

“We Aren’t a Flock of Little Sheep”

The Political Class and the Limits of Liberalization

As he left a dinner with Ulysses Guimarães, the sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso was uneasy. Cardoso, who came from a military family, had been forcibly retired from his post at the University of São Paulo by AI-5 in 1969.¹ After returning from exile, the co-formulator of dependency theory had helped found the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP). At their early 1974 private dinner, Guimarães asked Cardoso to help develop a campaign strategy for that year’s legislative elections. Speaking as one of the intellectuals who had opposed the regime in the 1960s, Cardoso recalled later, “We didn’t trust the MDB, or parties in general. . . . We thought they were just a tool for the dictatorship to legitimate itself.”² Guimarães shared Cardoso’s unease, and afterward he asked a friend, “Look, all this about sociology, sociologists, socialism . . . these people aren’t communists, are they?”³

Despite the reservations of Cardoso and Guimarães, the MDB’s openness to new collaborators and strategies would constitute a turning point in the military regime. Starting with the 1974 elections, the MDB complemented its “monophonic plainsong” criticizing the regime’s assault on liberal democracy with a focus on the socioeconomic issues that mattered most to voters—and it paid off.⁴ Characteristically, the military responded with repression, not by annulling the elections, but by persecuting the leftists the generals believed had shaped the MDB’s campaign. Yet this repression only further alienated already disillusioned politicians. Fearing that its project could be unraveling, the military resorted to extralegal measures to stack the deck for ARENA. But this too could backfire, as it did in 1978 when arenista Paulo Maluf defied the generals by running for governor of São Paulo against their anointed candidate. Faced with a resurgent opposition and restless allies, along with a declining economy, a regime that had looked unassailable in 1974 suddenly looked vulnerable.

“BRAZIL IS DOING WELL. ARE YOU?” 1974 AND THE
REBIRTH OF THE MDB

Held eight months after Geisel took office, the November 1974 elections would select one-third of the Senate, the entire Chamber of Deputies, and all state deputies. As the only races pitting one ARENA candidate against one emedebista, those for the Senate assumed importance as a reflection of voters’ attitudes toward the regime.⁵ This time, in contrast to 1970, when harassment of its candidates had likely contributed to the MDB’s atrocious showing, Geisel wanted the MDB to perform better, thereby strengthening Brazil’s democratic credentials. As he told his secretary, “The victory over the MDB has to happen in such a way that it doesn’t liquidate the party.”⁶ Many in the military and security apparatus supported this approach. An SNI report predicted that the elections would bring about “the desired valorization of the parties and politicians,” enabling them to “contribute to the perfecting of the regime” while “demonstrat[ing] . . . creativity, not contestation, much less subversion.”⁷

A free election was feasible precisely because the MDB’s prospects were so poor. In August the magazine *Visão* predicted, “Even if [ARENA] loses two or three seats in the Senate and another ten in the Chamber of Deputies (which would be a surprise), this would not affect its formal dominion and the . . . impotence of the opposition.”⁸ The regime had presided over half a decade of double-digit economic growth, and inflation had (at least officially) fallen to historically low levels. If the military had resorted to torture and disappearances to eliminate the armed Left, for most Brazilians this only meant that they no longer had to worry about “terrorist” acts. As São Paulo’s vice governor-elect put it, “A protest vote is inadmissible because . . . we are doing fine. You don’t protest against what is good.”⁹ In September ARENA’s national president, Piauí senator Petrônio Portella, predicted that his party would win the Senate races in every state except Guanabara.¹⁰ More cautious members of party leadership admitted that of the twenty-two states, five presented serious difficulties for their candidates.¹¹

But the party remained riven by personal rivalries, exacerbated by the gubernatorial selection process earlier that year. Geisel had sent Portella to each state to ascertain the political class’s preference for their next governor, who would be “elected” by the ARENA-dominated state legislatures.¹² Yet consensus proved elusive. In Pernambuco, after four former governors were unable to agree on a name, Portella was met at the airport by fourteen prospective candidates sprinting across the runway to try for the first handshake.¹³ In the end, he chose the one who appeared to have the broadest support, but Senator Etelevino Lins was so upset with the selection that he refused to run for reelection.¹⁴ In São Paulo, after Portella met with the current governor, Laudo Natel, state deputies, and business leaders, the consensus choice was Delfim Neto, Médici’s renowned finance minister. Instead Portella announced that Geisel had chosen the little-known Paulo Egydio Martins,

Castelo Branco's minister of industry and commerce.¹⁵ As one senator remarked, "Consensus is what they call it when Petrônio Portella brings us a name, and no one's stupid enough to say they're against it."¹⁶ Still, to placate ARENA factions whose candidates were not chosen for governor, Portella and Geisel often agreed to give them the Senate candidacy as a consolation prize. While this may have soothed ARENA egos, it meant that faction was prioritized over electability. And with their own positions secure, incoming governors might avoid supporting the Senate candidate, preferring the MDB to a rival arenista.¹⁷ But at the time, none of these problems seemed significant.

Meanwhile, the MDB's outlook was bleak. In September Guimarães proclaimed, "What the MDB aims for isn't electoral success but, above all, that of the ideas and theses we defend."¹⁸ Given regime intimidation, voter apathy, and candidate recruitment difficulties, his attitude was understandable. Though repression was reduced compared to 1970, it did not disappear. In July Justice Minister Armando Falcão asked the attorney general to instruct regional electoral prosecutors to challenge the candidacies of politicians "compromised by corruption or subversion."¹⁹ In October Bahia autêntico deputy Francisco Pinto was expelled from Congress and imprisoned for six months after a March congressional speech in which he called General Augusto Pinochet, head of the Chilean junta, a fascist and "the cruelest of the characters who have tyrannized Latin America over the past few decades."²⁰ Candidate recruitment presented another difficulty. Few established politicians wanted to join a party that by design could never come to power and had been embarrassed in the past two elections. Things looked no better in 1974; in São Paulo, while Quércia sought to become the Senate nominee, April opinion polls gave his ARENA opponent, incumbent senator Carlos de Carvalho Pinto, a 75 to 7 percent advantage.²¹ By September São Paulo senator André Franco Montoro, the MDB's campaign coordinator, guaranteed victory in only four Senate races and ventured that the party had a good chance in four more.²² To achieve even these modest goals, the MDB would have to convince skeptical voters that it was not just "a tool for the dictatorship to legitimate itself." In 1970 blank and spoiled ballots nationwide had outnumbered the MDB's votes; that is, voters opposed to the regime would rather vote for no one than for the MDB.

Party leaders thus began to craft a nationally coordinated campaign message. Criticism of "political" issues like indirect elections, AI-5, and even torture had not resonated in 1970, and this time they faded into the background. Instead the MDB opted to expand its appeal to working-class voters. MDB leadership thus initiated contact with CEBRAP. Despite initial misgivings, for intellectuals who had been summarily dismissed from their university positions, it must have been exhilarating to be invited to influence public discourse. Besides, many at CEBRAP had been impressed by the anti-candidacy, and when they met Guimarães, they discovered that they had more in common than they expected. Ultimately, they wrote a campaign manual linking political issues with socioeconomic ones such as "the

high cost of living, the disparities in income distribution, the tight wage policy . . . , the increasing incursions of foreign capital into the Brazilian industrial sector, and excessive centralization.”²³ This approach ought not upset the military; after all, wasn’t the stated purpose of the MDB to identify policies that needed improvement? As Montoro explained, the MDB simply “disagrees with the government every time it sees the people’s interests harmed.”²⁴ He repeated, “We are not putting the Revolution on trial. . . . Our enemy is not the government . . . but ARENA.”²⁵

Yet candidates remained hard to come by. In São Paulo, the ideal Senate candidate would be Guimarães, who had the name recognition to challenge Carvalho Pinto. But Guimarães refused. His reelection to the Chamber was certain; why would he serve as a sacrificial lamb in an unwinnable race? When Montoro reminded him of his words, “It is necessary to navigate, it is not necessary to live,” Guimarães retorted, “At least a cautious man dies of old age.”²⁶ In Rio Grande do Norte, “for absolute lack of anyone else who dared perform the role,” the candidacy went to Agenor Maria, a former sailor, street vendor, and one-term ARENA federal deputy who was currently working as a truck driver.²⁷ His opponent, federal deputy Djalma Marinho, dismissed Maria out of hand. “I could never debate that boy. I have nothing to learn from him, and I’m too old to teach him anything.”²⁸ In Paraná, Furtado also turned down the Senate candidacy; forty-one years later he admitted that he saw no reason to give up sure reelection to the Chamber to lose a Senate race.²⁹ The MDB also struggled to find candidates for deputy. In São Paulo, the party managed to recruit only forty-six candidates for federal deputy—barely half the eighty-six permitted by law.³⁰ In only two states did the opposition manage as many federal candidates as ARENA; in only one did the MDB run an equal number of state candidates.³¹

