

CONFIDENTIAL

22

PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL EVOLUTION IN BRAZIL

When President Geisel, the fourth military president since the 1964 "Revolution", came into office in 1974, he initiated a process of gradual liberalization of the political system. He has achieved some genuine accomplishments in this direction, including markedly reduced censorship, greater control over internal security forces, and somewhat reduced use of exceptional national security measures. This liberalization program has, however, suffered reversals both because of conservative military reaction and Geisel's own unwillingness to tolerate an effective political opposition.

Thus in April 1977, when the opposition party in the Brazilian Congress blocked a judicial reform package which failed to extend guarantees of habeas corpus to political cases, Geisel suspended the Congress for two weeks and issued a series of political "reforms" which cumulatively rig the congressional and gubernatorial elections scheduled for November 1978 in favor of the pro-government ARENA party. During the following months, several opposition leaders were deprived of their political rights. These acts, combined with a slowdown in economic growth, engendered widespread public reaction.

There appears to be a growing consensus in Brazil that political change is desirable, however, and this has been reflected in a lively public discussion of Brazil's political future. The press has been highly vocal and frequently critical of the government. Business leaders have complained of mismanagement of the country's economy and the increasing role of state-owned corporations. The Church, cooperating with lawyer groups and other proponents of civil rights, is the most active and effective critic of the government's human rights performance. A previously passive labor sector is beginning to take a more assertive posture in demanding greater wage increases. University students, after nearly a decade of quiescence, took to the streets last year to protest a broad gamut of issues including educational reforms, human rights, and redemocratization. Now somewhat better organized, the students are likely to renew their activity after the universities resume their sessions in mid-March.

In an effort to respond to these pressures, Geisel and his political advisors are reportedly formulating institutional changes that would return Brazil to a "state of law" before the end of his term by incorporating

CONFIDENTIAL

GDS

CONFIDENTIAL

-2-

certain arbitrary and presently extra-constitutional powers into the constitution, probably with some additional restrictions on their use. In addition, the present two-party structure will likely be changed to a multi-party system. Political rights may be restored to a number of persons who were "cassated" (removed from office and barred from participation in politics) for their criticism of the post-1964 regime, but no general political amnesty appears to be in the cards.

This year is an election year in Brazil. Senator Magalhaes Pinto (former Foreign Minister and Governor of Minas Gerais State) is running hard for the ARENA nomination, and an MDB opposition party candidate will enter the race in due course. Geisel, however, has indicated his choice for the succession, Major General Figueiredo, Chief of the National Intelligence Service, and his electoral success is virtually assured. Figueiredo has been involved in the current planning process and appears disposed to continue a carefully controlled movement toward political liberalization. Thus there are hopeful signs that changes during the course of Figueiredo's six-year term will pave the way for a civilian president in 1985.

Opposition elements are, however, likely to regard the limited administration-approved reforms as little more than superficial modifications of a basically authoritarian system, and they will probably continue to press for more sweeping changes and a new constitution. The new president will, therefore, inherit a political situation vastly different from the static docility prevailing when Geisel took office. He will also be subject to countervailing pressures from the military right, which (though apparently diminished in strength) remains obsessed with internal security and is still a force to be reckoned with.

In sum, the odds now favor the formation of a more open and democratic political system over the medium to long-term, but the transition will probably be protracted, is unlikely to be smooth, and may well entail some retrogressions.

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