

Report from Rio by Lorenzo Carrasco

Sabotaging the constitution

The present government would like to usurp power from the congress, but Brazil's military shows no sign of going along.

On Feb. 11, during a meeting sponsored by the São Paulo Industrial Federation (FIESP), Communications Minister Antonio Carlos Magalhães gave an improvised speech to the nation's most powerful industrialists on the need to dissolve the National Constituent Assembly. Magalhães, considered the strongman behind the Sarney government, argued that "the Constituent Assembly began in error," and should therefore be replaced by a "commission of jurists," with whom "the congress is not filled."

Minister Magalhães clearly hoped to find backing for his proposal to usurp power from the constitutional congress still in session, given that FIESP president Mario Amato had recently proposed that all matters of importance be submitted to a popular plebiscite, rather than congressional debate and decision. To his surprise, the industrial leaders greeted his proposal with silence.

The next day, President José Sarney himself confirmed his government's offensive against the Constituent Assembly, during his weekly radio program, "Ao pé do Rádio," broadcast nationwide. In unprecedented fashion, Sarney denounced one of the articles of the new constitution, which has still to be ratified, as a path to "chaos, the empire of crime and of impunity."

President of the Assembly Ulysses Guimarães, already upset with Sarney for having declared that "the [debt] moratorium was his first mistake," has not responded directly to these attacks, in the belief that this would only

contribute to political tensions at a moment when the democratic transition is in danger. Guimarães' cautious silence makes clear what is becoming evident to all, namely, that the floundering Sarney government is trying to provoke just such political tensions as a means of buoying itself.

It fell to other forces, with important links to the Armed Forces, to come out in defense of the Constituent Assembly. PMDB Sen. José Richa declared in an interview with *Estado de São Paulo*, that "the government is unaware of the situation—which is its own responsibility—and is preoccupied with the new constitution—which is not its task."

He went on: The country is moving toward "ungovernability and chaos. . . . I fear that, among the sacrifices asked of the nation is the very loss of sovereignty." He added that there exists, among the armed forces, "neither the tendency nor the will [for] an intervention representing regression, but the continued deterioration of the situation will bring Brazil to that. . . . Social difficulties will end up contaminating the Armed Forces."

Congresswoman Sandra Cavalcanti declared: "Whose interest would be served if the Constituent Assembly did not advance? Whose interest would be served if it became a circus? This government is living its last days of Pompei. . . . The members of the palace guard that surround the President are counting on a stagnation of the process of the Constituent Assembly, as the last hope for their survival and that of the government."

But the most critical support for the Constituent Assembly came from Navy Minister Adm. Henrique Saboia, who declared, "We believe in the democratic option of the Brazilian people, and we are confident that out of the efforts of the Constituent Assembly will emerge a Magna Carta that can reflect the aspirations of the Brazilian people, [and] relate to both the present and the future."

Since Admiral Saboia is the only military figure to speak out during the present crisis, his statements have been taken to represent the firm support of the Armed Forces for the Constituent Assembly.

It is now clear that the confusion reigning within certain political circles in Brasilia stems from the fact that the intimate group that co-governs with President Sarney, no longer has support either among the parties of the now-defunct Democratic Alliance, the PMDB and the PFL, or among the "legalist" group of the Armed Forces. Neither of these power centers are ready to endorse an effort to usurp power; on the contrary, they are anxiously awaiting the promulgation—of the earliest possible moment—of the new constitution, which will put an end to the government that has fallen into Magalhães' power-hungry hands.

Who is Magalhães, whose primary political backer is Roberto Marinho, owner of the O Globo radio and television empire? It was Magalhães who in 1985, together with Delfim Netto, tried to install in the presidency the ultra-monetarist Col. Mario Andreazza, who promised to do away with the "great projects" of President Ernesto Geisel (1974-79). Magalhães today is working with Antônio Delfim Netto's pupil, Brazilian Finance Minister Maílson da Nóbrega, to drive the country back into the fold of the International Monetary Fund.