Candidate registration data at the São Paulo Regional Electoral Court (TRE-SP) reflect these difficulties, showing that the MDB fielded a slate of relative outsiders. For example, the MDB had a higher percentage of candidates under forty: 28.3 percent of federal deputy candidates versus 23.2 percent for ARENA; for state deputy, it was 39.1 percent versus 27.5 percent.³² In addition, MDB candidates’ occupations were less prestigious. While liberal professions (lawyers, doctors, engineers, economists, and teachers) were the largest occupational group in both parties, ARENA had many more such candidates.³³ The MDB slate included travel agents, carpet makers, elevator operators, drivers, electricians, filmmakers, and designers, careers seldom associated with political aspirations in Brazil.³⁴ MDB candidates were also less wealthy. Candidates were required to submit a declaration of assets listing the values of their land, houses, businesses, cars, jewelry, telephone lines, bank accounts, stocks, livestock, and so on. While 46.5 percent of ARENA federal candidates and 40.2 percent of state candidates claimed fewer than ten assets, 62.2 percent of MDB federal candidates and 74.6 percent of state candidates claimed fewer than ten.³⁵ These differences did not mean that the MDB was more open to nontraditional candidates but rather how limited its pool of potential candidates

was. The party's discomfort with outsiders was thrown into vivid relief by its reaction to Quércia's Senate candidacy. Despite adopting his electoral strategy, party leadership attempted to block him from securing the nomination by launching a (failed) rival candidacy at the August São Paulo convention. While Quércia tactfully attributed their resistance to fear that an unknown politician could not beat Carvalho Pinto, the real issue was that he was an outsider from humble origins.³⁶

Low expectations notwithstanding, Quércia and the MDB campaign would distinguish themselves with something uncommon in a country where personal-ity tends to trump party: a unified message. In São Paulo, on September 12, the MDB gathered ten of its Senate candidates, a collection of state and federal deputies, and over a dozen presidents of state directorates. The attendees approved a statement endorsing "the struggle of the Brazilian people for development with democracy" and promised to work for "a better distribution of income, wage policy appropriate for the pace of Brazilian development, and the direction . . . of greater resources toward the education, health, and housing sectors."³⁷ Candidates received a CEBRAP-authored booklet filled with slogans, advice on how to use free television time, and statistics on the cost of living.³⁸ In response to government claims that per capita income was rising, candidates were instructed to highlight the unequal distribution of wealth: "What does per capita income mean? It's the average between someone who makes a million, and someone who makes 200. The average is good, but one is dying of hunger, while the other has everything"; or, "If I eat one chicken and you don't eat a chicken, on average we're each eating half a chicken."³⁹ When the party opened its São Paulo campaign headquarters, an overflow crowd listened to Guimãraes, Montoro, Quércia, and others decry the cost of living.⁴⁰ This focus was repeated by candidates across the state and probably the entire country. MDB campaign materials collected by air force intelligence in the city of São José dos Campos, for example, repeated the same themes.⁴¹ To keep the campaign coordinated, party leadership agreed to meet weekly at Montoro's home to evaluate the previous week's developments.⁴²

To introduce himself to the electorate, Quércia traveled across the state. At every stop, he emphasized face-to-face contact with voters. On a typical day, he traveled to Santos, where he met with coffee brokers, mingled with the populace as he walked to the municipal market, opened two campaign offices, greeted workers at the offices of the Santos Docks Company, visited working-class neighborhoods, met a commuter train to greet steelworkers, inaugurated another campaign office in nearby Cubatão, and concluded with visits to Praia Grande and Cidade Ocian.⁴³ At each stop, he reiterated the MDB's message. In the Paraíba Valley, he criticized "the ever higher concentration of wealth in the hands of an ever smaller minority."⁴⁴ In São Bernardo, he promised workers, "The fight against the current wage policy, the lack of assistance through social security, and the many other catastrophes that afflict the Brazilian worker cause constant concern in our struggle."⁴⁵ At the same time, he emphasized these issues alongside the party's usual themes; on

a trip to Americana, “he brought up the principal themes of the MDB campaign, like development with social justice, the cost of living, the participation of students in national politics, and direct elections.”⁴⁶ It was a brilliant strategy that appealed both to principled opponents of the military’s assault on civil liberties and voters concerned with their day-to-day struggles without arousing the direct ire of the repressive apparatus.

ARENA’s campaign could hardly have been more different. The opening of its São Paulo campaign office attracted a smaller than expected crowd that had to be entertained by a professional “crowd exciter” while awaiting tardy politicians.⁴⁷ ARENA’s statewide campaign launch in Bauru fell similarly flat, perhaps because the party scheduled it at the same time as a television *novela*.⁴⁸ These hiccups set the tone for a campaign beset by difficulties accidental, idiosyncratic, and petty. The problems began with the Senate candidate himself. Carvalho Pinto came from one of the state’s most venerable families; his father had been a state deputy; his grandfather, a senator; and his great-uncle Francisco Rodrigues Alves, president of Brazil from 1906 to 1912. And he himself had served as governor from 1958 to 1962. In 1963 he was invited to be Goulart’s finance minister, but during the coup he sided with the military. Yet he always numbered among the regime’s conditional “liberal” supporters; he nearly joined the MDB in 1966, and after AI-5, he had signed Krieger’s telegram decrying the act.⁴⁹

Whatever his feelings toward the regime, Carvalho Pinto was an elitist liberal to his core. Whereas Quércia spoke of empowering ordinary people to participate in politics, Carvalho Pinto spoke of teaching an ill-prepared electorate to accept limited democracy. “Democracy . . . belongs to adults,” he intoned, “and its authenticity depends on a permanent educative effort.” While Quércia decried the effects of inflation on salaries, Carvalho Pinto pompously spoke of “the definitive institutionalization of the principles of the Revolution of 1964,” now that the “stages of political-administrative cleansing and socioeconomic propulsion . . . have come to a victorious conclusion.”⁵⁰ Humble origins and years of door-to-door campaigning had endowed Quércia with the same language as voters; Carvalho Pinto struggled to shed his aristocratic image. Worse, he and his party ran a tone-deaf campaign that underestimated voters’ capacity to make an informed decision. Geisel, ARENA, and Carvalho Pinto may have thought that working-class voters could not be trusted to vote “responsibly,” but they forgot to ask the most important question: Did voters believe themselves incompetent?

Things soon went from bad to worse. In mid-September, not even a week into the official campaign, ARENA leadership decided that the Carvalho Pinto campaign needed “dynamism” and resolved to revamp his campaign strategy, a move repeated a month later. The initial reset kept Carvalho Pinto in his office, where he would receive visits from politicians from across the state; the second isolated him from voters and politicians alike in favor of a focus on recording TV ads.⁵¹ The second reset was due in part to an inopportune illness that led the candidate to pull

back from active campaigning. “The campaign is going well, it will be victorious, and there’s no need for me to appear at rallies,” he explained.⁵²

In Carvalho Pinto’s absence, the coordination of ARENA’s São Paulo campaign fell to Paulo Egydio Martins, Geisel’s designated governor. The forty-six-year-old Martins had gotten his start in politics as a university student; he had subsequently managed various mining firms, his business aspirations aided by his marriage into a family of industrialists. He had participated actively in plotting the coup, and after an unsuccessful run for mayor of São Paulo with the UDN in 1965, he was named industry and commerce minister for the remaining year of the Castelo Branco government. As minister, he became friends with Geisel, then chief of military staff, and the two remained in touch over the coming years.⁵³ While Martins was competent, committed, and well connected, he was a relative novice to campaigning, and he displayed an alarming propensity to make ill-advised off-the-cuff comments.

Martins criticized fellow arenistas, particularly businessmen, for blaming the regime for slowing economic growth instead of the global downturn resulting from the oil shock. “Until now,” he claimed, “this class has . . . benefited from the economic stability the government achieved, and now, suddenly, just because they can’t make as much money as they used to, they want to protest.”⁵⁴ He compared a vote for Quércia to a vote for Cacareco, the zoo rhinoceros who had received over a hundred thousand protest votes in São Paulo’s 1958 municipal elections.⁵⁵ “The vote isn’t a weapon of protest,” he argued. “It will not be possible to form a political consciousness in this country if the voters act like children.”⁵⁶ Détente presumed that voters had matured sufficiently to realize that ARENA was the right choice. As for the MDB, he interpreted their focus on socioeconomic issues as a throwback to Brazil’s populist past, perpetrated by “weak men who use the language of the past to . . . turn the people aside from the right path.”⁵⁷

Other prominent arenistas did little to help Carvalho Pinto. After belatedly endorsing Carvalho Pinto, federal deputy Adhemar de Barros Filho, son of the former governor, stated that his priority was “electing the greatest number of colleagues from the same political origin,” that is, his old party. Supporting ARENA meant helping one’s own allies and no one else.⁵⁸ The current governor, Laudo Natel, was similarly tepid, probably because as an *adhemarista* (Adhemar de Barros supporter) he was loath to support Carvalho Pinto, a disciple of Jânio Quadros. By late October, *Veja* reported as common knowledge that Carvalho Pinto’s candidacy was in trouble because of the “indifference of various sectors of the party, and above all of the current governor.”⁵⁹ At the same time that the generals promised an increased role for ARENA, détente showed its fundamental contradiction, for it demanded a sense of loyalty and self-sacrifice uncommon among many arenistas.

