

# Brazil Twists Thumbscrews

## Brazil Junta Repression Stifles the Opposition

By Brady Tyson

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**I**T IS NOW just over six years since the military coup that placed the Brazilian army in control of that nation's government. What was probably intended by most of its instigators as a relatively brief extralegal intervention in the country's political process and a temporary suspension of normal constitutional rights and procedures has now stretched out far longer than any previous similar intervention. And the majority of both friends and foes of the military regime agree that the end of army rule in Brazil is not in sight.

Three successive Brazilian army generals have assumed the presidency, each expressing the hope of restoring political freedom as soon as the process of purifying Brazilian political life of "communism, corruption and chaos" has been completed. But each of them has been led by the internal dynamics of army politics and military political ideology to adopt successively more stringent and repressive political measures until Brazil today resembles the harshness and insensitivity of the Greek military dictatorship.

Since the army seized power in 1964, physical force and torture have been used against political prisoners, either to force information or confessions or for purposes of intimidation and punishment. But what began as an unplanned and sporadic series of cases that might be described as "police brutality" has now become, according to the report of two French lawyers who visited Brazil in early March, a truly organized system used as a means of political repression. It is a system that has become general, with the participation of higher echelon officers and often even the presence of medical doctors in attendance who are attached to the police or to the armed services.

The Brazilian people are surely one of the most tolerant and amiable peoples in Latin America, with a reputation for nonviolence in politics. What are the factors that have produced an apparently durable and inflexible military dictatorship that is increasingly using torture as a systematic tool of repression? What have been the results

of the policies of repression on Brazilian political life, and what has been the impact on the Brazilian people?

Immediately after the military coup of 1964, thousands of people of all professions and classes were arrested, and some of these suffered various types of mistreatment and torture. In the first months, relatively few cases were reported.

During the first two years of the regime of President Humberto Castello Branco—after the first wave of repression had passed—many political factions were allowed to operate openly, if impotently, and this provided a channel through which tortures could be denounced. Likewise, the press remained largely free, and in this sense the government was under some restraints, and torture of political prisoners did not become common.

There was one notable exception, however, that demonstrated the pattern that was to be followed very often in the future when the army encountered stubborn opposition. In the state of Golas in late 1964, in a struggle to discredit and remove from office the governor of the State, Mauro Borges, (who had been one of the original supporters of the military takeover earlier that year, and was himself an army officer), the army investigators "discovered" a "Polish spy ring." The tortures



used by the police and army investigators in this case were subsequently publicized widely in the Brazilian press, with pictures and statements from those who had been tortured.

As a result of the indignation thus aroused, the federal government named a prominent general to visit the army posts of the country. The only public announcement made was that the inspection team found nothing abnormal, thus setting very early a pattern that has persisted: the government has refused to acknowledge or seriously to investigate the charges of torture, and to punish those responsible.

During 1965 Brazil was fairly tranquil, and violence against political prisoners diminished although President Castello Branco assumed greater powers to cancel out the effect of opposition victories in some state elections.

After General Artur Costa e Silva was elected president at the end of 1966 by a rubber-stamp Congress that had been purged of the most effective opposition leaders, prospective civilian candidates for the announced presidential elections of 1970 began to appear. A mild form of protest politics, against inflation principally, emerged in the major cities.

The lid was tightened when the government, to placate a group of hard-line air force officers, announced a ban on mass demonstrations against its policies. The opposition was thus forced into cowed silence or clandestine activity.

By 1967, the government had secret police and paid informers sitting in the classrooms of university professors, and efforts were begun to destroy the national students' union. And in prisons, a series of ingenious forms of torture became more common.

### A Turning Point

**I**N THE SPRING of 1969, a student was killed in a scuffle with military police in a student restaurant, marking the first such public use of violence against unarmed students who had begun a peaceful demonstration. Angered students took to the streets, with labor union and popular support that surprised the army. For the first time in memory, Brazilian soldiers were stoned and booed as they dispersed the demonstrators.

On April 4, 1968, a mass celebrated for the dead youth, Edson Luis, led to a protest march by his fellow students. Mounted military police rode into the

marching students. Serious bloodshed was avoided when the Roman Catholic bishop and his priests locked arms and placed themselves between police and students. But the deep alienation between the army officer corps and the civilian population, especially the students, was now in the open for all to see.

The army officers were bitter and resentful, which led to a mood demanding an end to half-measures in dealing with what they saw as the nation's social and political ills. An agreement evolved among them that, to bring about a cure, "the patient must be held still" through political repression.

