



Rio de Janeiro in 1964...

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By Michael Uhl

Rio de Janeiro in 1964 remained the de facto seat of the Brazilian government and home to its corps of international diplomats. Despite the fact that Brasilia, the modernist architectural ghost town erected in the scrublands of the country's isolated interior was designated Brazil's new capital in 1960, the foot dragging went on for years before the embassies and the governing bureaucrats accepted the inevitability that they would have to, not just occasionally commute between Rio and the new capital, but actually decamp and live there. Think of the founders and the whole apparatus of State being forced to abandon cosmopolitan Philadelphia in 1800 for swampy, malarial Washington. By 1964 standards, going to Brasilia, today Brazil's 4th largest city was worse.

Thus, when the coup unfolded on March 31, 1964 that brought down the democratically elected government of Joao (Jango) Goulart, American diplomats were still pulling strings on behalf of the Putschists from their comfortable embassy board rooms on the Avenida Woodrow Wilson in downtown Rio. And yours truly, a wet behind the ears undergraduate at the local Jesuit university for a year, in a Zelig-like coincidence, witnessed the military takeover from a window facing Copacabana beach in a building where the deposed president himself had an apartment.

The dictatorship and its afterglow endured a quarter century until the direct election by popular vote of Fernando Collor de Mello in 1989, following the creation a year earlier of a new constitution, by far Brazil's most democratic. Even then the military hovered in the wings having inserted into the new charter, according to historian Daniel Aarao Reis, the authoritarian wedge "of the military's right to intervene in the national political life if they are summoned by the head of one of the three branches of government."

Now, with twenty five years of democratic governments under their belt, and a flow of peaceful transitions from one presidential term to the next – including the resignation of President Collor under investigation for corruption – a Brazilian electorate many times larger than the one that brought Jango to office in 1961, might finally imagine itself immune from any future threat to democratic rule by the military, despite the menacing clause that lies dormant in their constitution.

As one engaged Brazilian friend keeps reminding me, “our democracy is a system that has to be exercised every day,” and in contemporary Brazil where, not just an ever-skittish military but an oligarchy that has banked its gold plated privileges on centuries of authoritarian rule, popular vigilance has not been lacking. Half of Brazil’s population was not even alive in 1964, and, as a spate of mass street protests demonstrated throughout 2013, the youth in particular of an emerging middle class have signaled that the culture of corruption in which the country’s elites remain contemptuously entrenched, is the principal target of their social and economic struggles.

The season of street protests has momentarily subsided. The response of the government, despite being headed by Dilma Rousseff, who herself had a serious brush with armed struggle back in the days of the dictatorship, has been cosmetic. Today, her Worker’s Party (PT), the senior member of a coalition of ruling parties that makes Italian politics look almost transparent, attempts to play by neo-Keynesian rules while bound in the structural and historical straight jacket long fashioned by the landed and industrial oligarchs.

The PT, first under the presidency of former trade unionist Lula da Silva, and now Dilma, is rightly credited with many of the reforms that have brought this emergent Brazilian middle class into existence, delivering a solid increase in the standard of living that has taken an impressive bite out of the chronic poverty the overwhelming majority of the Brazilian masses have suffered throughout the country’s history. But over the last several years, the PT leadership, if not the more militant rank and file, has also sullied the party’s reputation in a vote buying scandal that has placed some of its most powerful founding members behind bars.

Further fueling the social protests was the fact that the political class almost across the board seduced itself into lavishing billions of \$Reis generated by Brazil’s fleetingly robust export economy to build stadiums and hotels in support of the World Cup, which the country will host this June, followed by even more extravagant plans for the Olympic Games in 2016. Rio will be the epicenter for both events and the city is

undergoing a frantic pace of remodeling, much of it by displacing *favelados* who traditionally inhabit the city's extensive, crime infested shanty towns.

In the meantime, the urgent demands of the middle class, not to mention the millions who remain chronically impoverished, for education and health care, as well as long overdue attention to the Brazil's crumbling infrastructure of roads and public transportation, are sacrificed to the fantasies of the elites to project Brazil on the global stage as a world power. While Brazil is hardly the beggar country of years past, there are disturbing echoes of the country's former enthrallment to the IMF in the broad consensus of its economic chieftains to embrace the neoliberal constraints of the free market. Sadly, rather than ride the currents of popular unrest to re-arrange Brazil's economic priorities, the Dilma government seems more preoccupied with her campaign for reelection rapidly approaching next October.

With the above as a general orientation of the status quo in today's Brazil, we arrive at a moment that will divert Brazilians into a short period of historical self-reflection during events surrounding the 50th anniversary of the coup this March and April. Over the past year, Brazilians have paid desultory attention to the work of national and statewide truth commissions which, through archival research of police and military records, and public eyewitness testimony are coming to grips with the stories of those who were tortured, murdered and, in cases, "disappeared" over the decades of repression. Much of the upcoming retrospective around the 50th anniversary will be centered in Rio, which will enjoy a brief pause between two invasions of foreign visitors, the recently ended week of carnival before Lent and the upcoming games of the World Cup in June.

With little significant exception, the feeble disclaimers of a few survivors implicated in the most vicious criminal practices in those years, one expects that there will be virtually no public defense of the coup, its perpetrators and enforcers, across the full spectrum of political institutions, to include the views expressed by the most ideologically right wing elements of the media. A version of the past is being constructed into a Never Again consensus that will potentially leave the most pressing socioeconomic struggles unresolved.

I myself will be in Rio over several weeks to witness some of this national remembering, official, academic and, one hopes, spontaneous on the streets as well. The one thread of investigation I have become aware of that might aid in empowering those Brazilians who seek real solutions to persistent implacable injustices, will attempt to steer the national discourse away from a single focus on Brazil's military as the sole bogeymen of this historical trauma, and concentrate on the much more numerous ranks of enablers

throughout civil society without whose collaboration the uniformed regimes could never have been installed or sustained. Legions of these individuals have seamlessly transformed themselves without consequence from authoritarian collaborators into pious hypocrites now very content to see the dictatorship unambiguously denounced, as long as it is labeled for posterity exclusively as *militar*, and not as it ought to be, *militar-civil*.