Nationally, ARENA was beset by these same problems. Some, like tense coexistence with former enemies, had been problems in past elections. Others took on heightened significance amid détente and a nascent economic downturn. ARENA

had grown complacent, confident that the military would ensure its victories. More seriously, by persecuting the most principled opponents of their rule, the generals had attracted precisely the politicians they claimed to wish to eliminate: opportunists whose most notable quality was their boundless ability to say yes. Yet as the economic “miracle” began to fade and the opposition highlighted the uneven distribution of its benefits, ARENA politicians faced an unresolvable quandary. To which of their constituencies should they cater, the military or voters? When some government allies opted to court their voters, with a message suspiciously like the opposition’s, Guimarães scoffed, “They all remained in Congress . . . these last few years without taking any measures to correct what they now consider a mistake. When they come out in favor of changes, they are either betraying the government to which they owe loyalty, or the electorate.”⁶⁰ Deputy Aldo Fagundes smirked, “I’m sure it isn’t easy to defend the refusal to keep wages even with inflation, exchange rate indexation, the uncontrolled increase in the cost of living, housing policy, the foreign debt, and the progressive transfer of our national riches to multinational corporations.”⁶¹ Even Portella, ARENA’s president, grumbled that it was “inadmissible [to] publicly defend the opposition’s position . . . with the aim of gaining electoral profits.”⁶²

By the eve of the election, there were abundant signs of concern for ARENA and optimism for the MDB. While the opposition had run a unified campaign focused on the day-to-day issues that affected voters, ARENA had been hampered by its rivalries and the contradiction between supporting the government and attracting voters. But how much difference would any of these factors make? Most voters did not attend rallies or read newspapers; what difference would it make to them if the old governor was helping the new one or if Carvalho Pinto could campaign in person? As the campaign neared a close, however, the effects of a new variable were only beginning to become clear: television.

The electoral code (as amended in 1966) required stations to set aside one hour of electoral programming per party during the afternoon and another in prime time.⁶³ The parties could use their hours as they wished—short films, Q&A sessions with voters, debates, or segments for individual candidates. While in 1966 there had been only 2,334,000 television sets in Brazil, by 1974 the number had risen to 8,781,000.⁶⁴ Although this represented fewer than one set for every ten Brazilians, the new medium provoked excitement among politicians comparable to that generated by social media a generation later. With a few minutes on television, a candidate could reach more voters than in months of grueling campaigning. With every point it climbed in the ratings, a party in São Paulo city gained thirty thousand viewers, a nearly unachievable number for rallies.⁶⁵ While radio projected a disembodied voice, television allowed candidates to create a visual persona. Still, politicians had little experience with this relatively new technology. A US political scientist who sat in on a television planning session noted that parties formulated strategy without viewer data or feedback.⁶⁶ Performing on camera

also presented difficulties. Quércia admitted, “I really did have problems with television at the start of the campaign. . . . It was hard to work with all those people standing there, looking. I always felt better at rallies, being able to feel the reaction of the people I was speaking to.”⁶⁷

If the advantage from television belonged to either party, it was not the MDB. In São Paulo, the MDB recorded a film of Quércia walking and driving through downtown São Paulo, buying newspapers and being mobbed by adoring children—an attempt to present him as a man of the people.⁶⁸ The party also designed a cartoon with a talking sun telling candidates to vote for the MDB.⁶⁹ The talking sun was of poor quality, however, and since the cash-strapped party had spent less than a fifth as much as ARENA, the MDB could not afford to make more films.⁷⁰ Instead, they played the Quércia film so much that arenistas snickered that their message was, “Vote for Quércia. If you don’t, he’ll never stop riding around in a van and buying newspapers.”⁷¹ The ads did at least make Quércia into a star; when he arrived in Votuporanga, five hundred kilometers from the capital, fans surrounded his car requesting not speeches but autographs.⁷²

Meanwhile, ARENA, with the help of an advertising firm headed by a former ARENA municipal councilor, recorded a greater variety of ads in São Paulo, including a series of images of the public works of the “Revolution” followed by an image of Carvalho Pinto. Another featured a boy explaining why his father was voting for Carvalho Pinto.⁷³ ARENA also collected documentaries about grinding poverty in the rest of the world, thinking to highlight the government’s success at keeping Brazil immune from the global economic crisis—a strategy of dubious wisdom since working-class Brazilians who could ill afford rice and beans were unlikely to believe that the regime had defeated poverty at home.⁷⁴

Had the election been carried out as a traditional campaign, ARENA, with its superior organization and funds, would have held an overwhelming edge. Television diminished that disadvantage. In Rio de Janeiro, the MDB’s Roberto Saturnino Braga, a former one-term federal deputy, was facing Senator Paulo Torres, president of Congress. “I, who never knew how to build a political machine, . . . was greatly benefited by TV,” Braga claimed. “One week after my candidacy was launched, the entire state of Rio had heard my name.”⁷⁵ Only a year before, Quércia had observed an association between the MDB and subversion. Yet now, even if the MDB’s message or technical quality was no more convincing, the fact that they were allowed to campaign on equal terms was a victory.⁷⁶ Ultimately television leveled the playing field.

By November it was clear that the MDB stood a better chance than expected. Representatives of the US consulate in São Paulo visited the state’s largest cities and reported that a Quércia victory was likely, due to “a growing protest vote against the government’s failure to come to grips with the deteriorating economic situation.” Local ARENA leaders confided to the consulate that all was lost; one predicted a 3:1 margin for Quércia.⁷⁷ A poll the day before the election gave Quércia

a 61 to 33 percent advantage.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, ARENA representatives from several states informed Portella that strong MDB candidacies had been contained, and Portella assured Geisel that the party feared no “compromising” defeats. Still, as the vice governor–elect of Minas sagely noted, nothing was certain: “The mind of a judge, the womb of a woman, and the ballot box—you don’t know anything until they’re opened.”⁷⁹

There was nothing to distinguish election day under a military dictatorship from the 1945–64 “Populist Republic.” *Cabos eleitorais* (allies of candidates who do the legwork of attracting voters) hovered outside polling places, passing out flyers and shouting the virtues of their candidates. At times they were joined by candidates seeking to eke out votes at the “mouth of the ballot box” (*boca de urna*).⁸⁰ Long lines greeted voters early in the morning; middle-class voters wanted to vote early so they could leave the city for a long weekend, and working-class voters, as one bar employee put it, “are already used to waking up early and getting in line.”⁸¹

The next morning, with the tally barely begun, exit polls showed Quércia winning by 66 to 29 percent in the capital, with similar margins in other key cities. Even more shocking, the polls showed almost identical margins in the races for federal and state deputy.⁸² Partial results from Brazil’s largest polling firm predicted that Quércia would carry the state by a 60–31 margin.⁸³ Nationwide, the MDB won sixteen of the twenty-two open Senate seats. In Santa Catarina, polls had predicted a twenty-point victory for ARENA, but when the votes were counted, the MDB had won by five. A late October poll in Paraná had shown a six-point advantage for ARENA; the MDB won by three.⁸⁴ The MDB also seized an outright majority in six state legislatures and Chamber of Deputies delegations, which meant that even if the next gubernatorial elections were indirect, the party would elect several governors, including in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Rio Grande do Sul. The opposition nearly doubled its representation in the Chamber, to 160 of 364 seats (44 percent), ending ARENA’s supermajority. While ARENA still controlled the governorships, sixteen state legislatures, and Congress, its confidence was severely shaken.

How had this happened? With leftist “subversion” defeated and the economy on solid footing, voters were expected to continue to support the regime. Instead, ARENA had lost the national Senate vote by 4.5 million votes and only outpolled the MDB by one million in the Chamber. The MDB had nearly tripled its Senate representation and fell fewer than twenty-five seats short of a majority in the Chamber. SNI director, General João Batista Figueiredo, undoubtedly spoke for many when he fumed, “These shitty people don’t know how to vote.”⁸⁵ Geisel’s secretary sneered, “What can you expect from an electorate like this, from little people like these?”⁸⁶

Two days later an SNI report grumbled, “In order for the vote to achieve its true role, it would be necessary for it to be free, but also, and above all, that it be enlightened.” Of the report’s thirteen suggested causes of the disaster, eight blamed

the political class, including its “discontent with the secondary role to which it was relegated under the previous government.” The parties shared the blame: the MDB for its subversion, ARENA for its lack of unity. “In the quest for the vote, on one side were those who could give a complete outlet for their demagogic impulses; on the other, those who had their demagoguery barely contained by constantly disrespected party commitments.” The MDB’s focus on socioeconomic inequality was really a “broad movement of contestation [and a] fruitful campaign of disinformation.” As for ARENA, “no one imagined that that the party would be reduced to such a low level through the behavior of incapable and neglectful leaders and the lack of party unity.” Significantly, the regime itself did not escape blame, as it had not done enough to replace “discredited names” with new leaders.⁸⁷ And in response to Geisel’s secretary’s snide question about what else one could expect from “little people,” Golbery responded, “That by practicing, they’ll get better at it.”⁸⁸ Significantly, after a dramatic electoral defeat, an SNI report and a general in the regime’s highest echelon still held to the military dream of reforming politics, if only everyone implicated with the past could be removed or reformed and voters could learn to vote “correctly.”

