

“Sheltered under the Tree”

The Everyday Practice of Politics under Dictatorial Rule

On September 22, 1973, federal deputy Ulysses Guimarães, national president of the MDB, stood at the rostrum of the Senate in Brasília. The party had just nominated him as its “anti-candidate” to run for president against General Ernesto Geisel, the regime’s anointed candidate, in the 1974 electoral college vote, where ARENA would enjoy a massive advantage. Gazing over the heads of the delegates, Guimarães gave a grandiloquent acceptance speech filled with allusions to Portuguese poetry and Greek mythology that would have been incomprehensible to working-class Brazilians. At its crescendo, he declared, “It is necessary to navigate. It is not necessary to live.’ Stationed today in the crow’s nest, I hope to God that soon I will be able to shout to the Brazilian people, ‘Good news, my Captain! Land in sight!’ Without shadow, without fear, without nightmares, the pure and blessed land of liberty is in sight!”¹

Guimarães was saying that the MDB was driven by the desire to take a stand. In the audience there was a new generation of deputies dubbed *autênticos* (authentic) who agreed; no matter the risks, the opposition should fearlessly stand up to tyranny. Yet many of those assembled were less interested in taking a stand than surviving. As Minas Gerais deputy Tancredo Neves warned the Bahian autêntico Francisco Pinto, “Son, don’t put your chest on the tip of the bayonet! Let’s just stay sheltered under the tree and wait for the storm to pass.”² But in the years following the decree of AI-5, it looked as though the storm might never pass. Congress had become a rubber stamp for the regime. Leftist university students had been driven into exile or opted for armed resistance, and the military was marshaling all its firepower to annihilate them. Meanwhile, under the guidance of Finance Minister Delfim Neto, the economy grew at an annual clip of nearly 11 percent between 1969 and 1974, and the “Brazilian miracle” generated an approval rating

of over 80 percent for Médici in São Paulo, whose political and economic elites benefited most from accelerating industrialization.³ Amid repression, economic growth, and the regime's popularity, members of the opposition were forced to make their peace with the situation to which they were subjected. Most remained sheltered under the tree, waiting. The *autênticos* took courageous stands but had little to show for it. Yet there was a third path, embodied by Campinas mayor Orestes Quêrcia, that proved most effective: building a machine at the state level while emphasizing the day-to-day issues that mattered to voters. No matter the constraints, Quêrcia and those like him had campaigns to plan, alliances to build. There were party leadership posts to win, privileges (however limited) to be enjoyed, and funds to be procured for one's municipality. There were friends to help and enemies to win over or thwart.

These three paths demonstrate that even at their most repressive, the military's attempts to intimidate the political class had limitations. Although few politicians were principled opponents of military rule, they all subtly pushed back in search of opportunities to improve their lot. This is far from the armed resistance of the revolutionary Left or the courageous opposition of the progressive Catholic Church that has captured scholars' imaginations. Yet although politicians' apparent acquiescence was a key factor in the generals' decision to loosen their repressive grip in 1974, their submission was a farce. Most were biding their time, positioning themselves for a hoped-for return to political normality. Despite Médici's assurances that he required the collaboration of the political class, fear paralyzed most politicians. Few powers remained to legislators beyond offering timid criticisms, which would seldom appear in the censored press. As the British ambassador explained, "With the privileges and perquisites of their individual members so limited and with their collective powers so curtailed . . . elections to the [Senate and Chamber] no longer offered its former attractions and their deliberations exercised small influence on the conduct of affairs."⁴ Scholars described "a compliant façade of a Congress, shorn of any independent powers,"⁵ and highlighted the "institutionally democratic façade and the domesticated semi-opposition."⁶

The generals' confidence was enhanced by the 1970 legislative elections, which brought a resounding victory for ARENA and the near-undoing of the MDB. In the climate of intimidation, in most states the MDB recruited fewer candidates than the number of seats open.⁷ Most voters opposed to the regime simply spoiled their ballots or left them blank; nationwide such ballots outnumbered the votes for the MDB, which won only 90 of 310 seats in the Chamber and 6 of 44 Senate races, leaving it with only 7 of 66 senators.⁸ Finally, ARENA still controlled all state legislative assemblies, with the exception of Guanabara (comprising the city of Rio de Janeiro). Only less disastrous vote totals in cities of the Southeast and South gave the MDB any hope for the future.⁹ Nevertheless, this did nothing to help the party in the municipal elections of 1972, when ARENA won 90 percent of the mayorships.

"IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO LIVE": THE AUTÊNTICOS
AND THE ANTI-CANDIDACY

Of the 90 MDB federal deputies elected in 1970, 20 to 30, most serving their first term, would soon distinguish themselves by the "virility" of their opposition, as one later described it.¹⁰ Mostly in their thirties or early forties, they ranged from social democrats to socialists. Several were elected with the discreet support of the banned Brazilian Communist Party, which, unlike other leftist groups, rejected armed resistance.¹¹ In Brasília, often living in hotels without their families, they were drawn together by disgust with the cautious MDB leadership.¹² In conversations over coffee or meals in hotel restaurants, or as they wrote speeches in Congress's typing room (most deputies lacked offices in still-unfinished Brasília), they met colleagues who shared their convictions.¹³ Collectively they were dubbed the *autênticos*, in contrast to so-called *moderados* (moderates) like Guimarães, who, in the *autênticos*' view, were too timid. They reserved the most indignation for so-called *adesistas*¹⁴ like Guanabara governor, Antônio Chagas Freitas, a newspaper magnate and supporter of the 1964 coup who after AI-5 had built an MDB machine that collaborated with the regime.¹⁵ Considering the regime's marginalization of the political class and disregard for civil liberties, what did these young deputies have to lose? In their minds, something, *anything*, had to be done to show the world that the Brazilian dictatorship did not enjoy unanimous support. Although they knew that they would probably end up being removed from Congress, still they attacked the regime.