In September 1968, a five-minute speech by an opposition Federal Deputy in the National Congress, Dr. Marcio Moreira Alves, calling on the Brazilian people to ignore the army parades on Brazilian Independence Day (Sept. 17) because the army was harboring torturers, was sufficient to provoke the army into the next step towards open and systematic repression.

The military high command demanded that Congress strip Dr. Alves of his congressional immunity so he could be tried by a military court for defaming the name of the army. The crisis was put on ice until after the visit of the Queen of England, but in early December the Congress, in a surprising vote, refused to take away the legislator's immunity. The army acted swiftly, and on Dec. 13, 1968 a new "Institutional Act," closing Congress and giving almost limitless discretionary power to the president, was proclaimed by the ministers of the three armed forces.

### Massive Purge

**I**N A NEW WAVE of political repression many of the leaders of the official opposition party were stripped of their offices and political rights, as also were many members of the official government party who had dared to vote with the opposition in the key test. Thousands of federal and state employees suspected of being subversive or of sympathy with the subversives, were summarily fired, with no right of appeal. There was a new wave of arrests. The press was intimidated, and in the new situation there was virtually no way to denounce the tortures and abuses of the police power. The courts were subject to new limitations, and were thoroughly intimidated. And the tortures began to increase.

Students, dissenting soldiers, labor organizers, professionals, young priests and others became more and more attracted or driven to underground political and protest activity, and they began to organize clandestine groups dedicated to overthrowing the military dictatorship. The first task set was to win the confidence of the Brazilian people, and to undermine the authority of the military regime. There was some talk of guerrilla warfare, but very little physical violence has been practiced by the Brazilian underground to date. The movement began to rob banks to finance itself, and has staged a few dramatic incidents, such as the kidnapping of the U.S. Ambassador in September 1969, and of the Japanese Consul General in Sao Paulo last March, to dramatize the plight of the political prisoners.

By early 1969 the Brazilian government was aware that a significant amount of torture was going on in various prisons and army barracks, but it has consistently refused to deal with the question and has refused to name courts of inquiry, probably for fear that such inquiries would encourage the underground groups and paralyze the repressive work of the police and the army by destroying their morale.

The go-it-alone attitude of 20 or so competing federal agencies combating "subversive activities" began to show ugly tendencies again. The "Squadron of Death," composed of police from several important Brazilian states, began as early as 1967 to murder some common criminals without bothering to arrest them. It is believed that more than 200 criminals were killed this way during the high-point of this activity in 1968, even in the face of protests in the press. Again, the government maintained an official silence, and no one has been publicly charged or punished for these acts.

### The Situation Today

**R**ECENT REPORTS from Brazil—furnished by the Brazilian underground and therefore still needing verification from independent sources—tell of a demonstration of various methods of torture used on five live prisoners for the benefit of 100 policemen in training. Names of the police instructors and the prisoners are given, the time is set as October 1969, and the place as Belo Horizonte. Other reports list many cases, giving names of the tortured and sometimes of the torturers, and describing in detail the tor-



tures suffered. The number of people imprisoned probably reached an all-time high in December of last year, and though there is apparently a small drop in the total number of prisoners, the tempo of torture appears to be increasing.

In November 1969 the Minister of Justice of Brazil told journalists that "violence is against the law in Brazil." He continued by stating that the President of Brazil—by this time General Garrastazu Medici had been named by Congress to assume the place of the ailing Costa e Silva—had directed that all federal agencies dealing with internal security should review and revise, if necessary, their methods of repression and put an end to the use of all physical violence against political prisoners.

The national press, taking advantage of this opening, applauded the official statement and published reports of numerous cases of torture. A few days later the Minister of the Air Force said at a press luncheon that members of the opposition to the government were criminals and would be treated as such. The press ceased from that moment any further attempt to publicize the cases of torture.

No one, probably including the Brazilian government, has really accurate statistics on political persecution and torture in Brazil since 1964. But the following figures—pieced together from Brazilian exiles, sources in Brazil, newspapers and magazines in Latin America and Europe, and U.S. academics who have done research in this area—constitute a conservative consensus:

Political arrests since 1964—30,000.

Political prisoners today—10,000 (of which about two-thirds have not been formally charged).

Prisoners beaten and mutilated—3,000 to 5,000.

Prisoners tortured systematically—500 to 800.

Prisoners who died from torture—25 to 100.