Arenista explanations for the bloodbath naturally emphasized factors beyond the party’s control. Carvalho Pinto blamed voters for lacking “a rational and broad view of the country’s interests.”⁸⁹ Others, who had future elections to run in and could ill afford to blame voter stupidity, cited other reasons beyond their control, especially a wave of global protest votes in 1974 in places such as the United States, France, and West Germany.⁹⁰ Privately, Chamber president, Flávio Marcílio, told his US embassy contacts that the defeat should be interpreted in light of the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in Greece and Portugal.⁹¹ A few, including São Paulo senator Orlando Zancaner, insisted that the MDB had won because crafty leftists, adept at manipulating voters with socioeconomic arguments, had infiltrated it.⁹²

These explanations all located the cause in the political context of 1974 rather than flaws in the regime’s political model. Some arenistas were more honest. Several admitted that the opposition’s focus on socioeconomic issues had been wise and that the MDB had presented its case in accessible language while ARENA addressed the middle and upper classes.⁹³ Many also cited divisions that had led some arenistas to fight each other more than the MDB.⁹⁴ Members of the old PSD grumbled that the UDN had been too dominant in ARENA, and their intransigence had led them to dismiss the MDB’s message. If ARENA’s leaders had demonstrated the flexibility of the former *pessedista* (PSD member) Guimarães, for example, the disaster might have been averted.⁹⁵ Or perhaps the fault belonged to party leadership (and the regime) for imposing candidates based on personal considerations rather than the will of the majority.⁹⁶

A few ARENA leaders dared fault major regime figures. Senator Helvídio Nunes of Piauí blamed their privileging of technocrats at the expense of proven

vote getters.⁹⁷ In the same vein, Maranhão senator José Sarney argued, “You can’t practice politics without politicians. The Revolution in all its greatness will also have to recognize that a structure from a period of compression doesn’t work during one of decompression.”⁹⁸ That is, even if ARENA needed to change, the regime must also rethink its relationship with the political class. And while ARENA had proven its loyalty time and again, instead of reciprocating with trust of its own, the regime had imposed inviable candidates to placate political rivals. The only way to avoid this in the future would be to stop simply being the “government’s party.”⁹⁹

MDB politicians like Guimarães, whose anti-candidacy had energized the opposition; Quércia, who had built the party in the country’s largest state; and Montoro, the 1974 campaign coordinator, were eager to claim credit publicly and privately.¹⁰⁰ And the results that for ARENA were a sign of the Brazilian people’s lack of political consciousness were for the MDB a sign of maturity: not demagoguery, but rather rational people voting in accordance with their interests. As Montoro explained, “More than the victory of parties or candidates, the elections . . . represent a vigorous affirmation of the Brazilian consciousness and the maturity of the Brazilian people.”¹⁰¹ The results constituted “a revolution through the vote.”¹⁰²

Yet even as they reveled in their victory, MDB politicians struck a conciliatory tone. In a meeting with US diplomats, Montoro emphasized (in their paraphrase), “Now that the MDB campaign had been so successful, it would be foolish to adopt a vindictive tone, thus giving the military the opportunity to annul the election results and to thwart the prospects for a strengthened democracy.”¹⁰³ Tancredo Neves reiterated that the MDB had always aimed for “responsible and constructive opposition” and that it would continue to reject “revenge and a yearning for bygone days.”¹⁰⁴ Guimarães stated, “We do not intend to create obstacles or wage war between branches of government; besides, that would be unpatriotic.” He believed that the military would not annul the elections on these grounds: “We never made slanderous or defamatory attacks. We never created tumult in parliamentary work. . . . What we want is dialogue.”¹⁰⁵

The willingness of some ARENA leaders to blame the government and the MDB’s insistence that it would not rock the boat show that the two parties were not so far apart. While many arenistas may indeed have been less uncomfortable with indirect elections or human rights violations and while many emedebistas may have had a sincere desire to address social inequality, the political class was united in its desire to convince the military that its members had learned their lesson and could be allowed to reestablish their prerogatives.

The “maturity” displayed by both parties bore almost immediate fruit. In a late November speech, Brigadier Osvaldo Terra de Faria praised the elections for “fulfill[ing] the civic calendar of political renovation” and facilitating the “emergence of new leaders,” something made possible by politicians’ having changed their ways.¹⁰⁶ “If in the beginning the followers of unconditional liberalism . . .

did not submit themselves to the . . . pedagogical-corrective process, today they have grasped the . . . rise of pragmatic Brazilian liberalism, which harmonizes . . . development and security, freedom and responsibility . . . in unwavering pursuit of a greater objective.”¹⁰⁷

Geisel’s televised end-of-year address offered more evidence that the military did not see the elections as a repudiation. Indeed, they had proven the regime’s commitment to democracy. He praised the MDB for its “moderation and self-discipline and abandonment of a “posture of contestation” while chastising ARENA for “benefitting—or perhaps we should say wearing itself out—from a long period of comfortable but softening majority status.” Still, he warned the MDB that he would not tolerate “irresponsible attitudes of pure contestation.”¹⁰⁸ Elections and politicians were important, but the game would be played on the military’s terms.

Geisel’s warning was a harbinger of things to come. In the face of this defeat, the regime resorted to increasingly desperate means to retain power. Not everyone in the military supported *détente*, and they would stop at nothing—even murder—to neutralize their foes. And even Geisel, who at least outwardly was more concerned than Médici with gaining the collaboration of the political class, was happy to remove his harshest critics from Congress and rewrite electoral law to obtain desired results. Two events, in 1975 and 1977, made it clear just how far the regime would go in its attempt to save its “Revolution” from collapse. As the former federal deputy Marco Antônio Tavares Coelho put it years later, “Political victories have a flip-side: . . . a wounded enemy is more dangerous.”¹⁰⁹

THE LIMITS OF DÉTENTE: THE MILITARY OVERREACTS TO THE 1974 ELECTIONS

While politicians tended to interpret the elections as a sign that their prerogatives might someday be restored, some in the military saw sinister forces at work: communists. While communists have long been a scapegoat on whom the Brazilian military and middle and upper classes have cast blame for everything from changing sexual mores to economic troubles, supposed communist plots have nearly always been exaggerated or invented.¹¹⁰ The rare cases of actual subversion, such as the armed struggle of 1968–74, never threatened the regime. Yet this time the generals were partially right: members of the Soviet-aligned PCB assisted the MDB campaign, and a few were elected. Alberto Marcelo Gato, former president of the Santos metallurgical workers’ union, was elected federal deputy from São Paulo; his fellow PCB militant Alberto Goldman had already been elected state deputy in 1970. The PCB’s strategy of participating in elections differed markedly from their Chinese-aligned rivals in the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), whose armed struggle the regime had liquidated mercilessly.

But why would the MDB, made up of ideologically flexible *adesistas*, liberal *moderados*, and principled social democratic *autênticos*, align with communists?

The answer did not lie in ideological affinity. Guimarães or Quércia would have made no better communists than Martins or Carvalho Pinto. The answer, rather, lay in the fact that in Brazil power was and is sustained by having a network of clients who owe loyalty to their patrons. But there were precious few clients to go around for MDB politicians. So just as they had welcomed candidates from the middle and working classes in 1974, the MDB welcomed communists. It is thus unsurprising that the emedebista who most assiduously courted communists was Quércia. As a longtime ally put it years later, Quércia “doesn’t have many prejudices because he does not have a political background, he did not have a class position to defend, he came from Pedregulho [in the interior], he took night classes. . . . He does not have the ideological training to discriminate against someone who has a different point of view.” Thus Quércia and Goldman were closely allied for nearly two decades. The same man who embraced dissident arenistas in the interior cultivated the friendship of communists because few others would; both offered low-hanging fruit to someone building a network of clients.