The conflict between *autênticos* and *moderados*, with *adesistas* sometimes thwarting both, became the key conflict within the MDB. The *moderados* were annoyed; AI-5 had rid them of the headaches created by the "immature" deputies, but now they were confronted with another group whose careless, confrontational attitude the military might use to justify more repression. To them, the *autênticos* jeopardized all the party's work to ensure its members' survival. "We were seen as nutjobs," José Alencar Furtado recalled. "We dealt with the opposition of both the MDB and the dictatorship itself."¹⁶ Strategy was not the only source of conflict. The upstart deputies were also eager to supplant their elders and ascend to key party leadership posts, a situation that reminded Guimarães of PSD conflicts when he was young and eager to challenge authority. Indeed, he always resented *autênticos*' labeling him a "moderate."¹⁷ "If anyone were to compare the ideas of a 28- or 30-year-old *autêntico* with my ideas at the same time . . .," Guimarães recalled, "they would see that many times I said more authentic things than the *autênticos* did. . . . In spite of all my moderation, I made frontal, substantial attacks on the military regime."¹⁸

The MDB found common ground in the anti-candidacy of 1973, an event that the *autênticos* would remember as the high point of their careers and the one that transformed Guimarães into a nationally known figure. The MDB had

abstained from the 1966 and 1969 presidential “elections,” and with barely a fifth of the votes in the electoral college, there was no point nominating a candidate in 1974.¹⁹ Yet after Médici announced Geisel as his successor, the *autênticos* proposed that the MDB nominate its own candidate so as to use the free television time provided candidates to publicize the party’s criticisms of the regime.²⁰ The *autênticos* first sought to recruit a nationalist general disenchanted with the regime’s friendliness to foreign investment. When that bore no fruit, they courted the venerable lawyer and former governor of Pernambuco, Alexandre Barbosa Lima Sobrinho.²¹ They envisioned a candidacy that would conduct a national campaign to denounce indirect elections; but if the courts did not allow TV access, they urged the party to abandon the candidacy.²² Party leadership was sympathetic to their idea, as it offered an opportunity to oppose the regime within its own rules.

Ultimately the candidate chosen was Guimarães, who by September had warmed to the idea. During a night drinking whiskey with friends, an idea came to him: he would run as an “anti-candidate” to denounce the rigged election.²³ The September MDB convention ratified the anti-candidacy, with Lima as the running mate. At the insistence of the *autênticos*, the party agreed to hold another convention to reevaluate the anti-candidacy if needed. At the convention, Guimarães thrilled the *autênticos* by endorsing their desire for a more vigorous opposition: “It is not a candidate who will travel across the country. It is an anti-candidate, to denounce an anti-election, imposed by an anti-constitution.”²⁴ Years later, Pinto recalled, “On the day of the convention, yes, Ulysses appears as a true oppositionist. He gave an excellent speech. . . . And we applauded! It was the first time I applauded Ulysses.”²⁵

The anti-candidacy launched the thin, bald, ascetic-looking, fifty-seven-year-old Guimarães to national prominence. A graduate of the São Paulo Law School, he had been a deputy since 1950. As a longtime member of the centrist PSD, he shared the party’s penchant for taking both sides of an issue.²⁶ Although he had been a minister in Goulart’s cabinet, in 1964 he joined the pro-coup forces in Congress in electing Castelo Branco and authored a proposal that would have allowed suspensions of political rights to last fifteen years instead of ten.²⁷ Despite joining the MDB, by 1968 he was rumored to be considering a switch to ARENA in exchange for a cabinet position in São Paulo.²⁸ In the Moreira Alves affair, he served on the Constitution and Justice Committee and gave a measured defense of constitutional immunity but did not play a conspicuous role.²⁹ As the former deputy Sabiá summarized his relevance in the late 1960s, “Ulysses didn’t exist.”³⁰ He was more interested in congressional maneuverings than contact with voters and had limited involvement in local paulista politics. In the evaluation of a British diplomat who spoke with him in mid-1973, “The democracy to which Guimarães wishes to return is very much qualified by being a democracy adapted to the stage of development of the Brazilian people; . . . meaning no democracy at all, but Government in the hands of ‘those best fitted to exercise it.’”³¹ Yet when

the MDB president, Oscar Passos, was voted out in 1970, Guimarães, the party's highest-ranking vice president, was thrust into the presidency. Beginning with the anti-candidacy, Guimarães was transformed. Orestes Quêrcia, who worked closely with him for two decades, recalled, "Until then he was considered an appeaser, . . . someone who says 'yes' to everyone."³² Francisco Pinto remembered, "That was when a new Ulysses was born, affirmative and incisive."³³ Or in the words of Gaspari, "That paulista who had barely gotten any votes and presided over a party without a past or a present ended up discovering the future."³⁴

Yet the anti-candidacy's full potential to influence public opinion was thwarted—first, because it never reached a broad audience; second, because the press coverage it brought was of dubious significance; and third, because Guimarães refused to exit the race as the *autênticos* expected. Although Guimarães held rallies in fourteen of Brazil's twenty-two states, they were seldom held in public but rather indoors for invitees.³⁵ For the closing rally in Guanabara, the state party president, an ally of adesista governor Chagas Freitas, ignored the party's attempts to reserve the Tiradentes Palace, seat of the legislative assembly. When he arrived anyway, Guimarães found military police on the palace's steps.³⁶ Then, on November 20, the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE) ruled that free TV time applied only to direct elections, although the law made no such distinction.³⁷ Clearly the court had succumbed to pressure from the regime, which had no interest in allowing the MDB to disseminate its message to the masses.

