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## Brazil: screwing down the lid

The true nature of the Brazilian regime is plainer than at any time since the vintage years of 1968 to 1971. The army's only answer to dissent is more repression, and President Geisel has lost the support of influential moderates.

General Ednardo D'Avila, controversial commander of the second army corps in São Paulo, was sacked on Monday by President Ernesto Geisel after yet another political prisoner had been found dead in his cell in circumstances similar to those in which the São Paulo journalist Vladimir Herzog was found last October (see Vol. IX, No. 43). The prisoner, Manoel Fiel Filho, a metalworker, had allegedly committed suicide. The general has been replaced as second corps commander by General Dilermando Gomes Monteiro, a well-known supporter of the President, who has been in line to replace General Oscar Luís da Silva as third corps commander in Rio Grande do Sul. The suddenness of the move took both the civilian and the military establishment by surprise, though after the well authenticated reports of General D'Avila's attempts to overthrow the regime (see Vol. X, No. 2) it is not difficult to imagine that President Geisel was seeking an excuse to hurry on his retirement.

The departure of one of the most noted and conspicuous hardliners in the armed forces comes at a time when the President's popularity and that of his regime is probably at its lowest ebb since his inauguration in 1974. The death of Herzog, and the *cassações* at the beginning of the year, both products of the repression maintained in São Paulo, have brought open and harsh criticism.

Last week, on 13 January, most of the large circulation dailies in Brazil printed a long letter from the São Paulo journalists' union, the Sindicato do Jornalistas Profissionais do Estado de São

Paulo, alleging serious contradictions in the report of the enquiry into Herzog's death. The letter, signed by 467 journalists—including such distinguished figures as Prudente de Moraes, chairman of the Associação Brasileira de Imprensa (ABI), Carlos Castello Branco, columnist of *O Jornal do Brasil*, Carlos Chagas, press officer of former President Arthur Costa e Silva, and writers and editors from *O Estado de São Paulo*, the *Gazeta Mercantil*, *Movimento*, *Veja* and *Visão*—called for the enquiry to be re-opened.

The original enquiry, entrusted by President Geisel to General Cerqueira Lima, was published in December and greeted by journalists as a white-wash job. A wave of anger swept aside the equivocations of the moderates within the journalists' union, and produced a remarkable united front on the issue. Some of the journalists, notably Castello Branco, have drawn strength from the solidarity expressed to write daily criticism of the government, almost to the extent of calling for its overthrow. 'We are left with the hope', wrote Castello Branco, 'that the miracle that occurred with the appearance of a mature civilian elite in the 1940s can happen again'—a direct reference to the liberal 'Manifesto dos Mineiros' that marked the starting point for the downfall of Getulio Vargas in 1945. Castello Branco, hitherto a prominent Geisel supporter, was also scathing on the question of the suspended congressmen from São Paulo (see Vol. X, No. 2). 'Twelve years after the first list of *cassados*, the use of such a penalty, trivialised as time goes by, does not create much commotion. It merely undermines the presidency, demonstrating the revolution can only achieve its aims through acts of force'.

The particularly shocking feature of the *cassações* for 'moderate' supporters of Geisel was that the President was not acting under duress. As the sacking of D'Avila demonstrated, Geisel is stronger than at any time during the past 20 months. As *O Estado de São Paulo* said: 'It is the government which initiates the hard line'. By embracing a policy which precludes meaningful negotiation with civilian forces, Geisel has placed himself at the head of a united army. The need to

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a new level of repression in the face of widespread civilian opposition is actually a factor of cohesion in the army, at a moment when tension is building among officers as a result of the problem of succession to Geisel and the deterioration of economic and social conditions.

With *distensão* virtually forgotten, Geisel's new strategy is to control the situation within a minimal framework of apparent democracy, but using as many instruments of persuasion or force and whatever level of violence as may be necessary. The Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB), which really believed in the possibility of operating as a genuine opposition—or even new ruling party—within the Geisel democracy, is both terrified and disoriented by the latest turn of events. The party's situation is impossible. *O Estado de São Paulo* said that under the new rules, 'ARENA is detailed to defend what the MDB is not allowed to attack'. Many observers do not believe official manoeuvres, including the possible creation of new parties, will prevent a massive MDB vote in protest against official policies. If this is really in prospect, Geisel will not hesitate to cancel the elections. According to good sources a decree to this effect is already awaiting his signature.

The defection of 'liberal' middle-class supporters of the regime is perhaps the most important new ingredient of Brazilian politics. It is no longer possible for the government to satisfy this constituency with more consumer goodies. Castello Branco and Chagas, journalists who represented the more thoughtful supporters of the regime, are now calling openly for a complete change. Parallels with 1945 are not convincing. Vargas was overthrown at the same time as fascist regimes were collapsing in Europe and Japan, and social democracy had the full support of international business.

Today the United States is worried by developments in Brazil, but largely about the possibility of a radically nationalist military regime emerging. Washington's view is that if Geisel can keep the lid on the political situation for another two years, the economic situation will begin to improve and then the regime will be set for another ten years. *O Estado de São Paulo* theoretically represents liberal capitalist opposition to the regime, and it is possible it may again be subjected to prior censorship, but in fact the Mesquitas are just as worried as Geisel about 'the threat of communism'.

Growing social discontent, albeit disorganised and inchoate, represents a more immediate threat to the regime. The drought, which is seriously affecting food supplies in the south of Bahia and the north of Minas Gerais, has already sparked the sacking of warehouses by hungry peasants. The government there is no droug The health minist

the possibility of a cholera outbreak. A few cases have occurred in the north. The government does not have unlimited means of dealing with opposition in a country of 110 million people. This said, it remains true that the scenario for change is far from clear.

## Argentina: people who go bump in the night

**The main motive behind President Martínez de Perón's cabinet shuffle seems to have been a desire to have greater personal control over the administration in a pre-electoral period.**

Ever since the death of President Juan Domingo Perón, the tottering edifice of government has depended more on a web of shifting personal alliances than on any solid political foundation. Although there are only eight ministers in the cabinet, President Isabel Martínez de Perón has managed to run through a total of 32 different cabinet members in the past 18 months. Last week she sacked interior minister Angel Federico Robledo, justice minister Ernesto Corvalán Nanclores, defence minister Tomás Vottero, and foreign minister Manuel Arauz Castex.

The most significant casualty was Robledo, although he has gradually lost power during the past few weeks. The most significant blows to his prestige were the loss of the *verticalista* majority in congress, and the realisation that the military would not intervene to remove the President in a way that would leave the way open for him to succeed her. Although he was vice-president of the Justicialista Party, a post he has now resigned, there was little basis for his power other than his much praised 'flexibility'.

The obvious conclusion was that Lorenzo Miguel, whose demands for the 'intervention' of Buenos Aires and Santa Fé provinces had been resisted by Robledo, had secured the minister's dismissal. In fact, though this quarrel may have had a bearing on the cabinet crisis, Miguel appears to have been another of the losers. At the time of the reshuffle, Miguel was in Caracas with economy minister Antonio Cafiero, and it has been suggested that the moment was chosen so that these firm friends should have no say in the choice of new ministers. As it was, the President relied on the advice of her ambitious private secretary, Julio González, Raúl Lastiri, José López Rega's son-in-law, and Anibal Delmarco, the current minister of social welfare. (Continued on page 28)

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