Voices from the opposition: dictatorship and political transition in Brazil

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The military regime that took over in 1964 was a major political turning point in Brazil’s recent history. Political rights were severely curtailed during the authoritarian regime (1964 – 1974, which has been called the “leaden years”) and the transition returning to democracy under a new constitution (1974 – 1988); nevertheless, there were constant resistance struggles. However, re-democratization did not benefit all those who survived the struggle against the regime to the same extent. Indeed, some of them fell into political oblivion.

This paper aims to use recollections of the past to focus on the political careers of some individuals who took part in the struggle against the military regime in Rio de Janeiro. My interest here was not in members of clandestine organizations who supported the armed struggle (this has been covered elsewhere); rather it was to trace the life paths of individuals who played significant roles in the country’s political institutions. To this end, I interviewed seven individuals from differing positions in the political spectrum who hold different visions of the process that developed. Some of them were elected to congress; others led major social movements; still others liaised between legal political parties and clandestine organizations.

All of them have one feature in common: when political life was freed from restrictions and the rules ensuring democratic elections introduced, they all failed to maintain political support and most were not reelected. The decline in their support became even more visible after the 1982 elections, when many politicians were favored by amnesty and returned from exile. The year 1982 was a turning point in politics in Rio de Janeiro and, for that matter, in Brazil as a whole.

Those individuals, with their different life paths, played major roles in the opposition to the military regime. Their activity was concentrated over a 15-year period. The first elections held under severe restrictions introduced by new legislation (Ato Institucional #5) took place

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in 1970. The period ends in 1985, when Saturnino Braga was directly elected mayor of Rio de Janeiro by popular vote. Also in 1985, Congress elected (indirectly, in the sense that voters had no direct role) the first civilian presidential since 1960, Tancredo Neves.

**An overview of the opposition**

In order to understand the background to the interviewees’ political activities, we must go back to look at a few points in relation to the political and institutional situation.

Unlike past *coup d’état* in Brazil and other countries, the 1964 regime did not dissolve Congress itself. However, in 1965, all political parties were extinguished and replaced by two: ARENA, which supported the government, and the MDB, which opposed it. More radical observers thought that this “consented” or “tame” opposition was no real opposition at all. There was not much difference between MDB, the “Yes Party”, and ARENA, the “Yes Sir! Party.” Despite this early mood of rejection toward MDB, the party retained its own more radical wing, known as the “authentics” and allied with clandestine left-wing organizations. But MDB also had a moderate wing and certain sectors of MDB were no more than lukewarm in their opposition to the military regime, and this gave rise to internal friction.

The whole system of political parties was restructured in 1979, when an amnesty was granted. New parties were created and the opposition became more fragmented: the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT) emerged from the trade union movement in São Paulo and the new PDT was related to the pre-1964 PTB (Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro). Let us now turn to a brief profile of the interviewees.

**Lysaneas Maciel** (1926-1999) was born in Minas Gerais to a family of politicians (his grandfather’s brother was state governor during the 1930’s). Maciel went to Law school in Rio de Janeiro and graduated to embark on a career as a lawyer. His political activities did not begin until 1964, when he took part in international Human Rights commissions as a member of the Presbyterian Church. He ran for Congress on the MDB ticket in 1966, but was not elected. In 1970 he stood once again and this time was elected with a significant number of votes. Once in Congress, he joined MBD’s “authentic” section. Maciel was reelected in 1974 but was then stripped of his political rights in 1976 and had to go into exile. He returned in 1978 and jointed the PT in the wake of the restructuring of the party system in 1979. In 1982, he ran for state governor but was beaten by the PDT candidate. He then withdrew temporarily from politics, only to return in 1986, when he joined the PDT and was elected as a federal representative. During the constituent assembly, Maciel reinforced his position as an opponent
of the government by (unsuccessfully) challenging the PMDB for the presidency of Congress with the support of representatives from parties such as PT, PC do B and PDT. In 1990, he ran for office again but was again unsuccessful. In 1996, Maciel was elected councilman in Rio de Janeiro.