Although the campaign increased newspaper coverage of the MDB by as much as 3,500 percent, the practical effects were limited.³⁸ The media were still under censorship.³⁹ And newspaper readership in Brazil had always been low; in 1972, Brazilian papers printed only 37 copies per 1,000 people, whereas US papers published 297 per 1,000.⁴⁰ A 1970 poll revealed that 45 percent of people in the D class (the lowest income group) in São Paulo's capital reported reading no newspaper; in the state's interior the number rose to 84 percent.⁴¹ Rallies had failed to attract popular attention, the party was unable to preach its message through modern mass media, and newspaper coverage was of dubious utility. As the British ambassador explained, "Ulysses Guimarães . . . never succeeded in establishing his credibility as the representative of an effective Opposition. . . . They failed effectively to put their policies before the people."⁴²

In the wake of the TSE decision, the party called a new convention, for November 28, to decide whether to continue. The *autênticos* suggested withdrawing from the race, but with only a third of the party's federal deputies in their camp, they lacked the votes needed to pass their proposal. They thus agreed to maintain the anti-candidacy, but Guimarães quietly assured them that he would quit the race just before the election.⁴³ To hold Guimarães to his promise, the *autênticos* resorted to blackmail, threatening to embarrass the party by boycotting the election if he dared present his candidacy at the electoral college.⁴⁴ But from Guimarães's likely perspective, the anti-candidacy was going well. He and Lima

were receiving enthusiastic receptions from local MDB leaders (even if ordinary people never saw the rallies); moreover, the nearly forgotten party was attracting unprecedented press attention (even if few people were reading the reports). Who knew what positive electoral ramifications this might yield? Furthermore, Guimarães, president of a moribund opposition and never popular electorally, probably enjoyed being welcomed by local party militants, speaking to packed auditoriums, and being hounded for interviews. It was a level of attention he had never before received.⁴⁵ A US diplomat who had spoken with a reporter close to Lima wrote that the vice presidential candidate “is immensely flattered by the attention he draws when he appears in public, is enjoying himself hugely, and will campaign under any circumstance.”⁴⁶

As the vote approached, the *autênticos* expected Guimarães to exit the campaign in protest—“denounce and renounce,” as one put it—perhaps even as he gave his speech as president of the party in Congress the day of the vote.⁴⁷ Yet a few days before the election, Guimarães double-crossed them. In a closed-door meeting with the *autênticos*, he informed them that he would not withdraw.⁴⁸ “I cannot follow through with what I told you I would do,” he stated.⁴⁹ In justification, Guimarães and the party leadership argued that the military would never tolerate the insolence of a last-minute withdrawal. As he recalled years later, “All the possible weight of protest and denunciation was eloquently expressed in the anti-candidacy. I wasn’t going to induce the party into and much less lend myself to infantile, sterile gestures.”⁵⁰

The *autênticos* were infuriated. From the beginning Guimarães had failed to give them credit for the idea of the anti-candidacy, and after they were not invited to many campaign events, the group was forced to announce its intent to hold a parallel campaign on Guimarães’s behalf.⁵¹ Now, in addition to keeping them out of the public eye, Guimarães was going to participate in the sham election instead of denouncing the regime’s mockery of democracy. Two decades later, Furtado still remembered the episode with bitterness: “[Ulysses] could have arrived in that chamber like a giant, but he arrived like a dwarf. The anti-candidate turned into a candidate, betraying himself, providing a service to the dictatorship in an election with predetermined results.”⁵² Senator Petrônio Portella, ARENA president, fed this impression by praising the MDB for “giving a valid contribution to the strengthening of democracy in Brazil.” Like the MDB leadership, he worried that a “confrontational posture” from the opposition might “damage the effort that is being made on behalf of political-institutional normality.”⁵³

On the morning of January 15, the electoral college gathered. The *autênticos*, still fuming, planned a dramatic act of defiance. Although only party presidents were allowed to give speeches, the *autênticos* voiced their objections via a procedural question. Furtado was chosen in a random drawing to speak for them.⁵⁴ Under the pretext of arguing that the rules of the Chamber of Deputies, not the Senate, should apply to the electoral college, he insisted:

In this country, the right to a free press is usurped by prior censorship. The right of minorities to be represented in this electoral college is usurped, thus banishing the principle of proportional representation. In this country . . . even individual [legal] guarantees are usurped by the laws of exception. . . . In this country, even the right of access to radio and television is usurped by a tie-breaking vote.⁵⁵

Although procedural questions were not to be used to make a political speech, Senate president Torres made no serious attempt to interrupt; it was clear to the British ambassador that there had been a deal in place to keep the *autênticos* from making a scene during the "election."⁵⁶

Guimarães read his half-hour speech in his methodical yet majestic style. Though his sonorous delivery, his voice rising to crescendos and falling to dramatic pauses, sounds almost pompous to the modern ear, for its listeners, it surely meant something else. For Guimarães, schooled in oratory during his years in law school, with a quarter century of experience giving congressional speeches, this was how one should deliver a historically important speech, with a style that reinforced the gravity of the moment, both in the present and for posterity, and that impressed listeners and readers alike with its erudition and poise.

