

Brazilian's Reforms Falling Short of Hopes

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Feb. 1 — Almost two years after Gen. Ernesto Geisel assumed the presidency amid hopes of political liberalization, Brazil remains a right-wing military dictatorship with a parliamentary facade.

The stern looking general has emerged as a figure who is able and willing to suppress the worst excesses of the 12-year-old regime, but who is unwilling or unable to resist military hard-liners opposed to any substantial loosening of authoritarian rule.

The two sides of the Government and its leader have been very much in evidence since the beginning of the year.

Last month President Geisel dramatically dismissed Gen. Eduardo d'Avila Melo, the commander of the army garrison in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, after an imprisoned worker was apparently tortured to death by military intelligence officials under the general's command.

The President's firm action only partly lifted the gloom that has descended over the legal political opposition. A few weeks ago, General Geisel ordered two opposition legislators stripped of their posts and political rights. And in recent days, Government officials have leaked reports to the press that more legislators may be suspended and that strong curbs may be placed on the opposition party's attempts to conduct an election campaign for municipal posts later this year.

"We in the opposition live always trying to gain our balance," said Congressman Ulysses Guimarães, head of the Brazilian Democratic Movement, the only legal opposition party.

Relaxation Resisted

The Government's pendular swings between liberalization and repression have been further clouded by an uncertain economic outlook. After eight years of spectacular economic growth, known as the Brazilian Miracle, there has been a slowdown and a worsening deficit in the balance of payments.

Military hard-liners and civilian conservatives argue that the regime should not ease its



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President Ernesto Geisel

grip on power at a time of potential unrest.

The total of political liberalization to date has been meager. Press censorship has been reduced, allowing the better-known dailies to discuss such previously taboo topics as detentions, torture and foreign policy. But some leading weekly magazines and the television and radio networks are still heavily censored.

After years of virtually open confrontation with the Roman Catholic Church, the Government has at least made efforts to reopen a dialogue with church leaders who have expressed dismay at the regime's violations of human rights.

In a slight reversal of its economic policy, the Government last year permitted wages to rise above the officially recognized level of inflation. But workers, whose real income has dropped sharply despite the Brazilian Miracle, still have little voice under a political system that does not allow labor unions to strike or bargain collectively.

Perhaps the most important move toward liberalization was the fact that the Government permitted free and unhindered congressional elections in November 1974. The center-left Brazilian Democratic Movement, though still a minority, gained enough strength at the polls to form parliamentary committees that could question Government ministers on specific policies.

The 1974 elections turned out to be the high point of political liberalization during President Geisel's first two years.

Opposition Congressmen, eager to test their strength, decided to press the Ministry of Justice on the fate of missing political prisoners and on the use of torture by security officials.

But the Congressional investigations resulted in a backlash among military hard-liners, particularly among the intel-

ligence and internal security forces. An antisubversion drive that began early last year has imprisoned, at least temporarily, more than 1,000 people, mainly workers, students and journalists.

The backlash reached its sharpest level with the death last October of Wladimir Herzog, a São Paulo journalist. According to the intelligence services, he committed suicide after having voluntarily agreed to an interrogation and admitted his links with the Communist Party. The official explanation of the Herzog death was greeted by widespread skepticism among church leaders, the press and the opposition.

When a metallurgical worker, Manuel Fiel, died last month under similar circumstances, apparently not even President Geisel attached any credence to the suicide announcement of the São Paulo military intelligence.

Heleno Fragoso, vice president of the Lawyers Association of Brazil and a leading human-rights authority, remarked: "We all know that the army intelligence center is a house of horrors where prisoners are submitted to terrible constraints and violence, including electric shocks that can provoke death."

President Geisel's swift decision to oust the São Paulo commander was generally applauded. But it was also widely interpreted as an effort to restore the military's tarnished image on human rights, not the beginning of a sweeping reform of internal security practices.

'Profoundly Lamentable'

"It is profoundly lamentable that the decision to replace the army commander was only taken at the instant when another life was ended in jails," noted José Carlos Teixeira, a Democratic Movement Congressman. "President Geisel must understand that either he practices full democracy or he will lose the ability to lead the nation."

In recent weeks, the Lawyers Association furnished Government officials with a lengthy statement asserting that 300 political prisoners had died under torture since 1969 and identifying the torturers and their methods.

According to the document the deaths were reported as suicides, traffic accidents or escape attempts.

"The majority of us are condemned to extremely high prison sentences," read the document signed by 35 prisoners. "Without exception, all of us passed through the repressive organs and their torture chambers. We

were submitted to the most diverse abuses, and were also witnesses to the murders of many political prisoners. It is not an exaggeration to say then that we are the survivors."

Tortures Described

The prisoners went on to describe 30 forms of torture, identifying the following among those used most often:

A prisoner's feet and hands are bound, he is hung by an iron bar and given electric shocks.

A prisoner is tied to a wooden chair with a zinc seat and given electric shocks.

A torturer beats his cupped hands against a prisoner's ears until the eardrums are broken.

A prisoner is forced to stand barefoot on the edges of opened tin cans.

The authors of the document, who remain under detention, allowed their names to be passed on to the authorities to back their charges.

Since the 1964 coup, Brazil has had four successive military presidents. Each has indicated at one time or another a desire to do away with political excesses and to establish a legal, institutionalized regime.

Early Geisel Move

President Geisel said early in his administration that "terrorism has been dominated and contained," implying that the most brutal methods of political repression were no longer justifiable.

But efforts to carry out liberalization have repeatedly been thwarted by what many political analysts here refer to as the "system," a form of parallel government made up of the highest military officials responding to moods among important segments of the officer corps.

Almost invariably over the last 12 years, the "system" has reacted against political shifts that seem to give the civilian opposition more power. In the interests of maintaining military unity, the President has then felt constrained to reassert the regime's authority by using the exceptional powers granted to him by previous decrees.

The most important of these powers is widely known here as Institutional Act 5, which allows the President to suspend Congress arbitrarily, decree new laws, dismiss officials and suspend anyone's political rights for 10 years.

Civilian politicians constantly try to sense the shifting moods of the military and generally refrain from making sustained verbal assaults on the Government in their campaigns to establish a more liberal, constitutional system.

"As long as Institutional Act 5 exists we should not be surprised by anything," commented Senator Teotônio Vilela of the pro-Government party, who has repeatedly argued that politicians should persevere despite the Government's swings between liberalization and repression. "It is like a smoldering volcano."