

## Fifty years since the military coup: Taking stock of Brazilian democracy

In 1964, a military dictatorship that would last for 21 years was installed in Brazil. After a relatively smooth transition to democracy in 1985, Brazil is today considered one of the emerging powers in the world. This CMI Insight reviews the main characteristics of the military regime and the subsequent transition to democracy, and examines how this historical legacy impacts Brazilian democracy today.

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### Introduction

Half a century has passed since the 1964 military coup in Brazil, followed by a dictatorship that lasted for 21 years (1964-1985). Today, the country can look back on several decades without a single coup attempt, in spite of having passed through cycles of economic and social crisis. Democracy has become the rule, the military have remained in their barracks, and social policies have gained strength. President, Dilma Rousseff, was part of the armed resistance against the dictatorship, and was also arrested and tortured by the regime, illustrating the far-reaching political change that the country has been going through. Yet, confronting the human rights violations committed during the dictatorship has never been high on the public agenda in Brazil. Indeed, it appears as if the country prefers to look forwards, and not backwards, when carving out a role and image of itself as one of the countries predicted to become a major player on the world scene in the years to come.

Nevertheless, when a historical event has its 50th anniversary, the possibilities for analysis are enhanced. The temporal distancing, the emergence of new data, and new analytical contributions all allow for a more objective view. The present 50th anniversary therefore is a valuable pretext to reflect upon certain issues regarding both the past and the present:

Why did the coup take place? Why did the dictatorship last so long? Why is facing the past such a difficult task? What is the present balance of forces between the military and the civilian political sphere? And which are the major challenges facing Brazilian society at large today? In what follows, we will look into these issues, starting with an examination of the context of the coup.

### The coup and its context

When left-wing president João Goulart was overthrown in a military coup in 1964, it was not the first time that Brazil experienced a dictatorship. Getúlio Vargas, the most well known politician in the country, was installed as a "civilian dictator" with the support of the armed forces in 1937, and ruled as a dictator with full powers until 1945. This form of military intervention in fractional struggles between civilian forces was illustrative of the historical nature of military coups in Brazil, which had occurred several times since the country was first founded as a republic in 1889. Indeed, the proclamation of the republic in 1889 originated with a military coup, and from that point, the armed forces went on to have an active voice in politics. Military barracks became a space that was fought over by a vast array of ideologies and political groups. The coup in 1964, however, was the first after which the military held on to their power.

## Complex causes

The 1964 coup was not an isolated event in South America. Practically all the neighbouring countries experienced violent dictatorships in the same period—almost all of them of the military kind.<sup>1</sup> Across the continent, the 1960s and 1970s were characterized by the political radicalization of the Cold War, by the political mobilization amongst students and workers in rural and urban areas alike, and by a new generation of young political activists.

The background for the 1964 coup in Brazil was therefore to be found both inside and outside the country. In the context of the ideological polarization of the Cold War, reaching its height at the time, the Brazilian military came to be seen as “guardians” of order and of the values of the Christian, non-communist West. Thus, reflecting this ideological polarization in the country, the coup received strong support from the business community, the Catholic Church and the middle class sectors. Hence, in broad terms, it could be characterized as a military coup with civilian support from the conservative sectors of society. João Goulart, on the other hand, was supported by a few military groups, workers unions, peasant leaderships as well as the Brazilian Labor Party, which was the second most important party in the country at that time. To the military sectors that incited the coup, as well as their civilian supporters, these left-wing currents and their call for social reforms seemed influenced by socialism and the Soviet “Komintern.” This “anti-communist” ideology fostered a broad alliance in favour of a violent institutional rupture. The armed forces, in the words of their commanders, thought they were responding to a demand from society to “save the country” from a possible communist threat.

## Power struggles in the barracks

The coup also had roots in internal struggles in the armed forces. Simmering tendencies to indiscipline within army barracks took place during the João Goulart government (1961-1964), as lower echelons rose up against their commanders at various moments. Discipline and obedience, bedrocks of the armed forces, were perceived as threatened, creating the perception amongst military commanders that hierarchy needed to be re-instituted. To them, the coup in 1964 was thus also necessary for the self-protection of the armed forces, as it gave military chiefs discretionary political opportunity to preserve the values of their institution.