Like the far-walking and mestizo boots of the guerrillas who expelled [the Dutch] from the Pernambucan *recôncavo*; the leather hats, and, although destitute of swords and blunderbusses, the hands of the Acreans and the Northerners; the Farroupilhian ideals hued by the ponchos and lent voice by the gallop of the horses, the vote is the weapon of this same people to guarantee its destiny as end, and not means, of the State; as sharer in the dividends of development, not its disinherited creator; as [an act of] self-defense as well, raising on our borders the barrier of impenetrability against capital that has no Pátria, which criminally persists in colonizing a Pátria that has no capital.⁵⁷

MEDIA FILE 7. Clip of Ulysses Guimarães Speech before the electoral college, January 15, 1974.

SOURCE: Câmara dos Deputados, COAUD, Arquivo Sonoro, <http://imagem.camara.gov.br/internet/audio/default.asp>.



The focus of his speech was the regime's abandonment of liberal democracy. He intoned, "When the vote is taken away from the people, the people are expelled from the center to the periphery of history. . . . The [only ways to] protest become agitation and strikes labeled as subversion." He noted the absence of purged politicians with "profound bitterness." He called for the reestablishment of immunity, the revocation of AI-5, the elimination of torture, the end of censorship, and the repeal of decrees limiting student political mobilization. As an afterthought, he lamented government manipulation of inflation data, "which nourishes the divinization of the government in direct proportion to its starving of workers, civil servants, retirees, and pensioners."⁵⁸

Next, ARENA president, Petrônio Portella, turned the tables by arguing that ARENA, not the MDB, was defending democracy. After all, his party held a majority in the electoral college because it had won elections. It was the MDB that was attacking democracy by being sore losers. “In the minority,” Portella insisted, “with the pretension of being the holders of truth, they place themselves in opposition to the weight of our numbers, electing themselves tutelary guides of the Nation, the exclusive defenders of democratic principles.” In a final jab, he mocked Guimarães’s speech at the MDB convention in September, where he called on the party to navigate with purpose.

We watch with admiration the great adventures of the old sailors. Without a compass . . . , they faced the formidable sea. . . . “It is necessary to navigate. It is not necessary to live.” We, however, prefer to remain faithful to our duty. It demands from us intelligence, foresight, courage. There is no place in it for adventure. Glory lies in formulating, conceiving, creating. . . . “It is not necessary to live. It is necessary to create.”⁵⁹

Next came the state-by-state roll call vote. As each elector was called, he shouted his vote from the Chamber floor. Yet when the turn came for the first *autêntico*, Domingo de Freitas Diniz, he stepped up to a microphone, where he could be sure he would be heard and recorded, and announced, “I refuse to vote, according to the terms of the declaration I signed that was delivered to the board.” When Torres announced his vote as an abstention, Freitas Diniz protested that rather than abstaining, he was refusing to participate. “I refuse to vote.” As each *autêntico* voted, he made a similar statement, omitted from the minutes but preserved in the recording: “I refuse to vote in an anti-election”; “I refuse to vote, and I return my vote to the Brazilian people, the ones glaringly absent from this spurious process”; “I refuse to vote, in accordance with my party platform.”⁶⁰ It was the most dramatic moment of congressional defiance since the Moreira Alves vote.

MEDIA FILE 8. Clip of individual *autêntico* vote declarations, January 15, 1974.

SOURCE: Câmara dos Deputados, COAUD, Arquivo Sonoro, <http://imagem.camara.gov.br/internet/audio/default.asp>.



Geisel won 400–76. In a final gesture, twenty-three *autênticos* submitted a statement for publication in the *Diário do Congresso Nacional*. They explained that since the MDB platform was opposed to indirect elections, they had never had any intention of continuing until the election. Now that the MDB had betrayed itself, they were the only ones left to protest, even if it cost their careers. They concluded by dramatically reaffirming their perceived right to speak for a silenced nation.

Public men do not become great by the number of times they are simply present, but rather by their capacity to reflect the anguish and hopes of the people, in every age. .

.. [T]he Pátria of tomorrow will be able to do justice to the few who assumed the risk of combining their gesture of inconformity with the protest of their voice.⁶¹

The 1969 constitution required that delegates vote for their party's candidate or risk expulsion from their party. Yet the MDB leadership, unwilling to lose a quarter of their representation in the Chamber, instead simply stripped the *autênticos* of party leadership posts.⁶² And even when the MDB failed to expel the *autênticos*, Geisel declined to use AI-5 to remove them. It had been four and a half years since the last *cassação*; how would it look if a quarter of the opposition was removed for boycotting a sham election? While subsequent years would show that Geisel was not averse to purging opponents, today tolerance ruled.