Heloneida Studart, a journalist, was born in Ceará in 1934. She took part in founding a trade union, SENALBA, for employees of cultural and recreational organizations, social workers and Occupational Training staff hired by the Rio de Janeiro Municipality. She led the union from 1966 to 1968, when she was dismissed and arrested under new and more repressive legislation (known by the acronym AI-5). She was also a member of the Brazilian Communist Party (PC), and a founder of the Rio de Janeiro MDB. In 1974, she was active in the struggle to found the Brazilian Women’s Center, in which she played a crucial role. She was elected to the state legislature on the MDB ticket in 1978 and soon afterwards was active in the campaign for amnesty. Studart ran for office once again in 1982, but was not elected and went back to journalism before being elected again in 1986. After a brief period in the PSDB (a party created by PMDB dissidents) in 1988, she joined the PT in 1989 and was reelected twice, in 1990 and in 1994. In the 1998 elections, she was elected first alternate and returned to Congress in February 2001.

Iramaya Benjamin was born in 1923. A chemical engineer and a mother, she started her political life after the arrest of her children, who had joined the armed struggle in the 1970’s and were expelled from the country. Benjamin was a founder and the president of the Brazilian Amnesty Committee. In 1982, she ran for office as a federal representative (PT) but was not elected.

Modesto da Silveira was born in 1927. He was a PCB member and as a lawyer defended individuals arrested on political charges. In 1970, he was kidnapped by the political police but was soon released. In 1978, he successfully ran for federal office for the first time (MDB). His major achievements in office included Human Rights advocacy, denouncing torture and waging the struggle against the authoritarian regime. He remained loyal to the PMBD and unsuccessfully ran for reelection in 1982. In 1986, he ran for office again as a federal representative, on the PCB ticket, but was not elected. He left political life in the early 1990’s.

Raymundo de Oliveira was born in 1940. As an engineer, systems analyst and university professor, he worked for large corporations and for a Brazilian federal university, UFRJ. Oliveira was first arrested as a student and again when he was working for IBM. He was in touch with several left-wing clandestine organizations and in 1970 joined MDB to support
Lysaneas Maciel. In 1978, he was elected state representative (MDB). When the opportunity arose to build or join new political parties, he supported maintaining a left wing within the PMDB. In 1982 and in 1986, he ran for office again but was unsuccessful. He joined the PSDB in 1988 and then the PDT in 1990. Oliveira stood for city council in 1991, but was not elected.

Arlindenor Pedro de Souza was born in 1947 and became involved in student struggles rather than parliamentary politics. After the 1964 *coup d'état*, he joined what was called the “Red Wing” of the PCdoB and then the PCdoB itself. As a member of clandestine organizations, he liaised with legal party life in the MDB in 1975 and was arrested in the same year. In 1979, he managed Raymundo de Oliveira’s parliamentary office and in 1982 ran for city council (PMBD), but was not elected.

Francisco Amaral was born in 1933 in Maranhão. Amaral began political life by joining the PCB as a grass roots activist in Baixada Fluminense (a low-income area in the state of Rio de Janeiro). He joined MDB in 1970 and was elected to the state assembly twice, in 1974 and 1978. Amaral played an important role liaising between the Rio de Janeiro MDB left-wing leaders and Nova Iguaçu grass-roots leaders. In 1982, he ran for office as a federal representative (PMDB), but was not elected. In 1986, Amaral was elected vice-governor for the state of Rio de Janeiro.

We have reviewed the political lives of five men and two women; five congressional representatives (Lysaneas Maciel, Heloneida Studard, Modesto da Silveira, Raymundo de Oliveira and Francisco Amaral); a leading activist in the pro-amnesty movement (Iramaya); and one who liaised between clandestine organizations and the MDB (Arlindenor Pedro de Souza).

All these activists won support in the context of the political void produced by the suppression of political rights and the banishing of the main left-wing politicians that were active before 1964. Despite their rather diverse careers, we may point to a few shared features: their past membership of left-wing parties, their decision to avoid direct involvement in the armed struggle, and the belief that the best strategy in the struggle for re-democratization at that time was to work within the framework of legal institutions and organizations, such as Congress, or non-clandestine social movements. In their respective fields of struggle, they all devoted their energies to defending freedom, fighting censorship and denouncing torture and human rights violations.
The re-democratization process moved forward, political amnesty was granted and the exiles returned. The political party system was reformulated and with the return of direct elections to state governments, a new historical stage opened up which obliged these individuals to rethink their strategies. Until the end of the 1970’s, there were only two political parties to choose from and all opponents of the authoritarian regime waged one single struggle - against the regime. In the new situation, there were many new political parties and the former Opposition split to take different paths. Furthermore, the politicians recently returned from exile were new actors in the scenario.