Before and after the coup, the representatives of the armed forces underlined the fact that the military were morally superior, better prepared, more patriotic and better able to accomplish the “mission of salvation.” This is precisely the reason why what

seemed to be just another coup ended up becoming a government. The dictatorship was not contained in the coup, but was a consequence of it. In the first stage of the coup, the anti-communist ideology cemented and promoted cohesion among armed forces, as they believed that they had to stay in power in order to foreclose the possibility of a rapid return of civilian radicals from the left. In 1968, when the urban guerrilla insurgency began in response to the dictatorship, the prevalent mood amongst the chiefs of the armed forces was that they had to stay in power as long as needed in order to carry through their political and economic project.

## A different dictatorship

The Brazilian dictatorship had five distinct features that set it apart from the other dictatorships in the region at the time. First, the institutions of the representative government—parliament and political parties—were kept intact, though disfigured and censored. Regular elections were held, and different generals took turns at the presidency, elected indirectly by Congress.

Second, the main posts in government—those concerning the economy, finance and strategic planning—were handed over to civilian technocrats. Indeed, there was no random distribution of government jobs to military men. With the help of a favourable international setting, the dictatorship achieved extraordinary growth rates

during its initial years, which became known as the “economic miracle.” Between 1969 and 1973, the most repressive years, the country experienced growth rates as high as 13 per cent a year. Unlike for example Chile, the military did not enact major economic reforms. Relying on a favourable economic international scenario, they rather continued the development model initiated by Vargas in the 1930s, and accelerated the state-funded, state-planned process of industrialization with the help of national and international private capital. However, the macroeconomic success of the dictatorship came to an end in the 1980s as a consequence of the regime’s own weariness and the international financial crisis that generated economic hardships across the continent at large. When the dictatorship ended, growth rates were down and inflation rates were amongst the highest in the world.

Third, the military governments expanded higher education and gave priority to financing research, exemplified by a national network of postgraduate programs aimed at scientific and technological development. These policies also reflected a dictatorship that fashioned itself as a modernizing force, with a vocation for major science and technology projects in the name of a “Big Brazil.”

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Fourth, the Brazilian military regime exercised considerably less violence against its opponents than its counterparts in Chile and Argentina.<sup>2</sup> That is not to say that the amount of violence and oppression was any more condonable than in the other countries, but to point out that both the resistance to the dictatorship, and the response to the resistance by the military regime, was of less magnitude in Brazil than in its neighbouring countries. In Brazil, protests primarily developed against the regime as it unfolded, and not at the time of the coup. Political movements and unions were banned, political activities were to a large extent curtailed, and political arrests were frequent. By the end of the dictatorship there were an estimated 480 dead and “disappeared” (*desaparecidos*) —the Spanish expression for political kidnappings and executions perpetrated by the military regimes.

It is also worthwhile mentioning that, unlike Uruguay and Argentina, where large parts of the police and the armed forces partook in violent repression of dissent, violent persecution of opposition movements and guerrilla groups in Brazil was primarily undertaken by specially trained military and police agents. In that sense, political persecution was more “institutionalized,” forming part of a state policy based on a sophisticated system of information gathering and targeted operations.

### Returning to the barracks

The Brazilian transition to democracy took a lot longer than in many of its neighbouring countries. This slowness has its explanation in the internal logic within which the military regime operated. It was paramount for the transition to be conducted in such a way that internal unity be maintained and displayed to the outside world.

In the beginning of the 1980s, some of the chiefs of the armed forces started signalling that the military should return to the barracks. This generated resistance from some of the more radical sectors within the army, who maintained that the regime should carry on longer. This disagreement reflects the heterogeneous nature of the military at the time, primarily composed by two main fractions. These are commonly referred to as the hard line (*linha dura*), that is, the more radical elements, which postulated the suspension of civil liberties and the continuation of a police state, and the more moderate sectors, also known as the Sorbonne group. The latter was made up of more intellectualized officers, while the former tended to be connected with the operational sector of the armed forces, known as *troupiers*. It was the *troupiers* group that led the toughest years of the repression, the so-called “years of lead” (1969-73).

In spite of having different views about the *modus operandi* of the dictatorship, the two sides remained cohesive *vis-à-vis* society in defence of the armed forces and of their peers. The view was that the coup had been an initiative of the armed

forces, with support from society, and the military needed to demonstrate that they would remain cohesive in their mission. Unity was maintained through internal purges and the imposition of unprecedented discipline.