What, in the final analysis, was the significance of the anti-candidacy? Since television and newspaper coverage had been non-factors, it could not have altered popular perceptions of the MDB. And other than the poorly attended state rallies, the drama unfolded in distant Brasília, where a powerless Congress debated issues of passing local interest. Yet for the MDB politicians who lived it, the anti-candidacy was deeply meaningful. Guimarães discovered the allure of becoming a hero and the excitement of the spotlight. The anti-candidacy ultimately set him on a path to confrontation with the regime that would cement him as an *autêntico* himself. As for the *autênticos*, they had finally made the defiant gesture of which they dreamed. Considering the dire straits in which the opposition had found itself a year before, after another dismantling at the polls, even the quixotic anti-candidacy could be enormously encouraging.

BUILDING A PARTY FROM THE BOTTOM UP: THE RISE OF ORESTES QUÉRCIA IN SÃO PAULO

While *autênticos* and *moderados* bickered in Brasília, other young MDB politicians eschewed frontal opposition. Resistance for the sake of conscience had its attractions to some, but it was too risky to appeal to most. Instead, led by Orestes Quércia, the energetic mayor of Campinas, another new generation would build the MDB from the bottom up. For better or worse, the "Revolution" had happened, and no anti-candidacy would change that. Instead, the way forward was to use grassroots organization to win elections. At the state and local levels, for ARENA and the MDB alike, politics were (and still are) ruled by mundane struggles for power and resources. Elections—the route to local power—were also the only way remaining to challenge the regime. Of course, if elections were the key, why would anyone join the MDB? Since all the governors except one belonged to ARENA and since they controlled the disbursement of funds to municipalities, an MDB mayor would be left on the outside looking in. Moreover, the regime had created mechanisms to accommodate local rivalries within ARENA. Under the *sublegenda* system instituted in 1968, each party could run up to three candidates in mayoral elections. Whichever party received the most total votes would win the election,

with the mayoralty going to that party's top vote getter.⁶³ Since local rivalries were one of the few things that could drive a politician away from ARENA, creating space for those rivalries in ARENA was a brilliant approach. São Paulo showed how the system could pay off; in 1972 the MDB won the mayorships of only 58 out of 571 municipalities, along with only 80 municipal council seats across the state, compared to an astounding 4,930 for ARENA.⁶⁴

Yet where most saw insurmountable obstacles, Quércia, the thirty-five-year-old former mayor of Campinas (Brazil's largest city where the mayor was still directly elected) saw opportunity. Born to an Italian immigrant grocer in the hamlet of Pedregulho in São Paulo's northeastern corner, Quércia began working in his father's shop at the age of ten.⁶⁵ At seventeen he moved to Campinas, where he studied law and became a reporter. By his eighteenth birthday, he was planning a run for municipal councilor in 1959.⁶⁶ He was defeated, but in 1963 he ran successfully on the ticket of the Partido Libertador (PL), the only party that would let him run.⁶⁷ He was simultaneously councilman, lawyer, and businessman, selling cornmeal, Volkswagens, and, later, real estate.⁶⁸ In 1966 he joined the MDB, mainly because most local factions had already joined ARENA. That year he was elected state deputy, and in 1968 he accepted an invitation to run for mayor of Campinas. Quércia suspected that the MDB had only invited him hoping to increase its vote total enough to elect one of its other two candidates.⁶⁹ Still he threw himself into campaigning. He was far from what the elites of this city built with coffee money thought a mayor should be, and he was endorsed by none of the local political factions. Quércia related that the current mayor visited local taverns and demurred that his candidate, the head of the local Jockey Club, wasn't the sort to campaign in bars. Quércia proudly visited the same bars, proclaiming himself a "bar candidate," unashamed to mingle with voters.⁷⁰ When he was not traveling from bar to bar, he was going house to house; he claimed to have personally visited five thousand families in their homes.

While the two other MDB candidates, campaigning during the Moreira Alves crisis, emphasized the struggle against "militarism," Quércia focused on education, public transportation, housing, and the cost of living, alongside the party's usual themes of indirect elections, attacks on civil liberties, and the increasing power of foreign corporations.⁷¹ When the votes were counted, he had won more votes than the other candidates combined.⁷² His victory was built on votes in working-class neighborhoods where his "man of the people" aura and focus on infrastructure and public health had resonated. "The people were tired of having the [same] old alternatives before them to choose between, alternatives that were nothing more than the city's old political forces that kept alternating in power," he said after the election.⁷³

Quércia was ambitious, energetic, and a natural at using the tools of populist electoral politics that had developed in São Paulo between 1945 and 1964, through politicians such as Adhemar de Barros and Jânio Quadros. As mayor of Campinas,

he emphasized efficient administration and public works. Since he "did not have an ideological conception of politics, but rather a strictly electoral one," Quércia avoided involving himself in MDB disputes. Instead, he exhibited an extraordinary ability to conciliate between party factions. He nurtured good relations with the PCB, which earned him a degree of trust from the MDB Left; in exchange, communists gained a patron in an opposition party dominated by traditional politicians. He also built relationships with intellectuals at the recently created State University of Campinas.⁷⁴

Quércia's pragmatism hardly set him apart; indeed, the ability to navigate between factions is practically a requirement for politicians anywhere. Yet the waves of cassações had opened space for a new generation. And Quércia was a remarkably skilled negotiator and alliance builder. While not an adesista, his non-confrontational approach toward the regime could anger autênticos and moderates alike. In 1968 he argued that his goal was "not to overthrow the government or conduct extremist agitation" but rather "create conditions for a [political] opening . . . through the party struggle, . . . even with help from the military."⁷⁵ Instead of focusing on attacks on civil liberties, Quércia emphasized that there were national problems beyond "direct elections and democratic freedom" and that "our task is to listen to the people's aspirations."⁷⁶ Two years later he held a convention for MDB mayors elected in 1972. The meeting produced the "Campinas Letter," which argued that the party should focus its energy on the everyday issues important to local politics.⁷⁷ Its tone was so conciliatory that even one of the most moderate MDB national leaders, Secretary General Thales Ramalho, fumed, "It clashes with . . . the MDB's platform, . . . its code of ethics, and its very principles."⁷⁸