Political exiles—1,200 to 1,800 (mostly in Uruguay, Chile, France and Mexico, small groups in U.S., Cuba and Algeria).

Persons deprived of political rights—4,300 (includes three ex-presidents, about 20 ex-governors, 190 legislators and at least 2000 civil servants).

Even if the above estimates were cut in half, the army would still be the initiator of far more violence than the underground.

## New Methods

**I**N ITS FRUSTRATION, the clandestine political opposition in Brazil has turned recently to the much-publicized kidnappings of diplomats, who are held as hostages for the liberation of imprisoned members of the under-

ground. The current wave of kidnappings of foreign diplomats in Latin America must be seen largely in this context.

But the kidnappings are more evidences of the military weakness of the underground than of its strength, and contribute little to its campaigns to overthrow the governments of Brazil, Guatemala, Argentina or the Dominican Republic.

There is, indeed, no recourse, to courts; the press and public protest are largely silenced, and outside Brazil, international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States have ignored the problem. Only in Western Europe has the situation received any appreciable publicity.

Of the five prisoners released in Mexico City on March 15, four claimed to have been tortured, and one of the four showed signs of weakness and infirmity. One of the four who claims to have been tortured is a Catholic mother superior of an orphanage, who also claims to have been innocent of the charges leveled against her. Shortly after her arrest the archbishop of the city where she was being held excommunicated the police chief because of the alleged tortures.

The dissidents in Brazilian society have suffered repeated shocks as each new repressive feature was revealed or announced. I happened to be in Brazil last September when the government (inspired by the military high command) announced in the wake of the kidnapping of the U.S. ambassador and subsequent events, the institution of the death penalty. Brazil had long prided itself upon the civilized virtue of having no death penalty, and this new evidence of the hardness of the Brazilian army shocked even the Brazilian left, even as late as September 1969.

The tortures and persecutions have produced an atmosphere of suspicion, despair and listlessness among great sectors of educated Brazilians. (That 50 per cent of Brazil that is still functionally illiterate has lived in despair for centuries.) Brazilian university students are especially bitter.

"We have no friends or allies anywhere in the world," one Brazilian student told me during a visit there a few weeks ago. "We stand for justice for all our people, freedom for all our people, against imperialism and military dictatorship. The Russians do nothing for us. The Chinese ignore us. Fidel just makes propaganda. The American government helps the military dictatorship. American students and professors have no sense of solidarity with us. Our own professors have either run away or accommodated themselves. Our parents don't understand us and are afraid. We stand alone."

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**A** Catholic clergy, including some Bishops and some of the laity, has tried during the past 20 years to create a church more responsive and more helpful to the needs of the socio-economically depressed classes of Brazil. Some of the Church's leaders and organizations have become the symbols and focus of visible opposition to the policies of the new government. The Vatican has been concerned with the persecutions of the Church, and has been careful to avoid over-identification with the military government.

Rather than risk solidifying national and world public opinion on the side of the Church by attacking it directly, the Brazilian government has evidently decided that a war of attrition against the progressive elements of the church is a sounder policy. Occasionally, as in the case of the kidnapping of young Father Henrique Pereira Neto last May in Recife, rightist paramilitary groups exercise their intimidation outside the jails and police stations. A few priests have gone into the clandestine life of the underground, and many of the students there are products of the Catholic student movement. There are also at least several Brazilian priests in jail today, and the tension between the government and certain sectors of the church remains high.

Will the Brazilian army continue to tighten its control by increasing political repression and the torture of political prisoners? The frustrations of trying to govern a large nation (the fifth largest by population in the world, and one of the fastest growing), deeply divided between the rich and the poor, with a restless people awakening from centuries of deprivation to the possibilities of a better life, are enough to tax any government.

The Brazilian army has shown itself either insensitive to or irritated by all criticism from outside its own ranks. It has tended during the past six years to isolate itself even more from the people it rules, and to become more resentful of the skepticism of civilians. Indeed, there is a growing "anti-civilian" mentality among Brazilian army officers that makes one wonder if they ever intend to turn the country back to constitutional rule.

Neither the criticism and opposition, nor the difficulty of the problems, is likely to diminish in the future. And there seems to be little likelihood that the Brazilian army will change its pattern of reaction.

So far only Pope Paul on the international scene has expressed concern over the tortures and persecutions in Brazil, and he rather timidly. The U.S. government remains essentially committed to the Brazilian government's policy of "stability" as the road to progress and so far it too shows no sign of moving away from the status quo.