A long period of transition occurred between 1974 and 1985. The exit was carefully negotiated both internally and externally to make sure that the military would leave power en bloc, with no visible fissures in their ranks. This was also a way to protect themselves from possible lawsuits involving the violation of human rights and discretionary acts practiced during the dictatorship. At the same time, being granted immunity was a condition for the transition. The *abertura* (opening up of the regime) would have to be “slow, gradual and safe,” as General Ernesto Geisel stated soon after taking on the presidency in March 1974.

### Towards ruth and transparency

In 1979, an Amnesty Law was negotiated between the military government and the civilian opposition, covering crimes and transgressions committed against those regime adversaries who were imprisoned or exiled. The law granted impunity to state agents responsible for torture, deaths and disappearances, who, according to the agreement, were to retain their posts. Since then, the Brazilian armed forces have been veto players in reviewing the antidemocratic aspects of this law.

It was not until the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994-2002) that attention was paid more consistently to the crimes and abuses perpetrated during the dictatorship. In 1995, the Special Commission on Political Deaths and Disappearances, linked to the Ministry of Justice, was created. The special commission was given the task of researching and listing the people who were killed or disappeared as a consequence of their participation, or accusation of participating, in political activities classified as illegal by the dictatorship. Sixteen years after the amnesty, this commission represented the Brazilian government’s recognition that there still were missing people. However, this law also established that the responsibility for these disappearances would rest neither with the military institution, nor with the government, or with their direct executors, but with the state. In other words, the Brazilian state recognized that citizens had disappeared or had been killed whilst under its custody, and showed its willingness to regularize their legal situation and support their families financially. Though late, the process of reparation began.

Another important step was the creation of the Amnesty Commission in 2001. The commission was given the task of analyzing the compensation claims made by those who had been prevented from conducting economic and professional activities for political reasons during the period from September 1946 to October 1988, when the current Brazilian Constitution was promulgated.

## Documenting the past

In 2005, then-president Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva launched two important projects that would contribute to establishing an official record, or what in Brazil is called a “memory,” of the dictatorship. These projects were called *Direito à Memória e à Verdade* (Right to Memory and Truth) and *Memórias Reveladas* (Memories Revealed). The first project involved sending all public bodies’ internal censorship files and information relating to the period of the dictatorship to the National Archive. Officially, the armed forces stated that they did not possess such documents. In the name of defending its “honour,” and in order to protect its members—some of them already dead—the military destroyed a number of its archives. The second project, begun in 2008, provided public online access to all National Archive materials relating to the repression.

During Lula’s second term, towards the end of 2008, the government sent the Access to Information Bill to Congress. This bill aimed to increase transparency in the public sector—still one of the most sensitive points in Brazilian democracy. The bill means more accountability for the present and past government affairs and was signed into law by President Dilma Rousseff in November 2011. On the same day, she officially created the National Truth Commission, charged with examining and clarifying human rights violations committed between 1946 and 1988.

The National Truth Commission, highly questioned by the military establishment, started its work in May 2012, 35 years after the Amnesty Law. It has no power to take someone to court or to compel them to testify against their will. Even so, President Dilma Rousseff’s initiative was not welcomed by military chiefs and was publicly denounced by retired officers.

## Corporate justice system

One important question remains: What has been the public’s attitude towards human rights violations and the role of the military after the transition to democracy?

The impunity granted to the military by the 1979 Amnesty Law was not amply contested—neither at the time, nor in subsequent years. When the law came into being, the political opposition accepted it as the best achievable deal within the rules of the transition to democracy. Moreover, in the following years, there was never any serious attempt on the part of the political parties of whichever ideology, or by Congress, to review this law. The quest for bypassing the Amnesty laws in order to bring perpetrators to justice remained the preservation of groups of family members of the dead and missing. Whenever the law was debated, social mobilization was limited,

which strengthened the capacity of the military to block any changes to the law.

On the few occasions these issues surfaced, they generated fissures within the government, pitched ministers against each other and clearly showed the difficulties experienced by every post-1985 government in dealing with a subject considered a taboo by the armed forces. The questions of legitimacy of the Amnesty Law ended up returning to the Federal Supreme Court, which reaffirmed its constitutionality. Consequently, state agents accused of political crimes during the dictatorship cannot, to this day, be tried or sued. For this to happen, the constitution must be amended or political crimes committed during the dictatorship must be legally re-defined as crimes against humanity.

