

Civilian government at last

The left in the PMDB, based in the industrial cities, will make uneasy bedfellows for Sarney. They distrust his past and they are themselves under pressure in their political base from left wing parties not included in the Democratic Alliance. The most important of these are the PDT (Democratic Labor Party), ostensibly a social democratic party, in fact the personal vehicle of Governor Leonel Brizola of Rio de Janeiro, and the PT (Workers' Party) which in recent years has emerged from the industrial unions of São Paulo.

Brizola was the leader of the non-Communist left under the presidency of João Goulart in 1961-1964. He is still widely regarded as an extremist, but his immediate challenge to the Sarney government is expressed in constitutional terms. Brazilians have made it clear they want direct elections for President. The only legitimate regime is one originating in such elections. Therefore, Sarney's claim to rule is fundamentally illegitimate and direct elections should be held as soon as practicable and in any case no later than November 1986, rather than in 1988 as the government intends. November 1986 happens to coincide with the end of Brizola's term as governor, and he could use Rio as a base to campaign for the presidency. This obvious self-serving weakens his campaign, but he is potentially a formidable opponent. Unpopular with much of the middle class and the Marxist left, both of whom regard him as an opportunistic demagogue, he is an exceptionally skilled communicator with the urban masses, in person or by television. Direct elections are an ideal drum for such a man to beat.

Brazilian unions

While the PDT is one man, the PT is the first party to grow out of a mass movement, self-consciously the party of the labor unions. The political role of the Brazilian trade unions is important and will certainly grow under the democracy. Brazilian political parties tend to be ephemeral shufflings and groupings of the professional politicians; more than a dozen new ones have appeared since the military's restrictions on their formation ended. Unions, in contrast, are stable organizations. They were created on the lines of Italian fascist corporatism by Getulio Vargas, with one union for each industry in each municipality, and now number over 8,000. Forbidden to form national federations, they were conceived as a means of controlling the workers' demands rather than fulfilling them.

In the 1970s, however, several unions, and particularly the large metalworkers' unions in Greater São Paulo, began to shake off the tutelage of the federal Ministry of Labor. Guided in many cases by the radical wing of the Roman Catholic Church, which saw them as a means of "opting for the poor" on the principles of liberation theology, the São Paulo unions evolved a distinctive ideology which owes something to the Church, much to Marx, but relatively little to Lenin. Its political embodiment was the PT, founded in 1980 and the most consistently radical force in Brazilian politics.

Seeking control of the unions

The PT and the unions its controls are a threat to the working class political base of the PMDB and the Democratic Alliance. The former has little influence in the

unions except for the unions of the rural migrant laborers. It has therefore relied on an alliance with the Brazilian Communist parties, both the Eurocommunist PCB (Brazilian Communist Party) and the PC do B. (Communist Party of Brazil), formerly Maoist, now Albanian-line. Although the military in theory took power to save Brazil from the Communist threat, in practice it tolerated the long-standing Communist influence in the unions and allowed known Communists to run for office as PMDB candidates. With the emergence of the PT, the Communists and the PMDB have closed ranks still further in the face of a common enemy, and the Communists are now among the government's most loyal supporters. Legalization has been their reward, although this may not compensate them for the loss of revolutionary glamor and the burden of association with the government's measures.

The competition for control of the unions has contributed to the widespread labor unrest which broke out in April and May. The parties are under pressure to outbid each other in demanding higher wages, better working conditions and social reforms. This presents the government with difficult choices. Concerned for its political base, it is also responsible for managing the economy and reaching an agreement with Brazil's external creditors. Neither of these is consistent with an outburst of wage-propelled inflation. Officially, the government is taking the line that the corporatist structure will soon be swept away by a new labor law. Negotiations on working conditions will become the affair of employers and workers, with the government responsible solely for maintaining order and protecting property. While admirable in principle, this policy will encounter difficulties in practice. Maintaining order has already required the use of force, reminiscent of the military regime and unlikely to win the government friends among the workers. Further, the government is by far the largest employer in the country. Strikes in essential public services and the state corporations concern it directly and present choices which cannot be avoided.

The struggle for control of the unions, and the government's part in it, will be crucial for the future of the new democracy. But it will have relatively little to do with creating a more just society in Brazil. There are many millions of wretchedly poor Brazilians, but few of them belong to the metalworkers' union of São Paulo. Improvements in their condition must come about from economic growth and a more active program of social benefits.

Economic snarl

Before his death Tancredo had recruited an able team of economic ministers and advisers. Carefully balanced among his political bases of support, they were to be led by his nephew Francisco Dornelles, an experienced administrator whom he made Minister of Finance. Sarney has kept Tancredo's team, but it was widely expected that a struggle would erupt between monetarist and Keynesian factions, reflecting in turn the conflicting pressures on the government to control inflation (now running at 220 per cent a year) reduce the federal government deficit at US\$14 billion, and reach agreement with the IMF; all this while providing better housing, health care and education, more and cheaper food, higher wages and a start on agrarian reform.