After his term ended in 1973, Quércia (whose anointed successor was elected with over 80 percent of the vote) set his sights on the MDB's Senate nomination in 1974. Yet as a journalist turned politician with few ties to the state's political elite (the reason he had entered the MDB to begin with), Quércia could expect no support from party leadership. Instead, he set about founding MDB directorates in municipalities where the party was not yet organized; as he built the party, he would also build a network of clients to support his own aspirations.⁷⁹ His message could be summarized as, "I'm going to the top, and I'll take you with me." He called on his allies in Campinas to organize directorates statewide. In larger cities, their task was easy, but in São Paulo's hundreds of small municipalities, they faced significant difficulties. As Quércia recalled, "Back then the campaign carried out against the MDB was to say that there was no use voting for the party, because [MDB] mayors wouldn't get anything from the government."⁸⁰ When the organizers arrived, they would first alert the ARENA mayor of their presence. They then searched for radio or press outlets known to be sympathetic to the MDB, or perhaps the local Catholic priest, and asked if they knew of anyone with a "spirit of opposition." The going was tough, since many people worried that the MDB was "a party full of subversives, full of communists." Sometimes, armed with only a name

and address, they would ring a doorbell and ask whoever answered if they would like to join the MDB; often the resident “would run back inside . . . and talk to us through the little window in the door.”⁸¹

Within a year, Quérícia’s team had expanded the number of MDB directorates in São Paulo from under two hundred to nearly five hundred. Not only would these directorates provide delegates to the 1974 convention that would select the party’s Senate candidate, but they would also serve as a critical base of support for Quérícia and other MDB candidates. Campaign events would finally be able to count on local members for on-the-ground planning, which might include services like notifying the ARENA mayor and police of a rally, procuring permits, arranging food and lodging for visiting bigwigs, and turning out a crowd. As Melhem puts it, “The party grew in the interior, but it was tangled up with local issues, with no ideological rigidity; its key point of reference was the dispute for the municipal administration.”⁸² And indeed, it appears that a “spirit of opposition” usually meant opposition to the ARENA faction in power locally, not the regime.⁸³ Quérícia and his team quickly learned to start by reaching out to the ARENA candidate who had lost the 1972 mayoral election to another ARENA faction. Even if he did not join the MDB himself, he was often willing to provide names of people who might be interested.

Quérícia’s tireless work exemplified the bread and butter (or beans and rice) of Brazilian politics. While it was far from the lofty rhetoric and intralite negotiation of someone like Guimarães, this was something local politicians could relate to. Even more important, it took advantage of the political space available during the most repressive years of military rule. Due to the military’s dogged insistence on preserving parties and elections, this was a low-risk way to “oppose” the regime while advancing one’s career. And this was something that the regime could do little about, because it was an “opposition” that challenged carefully if at all and focused on gaining electoral support through socioeconomic arguments and public works. Even if it could somehow cast such behavior as “subversive,” the regime’s repressive apparatus lacked the will or manpower to investigate so many local politicians. As the future would show, of the three opposition strategies, Quérícia’s would prove most effective.

“OUR PEOPLE ARE STILL AT A VERY LOW LEVEL”: DÉTENTE AND “RELATIVE DEMOCRACY”

Thanks to Quérícia and others like him, the MDB made significant strides; between 1971 and 1974 the party grew from 1,180 municipal directorates to more than 3,000 nationwide.⁸⁴ But how much good would this growth do if the regime remained as repressive as ever? Médici’s term was set to expire in March 1974. After his unfulfilled promises to allow broadened participation for politicians, would his successor change anything? This question concerned both parties; after

all, no matter how much arenistas enjoyed control of Congress and the governorships, they were no more satisfied than the MDB with military tutelage. Might Médici pick a successor who took more seriously politicians' desire to be entrusted with more influence? This was not just idle speculation, as it appeared that an eventual military retreat from direct political power might be on the table. In December 1971, General Alfredo Souto Malan stated at a ceremony promoting new generals, "The moment is in sight when the existence of sufficiently broad, diverse, and capable civilian groups will permit the military . . . to consider the prospect of . . . controlled disengagement."⁸⁵ However, although Army Minister Orlando Geisel was present at the speech, military contacts informed the US embassy that Médici was "incensed" and had "called [Geisel] on the carpet" for allowing it.⁸⁶ And even if the military were to withdraw from its decisive role in politics, what sort of system might replace it? No one knew.