As a result of this sluggishness, obstacles, and resistance from the armed forces, Brazil remains the only country on the continent where not a single public authority has been sued or convicted for its positions, actions and crimes against human rights during the military dictatorship.

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## Low levels of awareness

Data released in January 2012 shows that among Brazilians with a maximum of four years of schooling—about half of Brazil’s population—only 18.7 per cent had heard of the Amnesty Law and knew what it was about. Among those with university degrees—some 10 per cent of the Brazilian population—the figure stood at 46.9 per cent. Those who were aware of the content of the law were asked whether it should be reviewed so as to permit the investigation and punishment of state agents who committed crimes of political repression during the military regime.

Only 22.2 per cent answered positively. This leads us to conclude human rights are not a strong issue in Brazil even among the civilian society. Violence practiced by police as well has been accepted as a regular procedure in security services. In this sense, the impunity for crimes against human rights during the dictatorship is a kind of alibi for coercive institutions of the present.

Thus, a quick evaluation would lead one to deduce that any decision, whether legislative or judicial, to hold agents of the repression accountable would lack mass support in society and in the justice system. At the same time it is important to recognize that the debate and the initiatives witnessed since 1995 on the issue of human rights and the amnesty laws, all of them involving and demanding documental proof about the past, accountability and reparation, were only possible as a function



of democracy having become the stable political norm of the country. They were also made possible by the ample political and legal reflections, at the national and international level, on transitional justice.

### Brazil, quo vadis?

As this CMI Insight has indicated, the memories and imprints of Brazil's political repression during the dictatorship still loom in the shadows, yet the preference for electoral democracy appears fully established throughout society.

Today, Brazil is eagerly cultivating its image and role as an ascending player on the international scene. Expectations surrounding the country's potential, especially within South America, gained strength when the expression "BRICs" was coined in 2001. The acronym is formed by the initial letters of four emerging countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), giving Brazil greater international attention and generating much buzz regarding the country's potential for taking on a leadership role in the world. Brazil was also one of the founders of G-20, which brings together the top leaders of the world.

However, with increased international attention, the government is also under increased pressure to resolve the long list of challenges the country is still facing. The persistent presence of high rates of violence, racism, corruption, social and economic inequalities and environmental problems are some of the issues that are still scarring the imagery of Brazil as a success story. Indeed, the country's remarkable economic growth throughout the twentieth century did not manage to alter the country's legacy of social and economic inequalities, a persistent mark of Brazilian society from its inception, when the country developed from an economic basis of slavery and agro-export.

State violence in Brazil today, predominantly perpetrated by the police, disproportionately affects the poor and Afro-descendants, and the country has on several occasions been condemned by the Inter-American Court for Human Rights for this form of human rights violations.

At the same time, the country has received international praise for the poverty alleviation programs and policies that were put in motion by Lula, and continued by his successor Dilma Rousseff. Brazil's poverty rates have been cut substantially since the 1990s and extreme poverty has been reduced from 30 per cent to 7 per cent. Yet, considering that Brazil has a population of almost 200 million people, extreme poverty still impacts a lot of people. 85 per cent of the population now lives in urban areas, and many of them in the precarious settlements known worldwide as favelas.

Since mid-2013, mass demonstrations across the country have drawn increased attention to poor quality and high costs of public services such as urban transport, public education and health. The arrangements for the 2014 World Cup only

exacerbated discontent with public spending. Mass protests and street clashes with the police were widely covered by the international press, making it evident to the whole world that social tension are simmering under Brazil's upbeat surface.

In sum, Brazil is a country that is eagerly looking ahead, while harbouring significant challenges inherited from its past. However, this time, unlike in 1964, it seems safe to predict that tensions will be negotiated without the military's interference.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Around this time, the following dictatorships ruled in the Southern Cone: Argentina (1976-83), Brazil (1964-85), Chile (1973-90), Paraguay (1954-89), and Uruguay (1973-85).
- 2 Data from human rights organizations puts the number of missing persons in Argentina at ca. 30,000 and in Chile at ca. 3,000. These are countries whose population was about half and a quarter of the Brazilian population respectively.

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