Coup Brazilian style

Marco Antonio Villa

ON THE 50th ANNIVERSARY of the military coup of 1964, it is necessary to go back in history to understand the present. In 1964 Brazil was a politically divided country paralyzed by economic crisis, strikes, the threat of a military coup, and an administrative morass. The climate of radicalization was exacerbated by old adversaries of democracy on the left and the right. The Brazilian right had an incompatible relationship with election polls and could not coexist with mass democracy at a time of profound societal transformations. Fearful of the new, the right sought to resort to an old technique: Bring the armed forces to the center of political struggle, in the tradition inaugurated in 1889 with the founding of the Republic, which was born in a military coup.

To the left the communists did the same. They had always hung around near the barracks, as in 1935 when they tried to overthrow President Getulio Vargas by inciting a military uprising. After 1945, they continued to seek support from the military, the "generals and admirals of the people." Being "of the people" meant communing with the politics of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) and being ready to answer the PCB call for an eventual coup. Clandestine cells of the PCB in the armed forces were to be seen as a demonstration of political strength.

To the left even of the PCB there were those supporting the guerrillas, among them the Communist Party of Brazil (PC do B). Because they wanted to start the armed struggle in Brazil, in March 1964 they sent the first group of guerrillas to train at the Military Academy of Beijing, China. The Peasant Leagues, who wanted land reform "by law or by force," organized training camps in Brazil in 1962. Documents that linked Brazilian guerrillas to Cuba were found with imprisoned militants. Already the supporters of Leonel Brizola thought that they had wide support among soldiers, sailors, and sergeants.

Thus, in a radicalized environment ideally the president would have political balance and judgment. Unfortunately, that was not the case. President João Goulart was negotiating his stay in office, which required amendment of the Constitution. He had suggested that he had support from the barracks to impose, if necessary by force, his re-election, which was barred. He organized a "military apparatus" that would "cut the head off" the right. He insisted that he could not rule with a conservative Congress, even though his party, the Brazilian Workers Party (PTB), had the largest number of representatives in Congress and it had not introduced bills to make the president's reforms viable.

Then came the coup of 1964. New interpretations were constructed for political use but were far from being based in reality. Associating the Brazilian military regime



Photo: CEPEDOC, Getulio Vargas Foundation.

President João Goulart, 1961-64, (center) and Prime Minister Tancredo Neves (right). Despite good intentions, the leftist president lacked political balance and judgment.

with the dictatorships of the Southern Cone (Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Paraguay) was the main one. Nothing could have been more false. The authoritarian regime in Brazil was part of a solidly entrenched undemocratic tradition born of Auguste Comte's positivism in the late Empire. Contempt for democracy had been part of Brazil for the hundred years of the Republic. Both conservatives and so-called progressives regarded democracy as a serious obstacle to the solution of national problems, especially in times of political crisis—as if extensive discussions of the problems were a barrier to action.

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The Brazilian military regime was not a monolithic 21–year dictatorship. It is not possible to call the period 1964–68 a dictatorship because of all the political and cultural movement in those years; much less the years 1979–85, which brought approval of the Amnesty Act and of direct elections for state governors in 1982. What kind of dictatorship was that?

In recent years, the theory that leftist militants of the armed struggle fought the dictatorship for freedom has gained acceptance. In this version, the military would have returned to the barracks thanks to the heroic actions of the militants. In a country without a memory, it is very easy to rewrite history.

The armed struggle was no more than a series of isolated actions: bank robberies,



Prominent right politician Carlos Lacerda (center) and President Castello Branco. Fearful of the new masss democracy, the right supported the 1964 Coup.



President Castello Branco, 1964-67, (right) consolidated the military rule. The authoritarian regime in Brazil was part of a solidly entrenched undemocratic tradition.

Photos: National Archives.

kidnappings, and attacks on military installations. There was no popular support. It is argued that there was no other means of resisting the dictatorship except by force, but another serious mistake was that many of these groups existed before 1964 and others were created shortly afterwards, when there was still room for democracy. That is, the choice of armed struggle, the contempt for political process and for participating in the political system, and the sympathy for Guevara's guerrilla warfare caused military hardliners to take power in 1964. The terrorism of small groups of militants gave the State ammunition for its own terrorism that ended up being used by the far right as a pretext to justify the unjustifiable—repressive barbarism.

In fact, the democracy struggle was fought politically by popular movements, including the movement for the amnesty, the students' movement, and unions. These movements had important allies in sectors of the Catholic Church and among intellectuals protesting against censorship. And did the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB) do nothing? Its members and legislators were persecuted, and many were deposed.

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Authoritarianism lurked in Brazil into the twentieth century. The country had no democratic tradition. Left and right have both used and abused power. Democratic values were discarded. The distinction between the State and the government of the day was nonexistent.

Today, 50 years after the events of 1964, the country faces different circumstances. The Constitution of 1988 paved the way for construction of an effective rule of law. However, achieving the full and effective functioning of institutions is a long-term task. It takes more than a few years. It's a long process.

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