In the state of Rio de Janeiro, the 1982 elections brought defeat for many who had stayed in Brazil whereas many politicians who had been exiled by the military regime returned to successfully compete for left-wing votes. Many slogans had, it seemed, become anachronistic and what was needed was a new and more specific approach focusing on the new demands of a society recently freed from authoritarian government. And many of those who had contributed to the struggle for democracy were unable or unwilling to play this new role.

**Memory, resistance and oblivion**

On analyzing the material from the interviewees, two crucial periods emerge – the 1978 elections with the pro-amnesty movement, and the 1982 elections. The 1978 elections and the proclamation of amnesty were perceived as victories for the opposition, whereas the 1982 elections signified a bitter defeat. The interviewees, paradoxically, saw the golden age of the opposition to the authoritarian regime as the period of the military dictatorship itself. This was when they had their most dramatic experiences, but it was also when they had their most glorious hours, confronting repression, defending the poorest sectors of society and feeling attuned with their political supporters.

Heloneida Studart, who ran for office as a federal representative in 1978, talked of her campaign in these terms: “The others organized [the political campaign] for me. The only thing I had to do was get out to these places with a small group, and speak there. The election rallies in the poorest areas (i.e., shantytowns) were very moving. (Ferreira, Rocha e Freire, 2001: 75).” Once elected, her role as federal representative centered on the great issues. She described it in these terms: “I remember that this period turned on the struggle for re-democratization and political amnesty. (...) We used to spend most of our time away from Congress, involved in public protests and demonstrations. In the House itself, we did what we
could. We introduced a few bills, but (...) our work within Congress was secondary; our major goal was re-democratization. (...) Democracy and freedom were the talk of the day.”

Modesto da Silveira, who was elected federal representative in the same period, says that his activity as an elected representative was devoted to the “struggle against torture, in defense of amnesty, human rights and democracy (Idem, p.119-120)”. There was no specific concern with local or regional issues: what mattered most was the fight against the authoritarian regime.

Iramaya Benjamin proudly recollects setting up the Brazilian Amnesty Committee: “The amnesty campaign was gaining momentum. We, as committee members, did not have an easy time – we were extremely active street agitators. We had stickers calling for “Full Amnesty for All with no Restrictions” that we gave out to drivers on the intersections. (Idem, p. 143)”. She highlights the fruits of the struggle: “The return [of the exiles] was such a joy!! Even before the bill was actually passed (...) some of the more impatient ones among them started coming back. They would tell us in advance the day and time of arrival, and the flight number, so that we could all go to the airport since we were afraid the repressive forces would arrest them again; and we celebrated their arrival with banners, music, and so on. Then the bill was voted. (...) The Committee would go to the airport, it was such a party! At times, the flights were delayed and we had to wait there; there was no place to sit and rest, so we sat on the floor, and spent the night there, sitting and waiting... Some of the Committee members really liked me, because I was old enough to be their mother. Even today they remember how I used to say: ‘Everybody to the Airport! We have to be there when they arrive!’ And, tired or not, we would all go. (Idem, p. 149)”.

Raymundo de Oliveira describes his role as a member of the state assembly: “I mean, I was really a politician dealing with nationwide issues rather than a state assembly representative. I dealt with national issues: the struggle for democracy; for a constituent assembly; I supported Cuba; attacked the Americans because of the Three Mile Island incident... The amnesty campaign mobilized us all. We were trying to broaden its scope to include all of the people who had been arrested. (...) Miro and myself went there [Frei Caneca prison] to visit our friends who were on hunger strike to fight for a broader amnesty, since the law did not include them. (...) I was active mainly in this area. I would express my opinion on every major issue. Perhaps you will not find me making statements on the lack of economic activity in the north of the state, or pollution in the Paraíba river – issues that a state representative is supposed to deal with. I was a state representative concerned with major domestic and
international issues. Very pretentious of me, wasn’t it? (Idem, p.176-177)”. Referring to the return of the exiles, more specifically, to Leonel Brizola, the former PTB leader who returned through the South of the country, Raymundo recalls: “The moment he entered Brazil was marvelous! There were lots of people on horseback, waving flags and wearing red handkerchiefs... It was wonderful. There was this one night during a speech in São Borja, it was really fantastic; that night, I argued that he should run for president.”