Suspicious of PCB involvement in the campaign, the regime’s security services for months produced reports documenting communist “infiltration” in the MDB. While the PCB’s support is indisputable, the often-fantastical reports attributed the MDB’s victory almost entirely to communist machinations. Without offering evidence, the SNI argued that “secret agreements” between the PCB and the MDB had established that once in office PCB-supported candidates would carry out “subliminal actions” to “attack and criticize the accomplishments of the government.” Worse still, they were supported by a communist-infiltrated press: “Even without offering solutions, these candidates, accustomed to demagogic attacks, enjoy the strong support of the Left that is active in the spoken and written press.” The SNI suspected (correctly) that Marcelo Gato owed his election to PCB support; the banned party had raised funds by selling cat-shaped keychains (*gato* means “cat”) near his hometown of Santos. More implausibly, federal deputy José de Camargo and state deputy Manoel Sala had supposedly received financial support from an unnamed Eastern Bloc country. Not even arenistas escaped suspicion; federal deputy Rafael Baldacci was accused of using communist money to support leftist candidates. As proof of this infiltration, the security services apprehended “highly subversive” campaign material, including a flyer that criticized the cost of living, “deficient” public transportation, and the “forsaken” health care system.¹¹¹ The paranoia ran so deep that when Tavares Coelho, former Minas Gerais federal deputy and PCB central committee member, was arrested, his interrogators tried to get him to confess that the PCB’s “subversive” activities had been facilitated by none other than Golbery, Geisel’s military chief of staff.¹¹²

The reports on communist support for the MDB total over two hundred pages. Dozens of candidates were accused of receiving PCB support. Much of the information was obtained through the torture of Tavares Coelho. If his words were recorded accurately, he was either a skilled dissembler or the PCB was heavily

involved in the MDB victory. While information gained under torture is suspect, it is possible that Tavares Coelho offered the names of MDB congressmen with some protection from arrest instead of exposing his PCB comrades.

Where the security apparatus erred was not in the extent of PCB support for the opposition but rather in its conviction that this support had led to ARENA's electoral defeat. Left unexplained was how a small organization that had been banned for over two decades and had made practically no impact in 1970 or 1972 suddenly had the power to convince millions of voters to support the liberal, tepidly oppositionist MDB. Communists were a convenient scapegoat for an electoral defeat that owed far more to flaws in the regime's model of development and the skill of politicians such as Montoro and Quéricia in exploiting them.

Suddenly the PCB, which had for years looked less menacing than the PCdoB and other revolutionary groups, seemed like the most dangerous communists of all. Armed resistance had never threatened the generals' hold. But in a dictatorship that portrayed itself as democratic, elections did. The regime's repressive gaze thus shifted from the already defeated armed resistance to the PCB and, by extension, the MDB. While it would have looked untoward to target the only legal opposition party, it was possible to do so by tying it to communists.¹¹³ The year 1975 thus witnessed the most intense repression leftist parties in Brazil have ever faced, as two thousand actual or suspected communists were arrested nationwide. In São Paulo, eighty-eight suspected communists were arrested merely in the month of October. The detainees were kidnapped without warning and taken to state DOI-CODI headquarters, where they were subjected to torture before being turned over for prosecution.¹¹⁴ At least three prisoners died in DOI-CODI custody in São Paulo between May 1975 and January 1976. Unlike the ordinary functioning of the justice system in Brazil, which disproportionately targets the poor and Black and Brown people, DOI-CODI cared little for social class. Those arrested included not only union leaders such as José "Frei Chico" Ferreira de Melo, vice president-elect of the São Caetano metalworkers' union and brother of future president Lula, but also military policemen with suspected PCB sympathies, as well as highly placed journalists such as São Paulo's TV Cultura director, Vladimir Herzog.¹¹⁵

The culmination of the military's overreaction to the 1974 elections came in October. On October 25, Herzog, head of São Paulo's state-owned station, TV Cultura, and a member of the PCB, voluntarily went to the São Paulo DOI-CODI for questioning. Later that day, he was dead. While the death certificate called it suicide and claimed he had left a note in his own hand, the photograph of his "hanged" body showed his feet dragging on the floor. Clearly Herzog had been murdered, probably during an interrogation gone wrong. While many communists had been killed before Herzog, under the repressive gaze of the Médici government reaction had been muted. Besides, every year Brazilian police executed thousands of working-class suspects with little outcry.¹¹⁶ But now Herzog's death generated vast publicity and a strong MDB reaction. Herzog was one of them, or close to it—a

member of the learned upper middle classes, sympathetic to the opposition. People like him were not supposed to become victims of police repression. And even if they had in the past, things were supposed to be different under *détente*.

Although Geisel had AI-5 at his disposal and could cassar anyone whose response was too heated, many MDB politicians were furious, and although they avoided accusing the military directly, they left little doubt as to their true feelings. J. G. de Araújo Jorge (MDB-RJ) pointed out that the military’s explanation contained “a series of absolutely illogical conjectures.”¹¹⁷ Gamaliel Galvão (MDB-PR) went further: “I want to register here not words of sorrow . . . but rather words of protest and revulsion against the lack of security and tranquility imposed upon this country . . . by a confused and ill-defined system that [is] arbitrary, incapable of solving the people’s problems, and allows things like this to happen.”¹¹⁸ The party’s official response was given by José de Freitas Nobre, an autêntico and three-time president of the São Paulo state journalists’ union. By choosing the former head of the union that represented Herzog to deliver its response, the MDB sent a none-too-subtle message. Freitas Nobre argued, “Even if we accept that it was a suicide, what kinds of pressure, of intimidation, of poor treatment are being inflicted upon prisoners to make them prefer death?” Suspected communists could be investigated, but “they should not suffer mistreatment, torture, and death, directly or indirectly.” No doubt he spoke not only for journalists, but for many opposition politicians, when he said, “What happens to one could happen to another.”¹¹⁹

At the same time discretion was still needed, and opposition leaders insisted that they would not create a climate of “agitation.” After an ecumenical service in Herzog’s honor, attended by eight thousand, was held in São Paulo’s Sé Cathedral, the MDB’s leader in the Chamber, Laerte Vieira, simply expressed relief that it had transpired peacefully.¹²⁰ Guimarães, the party’s national president, limited himself to protesting that it should be the police, not the army, that investigated “subversive organizations.”¹²¹ After he—among many others—was kept from arriving at the memorial service on time due to military and police checkpoints, he protested that this violated freedom of assembly. A few days later, MDB Chamber vice-leader, Israel Dias Novaes, urged the party to take a “moderate” posture that avoided “provocations.”¹²²

With Herzog’s death, Geisel’s promises must have appeared hollow. While *détente* had brought freer elections and Geisel was relatively receptive to the input of his civilian allies, the regime had also unleashed unprecedented repression against the PCB, a leftist party that had rejected armed struggle in favor of discreet electoral mobilization. Former federal deputies such as Tavares Coelho had been imprisoned, and the director of São Paulo’s public television had died in military custody. Although Geisel eventually sacked the head of the II Army, General Ednardo d’Avila Melo, who was responsible for DOI-CODI operations in São Paulo, this was small comfort for politicians. In 1975 and 1976 Geisel used AI-5

to purge ten politicians, mostly autênticos, including Marcelo Gato and Furtado.¹²³ Why play by the rules if the regime would not respect them? And although they defended the generals publicly, arenistas were certainly wondering: If the regime punished the opposition even when they followed its rules, how far could the generals be trusted to deal fairly with ARENA? For their part, the generals were concerned by the MDB's popularity in urban areas and the wealthiest states. In 1976 a new law banned most campaign television advertising.¹²⁴ With this new measure and its traditional dominance in rural Brazil, ARENA handily won the 1976 municipal elections.

With direct legislative and gubernatorial elections looming in 1978, Geisel feared that ARENA could lose Congress and governorships in key states such as São Paulo. He thus launched the regime's greatest assault on Brazilian institutions since the three military ministers had blocked Pedro Aleixo from assuming the presidency in 1969. In April 1977 the MDB, now with over a third of the seats in Congress, blocked a judicial reform proposal because it did not restore habeas corpus or judicial independence. In response, Geisel placed Congress in recess and decreed a constitutional amendment dubbed the "April package." Among other reforms, it maintained indirect gubernatorial elections and instituted them for one-third of senators. Conventions would select candidates for governor and senator, and electoral colleges, in which rural municipalities (usually controlled by ARENA) would enjoy disproportionate representation, would formally elect them in September.¹²⁵ The April package thus guaranteed ARENA a third of the Senate and nearly all the governorships.¹²⁶ It was the culmination of the military's repressive overreaction to its 1974 defeat. And it generated an unexpected reaction.

THE AUDACITY TO STRONG-ARM THE GENERALS:
PAULO MALUF RUNS FOR GOVERNOR OF SÃO PAULO¹²⁷

In contrast to the 1968 crisis that culminated in AI-5, the April package had not arisen from friction between the regime and the political class. Instead, it was a naked power grab that sought to keep ARENA dependent and the MDB in perpetual opposition. Golbery explained to the British ambassador that this had been necessary "because the opposition were effectively seeking to change the regime from that established in 1964." The MDB could win power but only "at an appropriate moment so long as they played the game."¹²⁸ As British diplomats put it, "President Geisel's policy of *distensão* is dead and there can be little hope of any further liberalising measures during the final two years of his presidency. . . . Those who felt that Brazil was set inexorably on the path to democracy will have to think again."¹²⁹

An infuriated MDB briefly considered disbanding itself in protest of this latest assault. And ARENA, instead of appreciating Geisel's help, was also displeased. Though the party expressed little discontent publicly, a foreign diplomat noted:

ARENA are shamefaced and demoralised. They find it difficult to defend measures in which they had little hand themselves. They are dismayed that President Geisel has apparently thought it necessary to fix the MDB because he had no confidence that ARENA . . . could do it for him. There is general dissatisfaction in their ranks.¹³⁰

Here were proud *homens públicos* with decades of experience winning elections, but instead of trusting them to do their jobs, the generals thought they needed help. In São Paulo, the 1978 gubernatorial contest provided an unexpected opportunity for ARENA to finally rebel.

