutting military influence down to size may take years, or decades.

Political reform is not the only item on José Sarney's agenda. The economic mess he inherits is a serious one, and the prolonged social discipline that is required to bring inflation down from 230 per cent will put his diplomatic skills to a severe test. But based on Brazil's history, its economic woes are manageable. With enormous resources and a pattern of strong economic growth already resuming after four years of recession, a resounding comeback is likely. Wise policies can channel that growth into the more equitable distribution of income Brazil so badly needs.

Still, it is in the political realm that Sarney will face his most severe test: helping his countrymen—and his colleagues who are unaccustomed to holding the reins of power after years of impotent opposition—find a way to decentralize and demilitarize without destabilizing Brazil. In 1988, or perhaps sooner, Brazilians will cast their votes for the first popularly elected president since 1960. That leaves little time to achieve a stable balance unknown in Brazil since Getúlio Vargas destroyed the Old Republic fifty-five years ago. *WV*

