

H Weekly

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5. TIGHTER POLITICAL RESTRICTIONS IN BRAZIL

The constitutional amendments imposed last week by President Geisel to inhibit the growth of the political opposition will have a profoundly negative impact on Brazil's internal political development, perhaps most importantly by eliminating any real hopes among politicized Brazilians that the regime will in the foreseeable future allow elected officials a meaningful role in governing the country.

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The amendments virtually eliminate the possibility of significant gains by the opposition in the 1978 elections, chiefly by providing for indirect election of governors and one-third of the Senate and altering voting procedures and apportionment of the seats in the lower house.

The new election rules actually change very little in the exercise of political power, since the incumbent governors were elected indirectly and Congress' input in determining policy has been minimal. Nevertheless, their blatantly manipulative nature is clearly recognized by most informed elements in Brazilian society, and the press has been strongly critical.

In its dealings with the opposition, the Geisel administration has been trading heavily on the implicit argument that only the President stood in the way of greater repression. The opposition has generally pulled its punches, partly from fear of reprisals and partly in the expectation of eventually developing a broad enough popular constituency that the regime would hesitate to use arbitrary measures against it.

By eliminating hopes (however unrealistic) that power could be acquired legitimately over the next few years, Geisel has increased the probability that the more committed opposition politicians and their supporters will refuse to participate in a rigged political system, and some may be attracted to less orthodox means of effecting change.

At least a few opposition politicians are likely to be deprived of their offices and political rights if, as is almost inevitable, they attack Geisel over the decrees. Over the longer term, Geisel will probably have to find means of restricting press commentary, and there may be an increase in political activism by students and other dissidents.

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