As 1978 began, the expectation was that the generals would select the new governors and the ARENA conventions would ratify their choices. Presumably, party factions in each state would agree on a candidate and relay their preference to Geisel and João Batista Figueiredo (anointed Geisel’s successor in December 1977), who (provided the choice was acceptable) would endorse him before the state convention. Aspiring governors, in an attempt to curry favor with the generals, thus sought to demonstrate that they could lead the political class. In São Paulo, the state’s political and economic importance made it vital that the generals approve a candidate who could unite ARENA and stave off surprises at the party’s convention.¹³¹ By this criterion, two-time former governor Laudo Natel had the best prospects. Since the end of his last term in 1975, when he was replaced by Martins, he claimed to have made 1,730 trips to the state’s interior to cultivate contacts with local political elites.¹³² More important, he had twice demonstrated his unswerving loyalty and was close friends with Figueiredo.¹³³ Despite Laudo Natel’s perceived advantage, at least six other *arenistas*, including Delfim Neto, architect of the “economic miracle,” and Olavo Setúbal, current mayor of São Paulo city, were also seeking the nomination. The press engaged in frenzied speculation as the candidates formed competing alliances, traded thinly veiled insults, traveled to Brasília to meet with regime figures, and showcased their real or invented support among politicians and voters.

One candidate, Paulo Maluf, employed a very different strategy. Appointed mayor of São Paulo from 1969 to 1971, this son of Lebanese immigrants harbored higher aspirations. Yet Costa e Silva, his political patron and a personal friend of his wife, had died in 1969, and he was now a peripheral player in state politics, though he had managed to get himself elected president of the São Paulo Trade Association. But when Geisel decreed the April package, Maluf saw his opening.¹³⁴ In April 1977 he invited Geisel to a meeting on foreign trade he was hosting in São Paulo. He pulled the president aside and asked, “You have delegated to the convention the choice of gubernatorial candidate. Can anyone who wants participate in the convention?” “Yes,” Geisel responded. Years later Maluf recalled, “I took him at his word.”¹³⁵

Instead of courting the generals, he chose to focus on the approximately 1,260 delegates (chosen from the ranks of local ARENA party members) who would

participate in the convention. He spent the next year making weekly visits to the interior, using his position as president of the São Paulo Trade Association to gain access to delegates. While vacationing in Paris, he spent his time writing postcards, as he ascertained the delegates would be flattered to receive mail from France.¹³⁶ Maluf reasoned that if one of the criteria for a candidate was the ability to unite ARENA, what better way to do so than by winning the convention?¹³⁷ Every Wednesday in São Paulo, Maluf hosted a lunch for prominent arenistas. Then after every lunch, even during the Carnaval holiday, he departed for a whirlwind tour of the interior, visiting delegates in as many as forty-two municipalities and staying in their homes to maximize time spent with them.¹³⁸ Maluf claimed that in 1977 he had made 625 such visits, and he produced a map showing where he had been, with colored pins representing his support in each of the state's municipalities.¹³⁹ Most striking about Maluf's campaign was how he took advantage of the generals' arbitrary measures to justify his candidacy. Everyone else knew that the convention would do no more than endorse Geisel and Figueiredo's candidate. Yet Maluf argued that if Geisel had created a law to govern the elections, "this law . . . exists to be obeyed."¹⁴⁰ He insisted that by acting in accordance with the April package, he was collaborating with, not opposing, Geisel, adding, "They will thank me in the future."¹⁴¹

On April 24 Geisel and Figueiredo announced that the new governor would be Laudo Natel.¹⁴² Perhaps in a nod to the oppositionist mood in his state, Natel proclaimed his support for amnesty for the regime's purged and exiled opponents, the revocation of AI-5, students' right to protest, and a multiparty system. While he wished that the election had been direct, the indirect contest, with its numerous unofficial candidates, had "resembled direct elections."¹⁴³ However, the press gave no credibility to Natel's pledges. A *Folha* editorial criticized the "monarchical" selection process and proposed that ARENA abolish its "useless and redundant" convention, which would merely bestow its "submissive and affirmative" vote on Natel.¹⁴⁴ Much of the paulista political class was similarly indignant, either because they disagreed with the top-down process or because the generals had passed over their candidate. Other arenistas, reluctant to anger the future president and governor, offered polite congratulations and calls for unity.¹⁴⁵ Yet their conciliatory tone barely masked major discontent. In the state legislature, only a few ARENA deputies bothered defending the generals' choice. Most remained silent as their MDB colleagues denounced the entire process. One brave arenista asked, "Will the country have to continue watching as Brazil is divided into pieces to be distributed according to personal preferences? Do you call this a revolution? . . . If this was the intent of 1964, then I must say . . . that I was duped. . . . Enough! Enough! It's time for democracy!"¹⁴⁶

Most arenistas did no more than grumble; Maluf acted. He had remained mired in obscurity since the end of his stint as state secretary of transportation in 1975 (a position Natel had appointed him to). He was irrelevant enough by 1978 that

Delfim Neto referred to him as “a burnt-out match who doesn’t interest anyone.”¹⁴⁷ Yet Maluf stubbornly refused to withdraw, even as ARENA’s national president, Francelino Pereira, urged dissident candidates to “understand perfectly the reach of a revolutionary decision and place this decision above their personal convictions.”¹⁴⁸ Maluf later claimed that he had received phone calls and visits from a series of prominent figures. Television executive Roberto Marinho warned him that defying the generals could carry heavy repercussions, and Air Force Minister Délio Jardim de Mattos hinted at a cabinet position if he withdrew.¹⁴⁹ An ARENA source told *Veja*, “No one believes that Maluf will go until the end. He’ll agree to any accord and accept any position to save his career.”¹⁵⁰

Yet in response to one politician who questioned his resolve, Maluf offered to renounce politics forever if he failed to present his candidacy at the convention.¹⁵¹ He reiterated, “The convention . . . will not ratify—it will decide. . . . Those who say that the convention will ratify are toadies, not democrats.”¹⁵² Maluf never challenged the regime on ideological grounds. Rather, he was likely motivated by self-interest. In an indirect election in the easily controlled state legislature, Maluf’s outsider status would have doomed him, while in a direct one, he would have lost to the MDB. Given that the regime might well allow direct elections in 1982, a convention with a set of delegates Maluf could form relationships with, followed by an indirect election, was the best chance he would ever have. Thus he continued his campaigning, even spending the Corpus Christi holiday calling delegates from the six phones cluttering his desk.¹⁵³ His staff sent weekly letters and newspaper clippings about his candidacy to the delegates, and he continued to host delegates and ARENA leaders every Wednesday for lunch.¹⁵⁴

Meanwhile, Natel began to outline plans for his next administration and recruit ARENA candidates for the November elections. Martins tried to warn him that his position was precarious and that he ought to campaign more aggressively, but he responded, “Paulo, I have been governor of São Paulo twice. I will be for a third time. Do you think that you still need to tell me anything?”¹⁵⁵ Similarly, he warned prospective challengers: “No one ignores that my selection was revolutionary . . . so why don’t we quit playing games?”¹⁵⁶ The convention would be “just the legal ratification of a choice that . . . was accepted by the leaders of the party.”¹⁵⁷ But in the days before the convention, with Maluf’s campaign gaining steam, Natel launched a belated push for support. In addition to submitting a petition for candidacy with the signatures of 879 delegates (more than Maluf’s petition),¹⁵⁸ he began to actively campaign among them for the first time, reminding undecided delegates that he enjoyed the approval of the future president.¹⁵⁹ To drive this point home, Figueiredo sent a telegram urging the delegates to vote for Natel, reminding them of the “national importance of the São Paulo convention for party cohesion.”¹⁶⁰ Would this be enough to put Natel over the top?