Those reports enable us to capture all the excitement and hope implicit in the work of the interviewees – but there was a different and somewhat discouraged mood when they talked of the 1982 elections, which brought out the differences between the interviewees’ positions and those of their voters. Note, however, that the former exiles were not the only reason for this mismatch. Contradictions within the PMDB, the party that emerged from MDB, also played a role. Not long before, the party’s left wing had confronted the more conservative section and accused it of consenting to the authoritarian regime. But it was the conservative members of the PMDB who succeeded in nominating their candidate for state governor.

On looking back at the perspectives for the 1982 elections, Raymundo de Oliveira comments: “In view of the growing power of MDB, the authoritarian regime chose to eliminate both parties, since the election contest between MDB and ARENA was becoming a plebiscite, and it was not hard to foresee the result: ARENA declining and MDB booming. When the authoritarian regime chose to abolish the two parties, I said we all should join the PMDB as the successor to MDB. (Idem, p. 177)”.

Arllindenor Pedro de Souza’s interview brought out the meaning of the 1982 elections for the MDB left, who not only saw themselves facing new left wing parties but were also obliged to support a candidate they had despised in the past: “It was the worst experience of my life. Before that, we had the run of the streets- no one could compete with us. Then an entirely different kind of people emerged. (...) The PDT candidate’s campaign was an eminently popular affair. Cars distributing voting slips would appear at the corners, and everyone just took the slips. It happened all over Rio de Janeiro, after the debate on TV, and we were startled, unprepared, because people began to accuse us of being corrupt or being thieves, the same accusations we had hurled at the MDB’s conservative wing. We were unable to elect a single soul. (Idem, p. 220)”.

Iramaya Benjamin’s comments on the 1982 elections reveal the same tone of discouragement: “I joined the Workers’ Party (PT) and ran for federal office in 1982. The PT members though
that the amnesty movement had developed more than it actually had (...) and that I could be easily elected [on that basis], but it never happened. (Idem, p. 152)”.

Francisco Amaral made a similar point in relation to the 1982 elections and the growing gap between voters and the left-wing PMBD candidates: “The cab drivers at Mesquita used to support me. (...) But some time later, I went back there with a PMDB conservative candidate! They got together and told me: ‘Listen, Amaral. This time we are not going to support you.’ (Idem, p. 260)”.

Modesto da Silveira added: “It was a very difficult campaign. First of all, the party was fragmented (...) Even though we had the systematic support of the left wing, it was split. And that made it all even more difficult. Besides, we needed money for the campaign, and we had none. In 1982, we lost nearly everything we had gained in 1978. (Idem, p. 124)”.

In these reports, the explanation for not gaining support from a section of the voters, and for their past role in the struggle against the authoritarian regime being forgotten, turns on media manipulation and the lack of financial resources needed to support electoral campaigns. They all still believe that the best way to bring the struggle against the regime to a successful conclusion would have been to come together in a broad front of all the regime’s opponents. They had wrongly expected that the former exiles would join the PMDB when they returned, instead of creating new parties. The interviewees were all clearly disappointed with the turn of events when new parties emerged that led to the much-feared fragmentation of the opposition.

They were also disappointed in the belief that their past record in the opposition would be a passport to reelection. The exiles returned and replaced those who had stayed in Brazil to struggle against the authoritarian regime.

Twenty years on, it is rather hard to acknowledge and accept that a new situation had emerged in the transition from the 1970’s to the 1980’s and that mistakes were made. The statements presented here do not show a critical view of past decisions and despite certain nuances or differences between their views, they still see the path followed in 1982 as the correct way to defeat the authoritarian regime, even though it implied personal sacrifice for activists who saw the triumph of their political ideas while they lost support for their positions.

Turning to a broader view - the history of left-wing struggles in general -- we can see that the role of these leaders in the re-democratization process has also been forgotten or minimized. It would almost seem that the 1982 electoral defeat erased the memory of all previous struggles. The great achievement of the anti-dictatorship groups who stayed in Brazil but did not support
the armed struggle was not always fully acknowledged. Even today, there are differing and contradictory recollections of the past as to who rightfully deserved the laurels of the victory that was won in the struggle for democracy.

The authoritarian regime thought that it was itself the main player in the return to democracy, since the transition – they say- was conceded by the regime itself. Their opponents in exile did not formally assign themselves this role, but they chose not to express their opinion in relation to the people who stayed in the country and focused their efforts in the institutional terrain. The political capital they built up during the years of the authoritarian regime was discarded or spent by others. It was their belief that their role as “guardians of democracy” would be acknowledged in the future, and their decision to maintain a left front to win the last battles against the regime, that ultimately left them unprepared for the new times that were approaching.

Bibliography