In 1973 Médici's civilian chief of civilian staff, João Leitão de Abreu, asked the political scientist Samuel Huntington to offer an analysis of the Brazilian political situation. Although Médici did not implement any of Huntington's recommendations, the American scholar's confidential twelve-page report eventually served as a blueprint for his successor's "slow, gradual, and secure" liberalization.⁸⁷ Arguing that the current system was neither desirable nor sustainable, Huntington suggested three steps toward "decompression." First, he urged the institutionalization of a means of determining successions for executive offices, especially president. For Huntington, Mexico under the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI), where the president selected his successor (the *dedazo*) with input from an array of social groups (the military, labor unions, etc.), offered an example of this approach. Second, he suggested expanding the range of groups who had input on policy. Third, he advocated for "the liberalization of current restrictions on individual political and civil rights." The goal of these measures was not democracy but rather "assuring the stability of the government and preventing a possible return to the irresponsible and inefficient political conditions that prevailed before 1964." In other words, for Huntington and the generals who followed his advice, democracy and participation were not a goal but rather a means to consolidating the "Revolution."

But how to accomplish this? If the regime could not indefinitely impose its will through force, it would have to do it through party politics, specifically, through a regime-allied party. Mexico had done this through the PRI. However, ARENA lacked the internal coherence ascribed to Mexico's ruling party. "Brazilian political parties have always been weak," Huntington argued. "And the two parties today continue to be weak, because . . . they have been conceived of as simply electoral organizations intended to serve a populist project." What Brazil needed was parties that sought "to integrate, within the very party structure, organized social, economic, professional, and bureaucratic groups." The problem was that Brazil did not possess any such tradition. The solution was to create a new tradition: "a working political party that is tied to and bases itself on organized socioeconomic

groups.” This would require building on the corporatist tradition of the Vargas regime, in which businessmen, labor unions, farmers, the military, and other groups all felt they had a collective voice in policy making.⁸⁸ Prophetically, Huntington warned, “This may be the key for Brazil’s political stability, because if the government does not do this in the coming years, the opposition certainly will.”

Huntington’s analysis demonstrated a remarkable grasp of the Brazilian political system for a novice. The problem lay with his solution of a coherent political party responsive to civil society. Huntington recognized that this was inconsistent with Brazilian political culture, but in keeping with his discipline’s long-standing dismissive attitude toward culture, his answer was simply to turn ARENA into such a party. This solution was what the generals had dreamed of since party reorganization in 1965, a vision refined amid the repression of 1969. The problem was that neither Huntington nor the generals had any idea how to convince the political class to set aside its self-interest and rivalries and work together to represent society.

Since the regime currently lacked the kind of party foreign scholars thought it needed, for now it would have to make do with something well established in Brazilian tradition: Médici would select his own successor. In June 1973 Médici informed General Ernesto Geisel that he had chosen him.⁸⁹ The son of a German immigrant, Geisel had served as chief of military staff under Castelo Branco, but he was not close to Costa e Silva and spent his term as a justice of the Supreme Military Court. When Médici took office, Geisel received the important but politically isolated directorship of Petrobras, the state oil company. Along with his friend, the erudite, astute general Golbery do Couto e Silva, Geisel was known for his unyielding respect for the chain of command. Politicians had high hopes that Geisel might be a “liberal” who could offer an enhanced role for the political class. While his “liberalism” was far from a repudiation of the military tutelage that rankled politicians, perhaps he would deliver the limited return to “democracy” that Médici had promised. Though politicians could not have known it, in his initial meeting with Médici in Rio, Geisel allegedly refused to promise that he would not repeal AI-5, which, combined with his appointment of Golbery, an enemy of Médici, to the post of chief of civilian staff in his new administration, decisively demonstrated his independence.⁹⁰

In his first cabinet meeting, Geisel promised a “sincere effort toward a gradual, but secure, perfection of democracy” based on “mutually respectful dialogue” that would foster “a healthy climate of basic consensus.” In other words, the military would define “respectful dialogue” and “basic consensus” while allowing no substantive challenges to the “Revolution.” With politicians now behaving better, this could involve the “greater participation from the responsible elites and the people.” He hoped he would not have to use “exceptional instruments” like AI-5, but its repeal would be conditioned on “a creative political imagination, capable of instituting, at the opportune time, efficacious safeguards and prompt and truly

efficient resources within the constitutional context."⁹¹ While the possibility of increased participation and the end of AI-5 was encouraging to politicians, it would require their continued good behavior.

No one, perhaps not even Geisel or Golbery, knew what this process would look like. Looking back, Geisel recalled, "We thought that when we left the government, the country would be more or less normalized. We didn't dare say, 'On such and such date, at such and such time, we're going to do this or that.'"⁹² They certainly did not have in mind a participatory democracy in any sense. Nor would the military tolerate a return to pre-1964 populist politics. Rather Geisel wanted what he later called a "relative democracy." Two decades later, he still insisted that European-style democracy could not work in Brazil, considering the "educational level, the mental level, the level of discernment, the economic level of the Brazilian people."⁹³ "I don't disagree that it's important to listen to the people," he stated, "but I believe that our people are still at a very low level. . . . Full, absolute democracy for Brazil is fiction. We must have democracy, we have to evolve toward a full democracy, but the stage we are at imposes certain limitations."⁹⁴ Under the system he envisioned, ordinary (literate) Brazilians could vote for municipal councils, state legislatures, Congress, and possibly also mayors. Yet the system would protect against their incompetence by preserving a powerful role for the military and controlling the selection of the president and governors. There was a place for a "responsible" opposition to offer "constructive" criticism but not unproductive and possibly subversive "contestation." Under no circumstances could the opposition come to power.⁹⁵ He wanted the "collaboration" of the political class and voters only if they never challenged him on anything he considered important and offered cautious criticism on specific policies without questioning the regime's legitimacy.

