

Latin America POLITICAL REPORT

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Brazil: Frota fired

President Geisel dropped his army minister, General Silvio Frota, this week. Frota was exploiting dissent within the Arena party to further his campaign to become Brazil's next President.

37 A brief public announcement on Wednesday said that General Silvio Frota had left the post of army minister for 'personal reasons'. He has been replaced by the third army commander, General Belfort Betelehem. Frota, whose presidential ambitions have always been opposed by President Ernesto Geisel, stepped over the line when he began to attack the President, using dissident members of the Arena party as a mouthpiece.

Morale in the party has been low since the closing of congress in April. The measures decreed at that time to keep the opposition Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB) permanently out of power were regarded by many Arena members as a sure recipe for electoral disaster. Although the party has never been more than the President's rubber stamp, Arena deputies have been bitterly complaining that they are never consulted on government decisions. Significantly, they want a say in the choice of Brazil's next President.

Throughout last week, there was a concerted attack on the government by some Arena deputies, most of them calling for the 1978 elections to be cancelled. Talks between senate leader Petrônio Portella and sectors of the opposition were also criticised.

The most damaging attack on the government concerned these talks; it was delivered last Friday by the deputy chairman of Arena in the chamber of deputies, Marcelino Linhares. The talks form part of President Geisel's programme for a set of political reforms to be enacted by his successor in 1979 (there are some reports that a reform package may come considerably

sooner). It is widely believed in Arena and elsewhere that the programme is a joint initiative on the part of President Geisel and the secret service chief, General João Batista Figueiredo, aimed at defusing the opposition until the latter takes over as President. It is also believed in Arena that Geisel wants to maintain the two-party system until Figueiredo is nominated late next year, but that the whole party system would be dismantled the day after the congressional elections if opinion polls showed that Arena was certain to be defeated. The elections take place a month after the presidential nomination.

Linhares chose to attack the President at his weakest point with an accusation of the gravest military sin: he said that the real purpose of the Portella talks had been 'to reduce the role of the army high command in deciding the presidential succession by stimulating opposition pressure on the system and disrupting the unity of the military hierarchy.' The biggest problem with Figueiredo's presidential campaign is that it lacks support in the army high command; Figueiredo has still to be promoted a *general de exército*. Despite warnings from government leader José Bonifácio that, in pitting politicians against the military, Linhares might be breaching the national security legislation, the Arena deputy repeated his accusations; he said that the reason for the rebellion within the ranks of Arena was that the party's leadership was an accomplice to the manoeuvre. Frota, who does have solid army backing, was the obvious beneficiary, and almost certainly the inspiration of Linhares's offensive.

While Geisel was able to rebut the call for cancellation of the elections with the laconic comment that the Arena deputies could extend their mandates through due parliamentary procedure, he was on thinner ice when it came to the succession. Among the few rules regarding the succession is a stipulation that Arena decides its candidate in a secret ballot. This has previously been a simple matter of confirming the high command's nominee. With Arena divided, it is no longer a reliable rubber stamp.

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There are at least two dissident factions within the party. One is composed of the more moderate *renovadores* led by Theódulo de Albuquerque. They are demanding a return to the 1967 constitution (which does not include Institutional Act No 5 nor a wide range of other repressive legislation) before the elections. The other, which was vocal in congress last week, is led by the federal deputy Herbert Levy; it has been holding semi-clandestine meetings for some time.

Since the President's injunction earlier this year on all discussion about succession until 1978, Frota, if not Figueiredo, has been keeping quiet. However, last week speeches started flowing in congress supporting his candidacy. His sacking could make Figueiredo's task more difficult since he now is the sole official candidate upon whom all opposition will be concentrated.

Portella has enlisted the aid of the moderate Arena senator, Daniel Krieger, to mollify the *renovadores*, and of retired Marshal Cordeiro de Farias in his dialogue with the broad opposition to the regime. However, he is making little progress with his talks on either front. In the first round of his 'dialogue' with the opposition, he met the general secretary of the Conferença Nacional dos Bispos Brasileiros, Bishop Ivo Lorscheiter; the fairly right-wing Cardinal of Rio de Janeiro, Eugénio Salles; the chairman of the Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil, Raymundo Faoro; and a former high court judge, Prado Kelly. He apparently found the most receptive audience with Faoro, who did not demand amnesty for political prisoners or those punished under Institutional Act No 5.

He did, however, insist upon the right of habeas corpus for political detainees, an unpopular idea within the military. He found no compromise with Ivo Lorscheiter, who said the Church would accept nothing less than full respect of both social and democratic rights.

Argentina: tangled web

The need to maintain good relations with the Soviet Union and the third world, while simultaneously satisfying an anti-Communist and racist constituency at home, leads the Argentine government into some contradictory positions.

The navy seems to have reaped certain political benefits from its diplomatic/military offensive in the choppy waters of the South Atlantic (LAPR XI, 39). Admiral Emilio Massera has made patriotic speeches which were fully reported in the press, and right-wing political figures showered him with congratulations. It seems likely that the whole affair was intended for

domestic consumption and will not perturb Argentina's increasingly close relations with the Soviet Union.

Despite the radio and the press reporting support from China and Chile for the navy's action in detaining Bulgarian and Soviet fishing boats, sources close to the foreign ministry were saying that Argentina had decided to accept Soviet participation in major hydroelectric projects on the Paraná, and the Soviet ambassador said that his country's imports from Argentina would reach 1,200 million dollars this year.

Similar contradictions in Argentina's relations with the rest of the world could be detected in the United Nations, where the foreign minister, Admiral Oscar Montes, made a sharp about-turn last week after first admitting to the ANSA correspondent in New York that Argentina was involved with South Africa in discussing the defence of the South Atlantic. He said the two countries had not yet moved towards signing a treaty, but 'we have every intention of doing so'. He said: 'Relations between South Africa and the Southern Cone are really important for the efficient defence of the South Atlantic'.

The following day, Admiral Montes denied that any such conversation had taken place. In fact, he was almost certainly telling the truth in the first instance. Brazilian diplomats at the United Nations say they are aware of conversations between South Africa and the countries of the Southern Cone, but categorically deny any Brazilian involvement. Argentina is anxious to play the connection down because it could damage the government's efforts to remain on good terms with the non-aligned nations.

In his conversation with ANSA, Admiral Montes emphasised Argentina's opposition to the principle of apartheid and his hope that it would be abandoned by the South African government. He looked for a 'peaceful, gradual and moderate' solution to the problem, recalling Argentina's participation in the United Nations conference on apartheid in Nigeria in August. In fact, Argentina vacillated interminably before finally sending a delegation, the deciding factor being Brazil and Uruguay's agreement to take part. The professional diplomats of all South American countries are well aware of the dangers of open association with South Africa, which are not always appreciated by their military masters.

The Argentine diplomats have a hard job because the armed forces are so directly involved in the management of foreign policy. Senior officials in the foreign ministry were horrified a few weeks ago to receive a memorandum from a senior general suggesting that Argentina should develop closer relations with Rhodesia. The idea was successfully resisted, but the contradiction remains.