As the day of the convention dawned, each candidate mobilized an army of supporters to appear at the seat of the state legislature, where the convention would

be held. Supporters of both men filled the area in front of the palace, spilling into the street and the adjacent Ibirapuera Park.¹⁶¹ Natel's supporters carried banners, balloons, and signs emblazoned with the slogan, "Laudo is a person like us," and a hired publicity firm sent a dozen vans fitted with loudspeakers and posters.¹⁶² Maluf's partisans carried their own signs and passed out flyers proclaiming Maluf "the delegates' candidate, with Geisel and Figueiredo."¹⁶³ They were led by attractive, young, women supporters (dubbed "malufettes" by the press), who had been bused in by a *malufista* former mayor.¹⁶⁴ Natel boasted a band, but whenever it started a song, Maluf's supporters moved in, dancing, waving banners, and cheering, prompting *laudistas* to comment, "Laudo brings the band, and Maluf has the party."¹⁶⁵ Former governor Sodré, who had at times run afoul of the regime during his 1967–71 administration, compared the civic spirit to the state's 1932 armed rebellion against Getúlio Vargas, an event whose memory lived on in paulista lore as a symbol of the state's courage in defying centralizing regimes. "The people reveal in their hearts the democratic sensitivity that motivated the Constitutionalist Revolution. We aren't a flock of little sheep who accept top-down impositions," Sodré said.¹⁶⁶

At 9:00 a.m., state ARENA president Cláudio Lembo formally opened the proceedings.¹⁶⁷ Maluf, himself a delegate, was among the first to vote. He then joined Natel to greet the delegates, full of energy as he flew from one to another; in five minutes, reporters counted thirty-one hugs and sixty expressions of thanks or greeting.¹⁶⁸ "Every delegate was greeted. . . . He knew by heart the names, the cities, and even the personal details of every delegate," wrote one reporter.¹⁶⁹ He asked one delegate about the chicken that had been sick when he visited and complimented another on the *kibbeh* (a Middle Eastern appetizer) his wife had served.¹⁷⁰ When one delegate asked how he could remember so many names, Maluf responded, "But how could I forget you? You're all my friends. We are going to govern together for four years."¹⁷¹ Meanwhile, Natel greeted each delegate with a smile and a piece of candy, and delegates paid his photographers to take their picture with him. Yet few delegates sought out Natel, unless brought by his allies.¹⁷² After all, with his demands that politicians meekly accept his nomination, he had demonstrated a marked disdain for delegates' opinions, whereas Maluf had spent a year cultivating their friendship.

Yet despite the animated atmosphere outside and the personal attention of the candidates inside, some delegates were unimpressed by the "democracy" on display. One remarked that it would have been a shame to stay home watching *Os Trapalhões* (a popular comedy program) when the best comedians were right there in the Legislative Assembly.¹⁷³ And São Paulo municipal councilor, Carlos Sampaio Dória (who shortly thereafter would leave ARENA and join the MDB), issued a statement that was remarkable for having come from a regime ally.

This convention has been an uncommon, almost forgotten, event of a type to which São Paulo arenistas and the country were no longer accustomed: a contest. Cold due

to the absence of the people, stripped of any real democratic meaning, but a contest all the same. If it had not been for . . . the determination to challenge, to assume risks, to not surrender to intimidation, today we would be watching . . . a subservient, cowardly, and despicable convention. . . . Whatever the outcome of this convention, it will not lessen—indeed, it will highlight—the paulistas’ yearning to see restored, in their fullness, their basic rights as citizens. . . . Give back to the people, without further delay[,] . . . the freedoms and prerogatives inherent to a democratic state.¹⁷⁴

Around 4:00 p.m., as the voting was winding down, an exhausted Natel withdrew to an allied state deputy’s office to await the results.¹⁷⁵ Shortly after 5:00, the tally began. The gallery, designed to accommodate a few hundred people, was soon packed with 3,500 chain-smoking spectators. By 7:20, with one box partially counted, Maluf led by fifteen votes.¹⁷⁶ Amid the haze of cigarette smoke, the smell of something burning filled the chamber, and someone shouted that there was a fire. Lembo assured the crowd that it was only a problem with the ventilation system, but as the smell grew stronger and the smoke thicker, it became clear there was a fire. Lembo’s advice to evacuate calmly went unheeded as the chamber fell into a panic.¹⁷⁷

Maluf and his supporters’ worst fears seemed to be coming true. Earlier, a malufista had handed a lantern to state deputy Antônio Salim Curiati, a close Maluf confidant, saying, “If the lights go out, illuminate the ballot boxes. You know how conventions are. Laudo’s people are capable of anything.”¹⁷⁸ This was not mere paranoia: politicians had noted that the Nove de Julho Palace’s electricity often went out during important votes.¹⁷⁹ An SNI report pointedly noted that although Lembo insisted that the laudistas were not responsible for the fire, “the area was full of military police and DOPS agents tied to Natel, many of whom were aware of the problem with the ventilation system.”¹⁸⁰ For his part, Maluf remained convinced nearly four decades later that the fire had been set intentionally.¹⁸¹ As they fled, some malufistas could be heard cursing ARENA, while others called for Maluf’s observers to stand ready with their lanterns: “Illuminate the ballot boxes! If you don’t, they’ll disappear!”¹⁸² Maluf frantically approached the dais as Lembo, the ARENA executive committee, and Olavo Drummond (an observer sent by the Regional Electoral Court, or TRE) debated what to do. Panting and wide-eyed, Maluf climbed the wall separating the floor from the dais, shouting, “It’s sabotage! They put this smoke in here on purpose! The count has to happen here!” as he clutched the ballot boxes.¹⁸³ Lembo attempted to separate Maluf from the boxes, and he and Drummond agreed, over Maluf’s protests, that the counting could continue at the TRE’s headquarters.¹⁸⁴

Lembo, Maluf, Drummond, and the boxes hastily exited the palace.¹⁸⁵ Outside they met a crowd of delegates and spectators. Politicians and delegates from both camps, in a moment of solidarity, held hands to create a wall around Lembo, the state ARENA executive committee, and the boxes. Sure enough, the electricity went out, but the malufistas immediately lit their lanterns. With no power and

smoke pouring from the building, a police van was commandeered to transfer the ballots to TRE headquarters. Maluf attempted to jump into the van but was forcibly removed, and it pulled out, forcing its way through a crowd of booing politicians.¹⁸⁶

Maluf, hair disheveled and glasses missing, rushed to TRE headquarters. Natel, who had retired to await the results by telephone, was conspicuously absent. However, the TRE president informed Lembo that since the court's role was that of observer, it would be inappropriate for convention proceedings to take place there.¹⁸⁷ Around 9:30, it was decided that the tally would continue at the spacious Anhembi Convention Center, but when the ballot boxes and the accompanying caravan arrived, it turned out that the Japanese Brazilian community had reserved the hall for a "Miss Nissei" pageant. The organizer refused to suspend the pageant, arguing that it was more important to the Japanese Brazilians than choosing a governor. So the executive committee met hastily and voted to continue the count in a tiny room next to the convention hall, with space for only the committee, the candidates' observers, and a few reporters. Perhaps because of Maluf's vocal protestations, candidates were specifically excluded.¹⁸⁸

As the count recommenced, unofficial updates from the room made it clear that Maluf's lead would hold. Boisterous supporters began to chant, "One, two, three, four, São Paulo's given an example once more!" When the final announcement came near 2:00 a.m.—that Maluf had won by a count of 617 to 589—the malufistas erupted in cheers and carried Maluf on their shoulders to the convention hall, by now vacated by the pageant. Maluf dedicated his victory to the person whose will he had flouted: "I offer this victory to President Geisel . . . who, through his steadfastness, maintained the April reform, which permitted the delegates to choose their candidates in a free and democratic election."¹⁸⁹ The malufistas applauded wildly, and one shouted, "Next, the Presidency of the Republic!"¹⁹⁰

The convention illustrates the tense relationship between the regime and its civilian allies. In 1978 the government faced foes not only among the MDB and communists but also among students, progressive Catholic bishops, and labor unions. The generals needed loyalty from their civilian allies more than ever, but Maluf and a majority of ARENA's delegates betrayed them. A municipal councilman had criticized the regime in language befitting the opposition, a former governor had favorably compared it to an armed revolt against another despotic central government, delegates had mocked the proceedings, and the fire had provoked speculation that the regime would resort to sabotage to defeat dissidence. Worst of all, Maluf had ignored the will of Geisel and Figueiredo, even as he justified his candidacy with their own rules, and a sizable bloc of ARENA politicians had joined in his insubordination. As the SNI report put it, "Maluf's victory in the convention was ARENA politicians' first gesture of rebellion, albeit within the laws issued by the Revolution, against the federal government."¹⁹¹

How much of a rebellion did the convention represent? Some delegates voted for Maluf because they resented federal meddling; delegates from the city of Guarulhos commented, “São Paulo said no. It said ‘Enough!’ to the system, and Maluf deserves our support for having the courage to believe in the sovereignty of the convention.” Others used their vote to express their dissatisfaction with the regime’s economic policy. One delegate from the interior remarked, “I haven’t been able to sell my oranges or my sugarcane. The only way I found to voice my discontent with the government’s agricultural policy was to vote for Maluf.”¹⁹² Others may have voted for Maluf because they were offered incentives or because their local faction saw support for Maluf as its ticket to political power. Whatever their individual motivations, the delegates knew that their vote represented a gesture of insubordination. Geisel and Figueiredo had endorsed Natel, and Figueiredo had sent a telegram demanding the delegates’ compliance. The last time ARENA had so openly defied the generals it had received AI-5 in answer, and many of those who had rebelled were cassado in the following months. Yet despite the risks, they voted for Maluf, illustrating the depth of their dissatisfaction with their marginalization.¹⁹³