Private correspondence leaves little doubt that the new president and his advisers would have liked to keep the regime going indefinitely. In July 1974 Geisel's secretary, Heitor Ferreira, proposed changes to the terms of federal deputies in order to institute an electoral calendar favorable to the regime winning future elections. If his suggestions were adopted, he projected, the regime could continue through 2004 and beyond, with indirect elections for president and governors. "If it occurs like this, there will be no critical moments in sight. . . . The system can last." While the plan was never seriously considered, it demonstrates that indefinite indirect elections were anticipated, that it was considered feasible for Geisel to unilaterally amend the constitution, and that the regime would always be military dominated, since Ferreira mentioned problems posed by "factions formed by generals" attempting to influence indirect elections.⁹⁶ Whatever reforms Geisel had in mind, they fell far short of politicians' hopes.

Publicly, Geisel aroused further hopes in an August speech, when he referred to a "slow, gradual, and secure *détente* [*distensão*]" of the political system with "a maximum of possible economic, social, and political development and a minimum

of indispensable security.”⁹⁷ Distensão, with its fitful starts and the threat of “hard-line” military backlash, is the key to understanding the remaining decade of the military regime. While sparking politicians’ enthusiasm, Geisel’s promises were tempered by warnings to “those who think to speed up this process by . . . manipulating public opinion and, in doing so, [act] against the government.”⁹⁸ The brilliance of Geisel’s speeches was that one could read anything into them; officers distrustful of the political class were reassured that détente would not get out of control, and politicians could see the possibility of increased power. As an SNI report wryly noted, politicians were excited about a “perfection of democracy” but “abstained from commenting on the passages that allude to the responsibility that falls on the political class.”⁹⁹

Although Geisel’s détente fell short of politicians’ hopes, it was better than nothing. Golbery was so impressed with Huntington’s report that he invited him to Brazil twice in 1974, where he queried him about the ideas contained in his paper.¹⁰⁰ In August Golbery met with São Paulo bishop Paulo Evaristo Arns, a persistent advocate for political prisoners.¹⁰¹ In a meeting with Guimarães and Ramalho in early 1975, Golbery assured them that Geisel wanted to repeal AI-5, abolish the two-party system, and offer amnesty to those affected by the institutional acts. Golbery swore Guimarães and Ramalho to secrecy; as Guimarães would recall, “We left that meeting like the apostles after seeing the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. Absolutely dazzled, holders of information as extraordinary as it was enrapturing, with the same recommendation as in the gospel: ‘Tell no one what ye have seen.’”¹⁰²

The strategy Geisel and Golbery followed sought to normalize the regime’s relationship with corporatist groups, including the political class. Détente would reward politicians for their progress but without offering significant independence. As Santa Catarina ARENA deputy Aroldo Carvalho understood it, “Decompression is among the strategic objectives of the Brazilian Revolution. The behavior of politicians . . . can offer evidence to the President of the Republic not only of the maturation of the political class, but above all of its qualification to lend its effective collaboration to those who direct the nation.”¹⁰³ However, as Huntington’s paper prefigured, under no circumstances should détente lead to a challenge to the “Revolution,” and its triple pillars: development, security, and political reform. Any military “disengagement” was contingent on the political class accepting this model.

CONCLUSIONS

Between 1969 and 1974 the military implemented almost unopposed its plan to transform Brazil, and by 1974 it appeared it had been successful. Breathtaking economic growth, the defeat of “subversion,” and meek politicians convinced many in the military that the “Revolution” was succeeding. A few noisy autênticos and some opportunists building directorates in the interior were hardly cause for

concern. Yet all was not as it appeared. If the political class bowed to military tutelage, it was because they saw it not as proper but as necessary, and they pushed back to the extent they could. A few, like the *auténticos*, chose to courageously remind the generals of the illegitimacy of their rule. Others, like Quérchia, opted to work behind the scenes to build up their personal following, aggressively pursuing their own advancement. Most, including most of ARENA's membership, resisted by doing as they always had: refusing to bury their rivalries and quietly hoping that they might one day again enjoy their old privileges. As ARENA senator Clodomir Millet put it in a meeting of ARENA legislators in the early 1970s, "We are politicians. We know what we want, and we know how far we can go under the circumstances. . . . Let's be coherent, and, at the same time, show that we are enlightened."¹⁰⁴ Or as ARENA's Filinto Müller told another meeting of legislators in 1972, their "common objective" was to "consolidate and enlarge our parliamentary prerogatives."¹⁰⁵

But neither Médici nor Geisel appears to have fully appreciated just how strategic most politicians' acceptance of military tutelage was. Certainly some *arenistas* were enthusiastic about military rule, either because they genuinely believed in the military's ostensibly reformist project or because they enjoyed their proximity to power. And Quérchia's strategy to accept the "Revolution" as a *fait accompli* fulfilled the generals' wish for an opposition that avoided "contestation" in favor of constructive criticism. Surrounded as they were by some who flattered them, others who opposed them within the rules, and a majority that appeared to have accepted military tutelage, it is little wonder that Geisel and Golbery judged it safe to relax authoritarian rule. This was not a concession from above, for at the height of the regime's power, no concessions were necessary. Rather it was an expression of both the regime's confidence in the success of its political model and its unease with an illiberal political system that placed heavy constraints on politics. Had the regime not proved itself worthy of politicians' support and the people's vote? But the generals would soon discover just how badly they had miscalculated.