The next day, a stunned Legislative Assembly met in the slightly damaged Nove de Julho Palace. Malufista Curiati called the “very democratic” convention “a historic moment” that had “offered an example to Brazil.”¹⁹⁴ For ARENA state deputy Paulo Kobayashi, the convention proved that “the Revolution, and its measures in São Paulo, has entirely exhausted itself,” since it could not “manage to make its party[,] . . . which for 12 years never contested revolutionary measures, swallow preprepared meals.”¹⁹⁵ Opposition deputies were similarly pleased. According to Horácio Ortiz, “The victory of the ARENA opposition was a demonstration that no one else in the government’s own party will allow impositions.”¹⁹⁶

Meanwhile, the press was rife with speculation that Geisel and Figueiredo, offended by Maluf’s insolence, might be seeking a means of preventing his election.¹⁹⁷ Publicly, Geisel’s spokesman insisted, “The only role for the government is to accept the result in accordance with the political and democratic process that has been consistently developed . . . over the last several months.”¹⁹⁸ A Figueiredo confidant revealed that the next president was urging ARENA to support Maluf, “as long as everything is in order with him.”¹⁹⁹ Still, if they changed their minds, two options were available to remove Maluf legally. The first was through a pending investigation of Maluf’s in-laws’ Lutfalla Textile and Weaving Company for allegedly pocketing a federal bailout intended to prevent the corporation’s collapse. Although Maluf had not been directly implicated, his wife was a shareholder, and if the government froze or confiscated her holdings, Maluf could be ruled ineligible to hold public office. On June 5, only hours after the convention, a congressional investigatory committee recommended the confiscation of Lutfalla’s assets.²⁰⁰ On August 6, Geisel did so. Yet a presidential spokesman insisted that

the case would not affect Maluf's candidacy.²⁰¹ This was likely because if Maluf were declared ineligible, the timing, so soon after the convention, would be suspicious.²⁰² And if the Lutfallas had so easily pocketed their bailout, what did this say about the regime's ability to combat corruption? The scandal was embarrassing, and the inclination was to ignore it.

A less far-fetched possibility was a legal challenge to the convention, which Natel filed on June 13. His lawyers pointed out that in the minutes, the number of votes for governor did not match the number of votes for senator or the number of delegates. The most likely culprit, they argued, was the chaos surrounding the fire, when votes could have been lost. They also claimed inconsistencies on the convention sign-in sheet, including missing and duplicated pages, double signatures, and blank lines. With so many problems in an election decided by a twenty-eight-vote margin, Natel argued, the only fair course of action was to annul the convention.²⁰³ The party executive committee offered a refutation accounting for most of the inconsistencies, and Maluf's lawyers pointed out that Natel had made none of these complaints during the convention.²⁰⁴ Although Natel's case was weak, under a regime that shamelessly manipulated the judicial system, the outcome was far from certain.²⁰⁵ This was the perfect chance for the generals to eliminate Maluf without getting their hands dirty. Would they apply pressure on the court to rule in Natel's favor? Although the TRE was made up of career judges who had spent years in the judicial system, judges drawn from upper-middle-class and elite families were hardly impervious to political influences. But on June 29, by a 5–1 vote, the TRE dismissed Natel's challenge, ruling that Maluf and the executive committee had sufficiently accounted for the discrepancies and that the party had taken adequate precautions to protect the ballots.²⁰⁶

Natel immediately appealed to the TSE in Brasília to overturn the regional court's decision. Since the TRE had rejected all Natel's arguments, in his appeal he was left to argue that minor clerical errors in the vote totals in the handwritten minutes should invalidate the convention.²⁰⁷ When questioned, Maluf repeated the same mantra, "I have faith in the justice system."²⁰⁸ Nevertheless, as he was undoubtedly aware, in a nation long governed by "revolutionary decisions" and "laws of exception," such faith could be misplaced. Sure enough, on July 13 Brazil's chief prosecutor, Henrique Fonseca de Araújo, submitted a brief endorsing Natel's appeal, arguing that even if the tabulated results from the convention could explain the discrepancies, supplemental documents lacked the same validity as the minutes. The minutes showed a discrepancy of 30 votes between the totals for indirectly elected senator and governor, a margin greater than that separating Maluf and Natel.²⁰⁹ Araújo's brief was without merit. The total of 1,194 votes for senator was a simple clerical error, and it could be easily proven that 1,224 delegates had cast ballots in that race, the same number as voted for governor. Why should a minor miscalculation on handwritten sheets of paper, hastily scrawled at 2:00 a.m., invalidate the entire convention?

The explanation for Araújo’s opinion lay in the fact that if the convention were invalidated, the state ARENA directorate would have to nominate a new candidate. And allies of Natel appeared to hold an advantage in the directorate.²¹⁰ Although Araújo claimed that Geisel and Figueiredo had no role in his brief, there were reports that Figueiredo was showing it off in his office the afternoon before its release.²¹¹ The brief looked like—and indeed probably was—a thinly veiled effort to salvage Natel’s candidacy. But the TSE decision stunned everyone. On July 17, by a 4–2 vote, the court ruled in Maluf’s favor.²¹² The chief federal prosecutor, likely at the behest of the generals, had publicly pressured the judges, and they ignored him. At the suggestion of “influential people,” Natel chose not to appeal to the STF.²¹³

Did Geisel and Figueiredo really want to eliminate Maluf? It is difficult to be certain as the only hints are press speculation and the regime’s history of ridding itself of troublesome politicians. Maluf pointed out in our interview later that it was only natural that the future president wanted his friend as governor, but he also insisted that Figueiredo did nothing to block his candidacy either.²¹⁴ Regardless, the most striking aspect of the legal challenges is that, whatever they wished, the generals found themselves effectively barred from removing Maluf. The Lutfalla case raised questions about the regime’s handling of corruption, and the electoral justice system could not be relied on to annul the convention. Besides, Maluf’s candidacy had followed the letter of the April package perfectly. How could Geisel simply ignore his own law?²¹⁵ To make matters more complicated, such blatant federal meddling in state affairs might upset ARENA politicians nationally, and they could refuse to support Figueiredo in the indirect presidential election and vote for an MDB candidate.²¹⁶ The convention’s aftermath illustrates the constraints the regime faced in its attempts to legitimize authoritarian rule with the trappings of liberal democracy. Open rebellion from ARENA, even if based more on self-interest than disagreement with military rule, represented a serious threat to that project.

CONCLUSIONS

The years 1974–78 marked an irrevocable turning point for Brazil’s military regime. In early 1974 the generals were presiding over a roaring economy, and the radical Left had been practically eliminated through violence, imprisonment, or exile. However reluctantly, politicians appeared to have accepted military tutelage, and the regime-allied party enjoyed a supermajority in both houses of Congress. But only four years later, the MDB had scored a stunning electoral victory, and Geisel was forced to resort to extralegal measures to keep them from taking control of Congress and key governorships. Most significantly, the generals’ faithful allies in ARENA had turned on them in Brazil’s most important state, offering a clear sign that the political class had not learned its lesson as well as the generals thought.

What happened in these four years? Certainly the failure to significantly reduce inequality played a role in the MDB's 1974 electoral victory. But the generals' failure was not economic. Indeed, until the early 1980s the regime's management of the economy, with its focus on state-directed development and regulated access for foreign corporations, brought the greatest economic stability Brazil had seen in decades. Rather, the failure was political. As Huntington had argued, a cooperative political class was essential to the institutionalization of the regime. But greater responsibility for the political class and the strengthening of the regime for the long term were predicated on politicians learning to behave correctly. By 1974 the generals perhaps believed their own rhetoric about a Brazil freed of economic crisis, leftist subversion, and a corrupt, rivalry-riven political class. They miscalculated badly.

The MDB's victory in 1974 showed that by following Quéricia's model, the opposition could play by the rules of the game and win elections. The persecution of the PCB, the death of Herzog in 1975, and the use of AI-5 to decree electoral reforms to benefit ARENA demonstrated that even if politicians followed the rules to the letter, the regime would either reinvent the rules or employ blatant repression to neutralize its foes. The political class's faith in *détente* was deeply shaken. The greatest proof of this came in São Paulo, as Maluf's victory, validated by the legal system, showed that even the military's allies were fed up. The regime was in crisis.

Still, the student movement, labor unions, and other groups that would soon be collectively referred to as "civil society" remained relatively quiet if agitated. But on the eve of Maluf's victory, strikes in São Paulo would demonstrate that it was not only the military's grip on politicians that was tenuous, but its very grip on the Brazilian people. As strikes proliferated over the next two years, led by a dynamic union leader who would one day become Brazil's first working-class president, the regime was forced to contend with an ever-expanding cast of foes. And the MDB, in a move away from the elitism of many of its members, would embrace the workers' struggle because they recognized that only with mass support could they gain power. It is to these strikes and the political class's response that the next chapter turns.