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OFFICE OF  
NATIONAL ESTIMATES

# MEMORANDUM

## *The Deterioration of Church/State Relations in Brazil*

**Secret**

2 February 1971

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

2 February 1971

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Deterioration of Church/State Relations in Brazil\*

NOTE

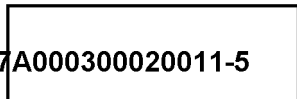
This memorandum considers an emerging problem which is unlikely to have very serious short-term implications but which could have major long-range impact on developments in Brazil.

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\* This memorandum was prepared by the Office of National Estimates. It was discussed with representatives of the Office of Current Intelligence, Office of Economic Research, and the Clandestine Service, who are in general agreement with its judgments.

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1. In many respects, the Médici regime in Brazil is riding high. The economy is growing at around seven percent a year as the government's emphasis on industrial development and export diversification seems to be paying off. Though inflation is still a problem, the annual rate of 20-25 percent for the past four years is much more manageable than the rate of 120 percent in early 1964, when the military came to power. Urban blue collar workers complain about low wages. Only in the last year have their earnings kept pace with higher prices. In any case, because their unions are controlled by the government, they have little leverage against the regime. Whereas left-wing terrorist groups still pull off some highly dramatic acts, their overall strength has been gradually whittled down by the frequently ruthless and increasingly effective security forces.

2. The government's political party, ARENA, was awarded an unexpected landslide victory in the congressional elections last fall, and General Emílio Garrastazú Médici, in power since October 1969, is becoming a relatively popular president. He skillfully managed to associate himself with Brazil's victory at the World Cup soccer games last summer, but there are other, more fundamental, reasons for his

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government's public acceptance. Quite simply, the new breed of technocratic government managers, most of whom do not have military backgrounds, seem to be doing a better job than most of their now discredited predecessors. There is, moreover, a certain parallel to the situation in Greece. The Médici government's suspension of civil liberties and occasional crackdowns on liberal intellectuals, journalists, and politicians are considered by a large chunk of the politically aware Brazilian public, especially the middle classes and businessmen, as an antidote to the permissiveness of the Goulart administration. The repressive nature of the regime -- well documented by a multitude of explicit reports of torture in the prisons and the recent arbitrary round-up of several thousand opponents of the government -- is accepted partly because it has long precedent and partly because one of its principal targets is radical terrorism.

3. The Médici success story does not, however, extend to Church/State relations. A growing number of Brazilian clergymen, many of whom are foreign born, have been critical of the government for various reasons. Those in the rural northeast tend to blame the regime for not devoting more

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resources to improving the quality of life for poverty-stricken laborers there. Many demand land reform, basic education for the largely illiterate peasants, and the establishment of rural labor unions. Some parish priests have tried to organize rural workers on their own. Archbishop Helder Camara, the most celebrated left-wing churchman in the country and the leading force behind the "Third World Movement," has called for peaceful social reform along non-capitalist lines. He has also spent a lot of time in Europe criticizing the Brazilian government for torturing prisoners and otherwise violating human rights. His nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize was a blow to the Médici regime. A few churchmen have gone so far as to be associated with the late Carlos Marighella's terrorist operations. Others have made their churches or monasteries available as sanctuaries or meeting halls for radical students and subversives. Though the total number of clergymen involved in activism of this sort remains small, the government is particularly sensitive to their activities.

4. A series of incidents in late 1970 has brought Church/State relations to the lowest point in many years. In August, two priests were arrested for subversive activities, and one

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was apparently tortured. The Church hierarchy was furious, and the National Council of Brazilian Bishops (NCBB) issued a firm condemnation of these arrests. The case against the two priests was eventually dropped for lack of evidence. Meanwhile, the government launched a propaganda campaign against Dom Helder. Although his views have long been anathema to many Brazilian clergyman, even the conservative prelates regarded the government's attacks on him as an affront to the Church. Similarly, the Church hierarchy has protested against the repeated raids by security units on various social action affiliates of the Church. Following an assault on one of these groups, IBRADES, a training institute operated by Jesuits, the general secretary of the NCBB rushed over to complain. He was held incommunicado by the police for four hours.

5. The government's harsh treatment of clerics has antagonized many, including a number of Brazil's most influential churchmen. All five cardinals protested to Médici over the general secretary's detention, and Cardinal Rossi of São Paulo also challenged the governor of his state to prove allegations of subversion he has made against Dom Helder.

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The rough treatment of prelates and laymen, some of whom are indeed of a revolutionary bent, has also brought vigorous protest from Church leaders all over the world. Even Pope Paul in a major pronouncement went so far as to deplore violence "by a large Catholic nation." His allusion to Brazil was obvious.

6. Cardinal Salles, the Primate of Brazil, was disturbed enough to consult Médici privately about the government's maltreatment of clergymen. Médici, a devout Catholic, listened patiently and assured him that no more priests would be arrested without Médici's personal approval. Salles was pleased to find the president so cooperative, but Médici's good will and personal inclinations to be careful of the Church will not necessarily be sufficient. General Giesel, the Army Minister, persuaded the president not to issue an apology for the heavy-handed treatment of priests and laymen on the grounds that such an admission would reflect adversely on the military. Moreover, army intelligence and police officers at lower levels sometimes choose to ignore instructions from above that call for restraint in dealing with radical clergymen. The IBRADES bust was only one of several cases of local military authorities acting independently.

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7. Perhaps the heart of the problem lies in the unwillingness or inability of those at the top to ensure that their directives are always obeyed at lower levels. Many middle grade officers see themselves as the staunchest defenders and interpreters of what the regime calls the 1964 "Revolution." They are convinced that organizations like IBRADES and the Catholic Worker Youth Movement deserve rough treatment because they are subversive. As justification for their acts of violence against left-wing churchmen, security officials point to the Fifth Institutional Act of December 1968, which suspended most constitutional rights and broadened the powers of the security forces.

8. A few radical clergymen will continue to provoke reprisals from the security services, but there are other reasons why the government's problems with the Church are likely to increase in the years ahead. The government's economic program includes measures aimed at bettering the lot of the peasants. For example, the regime has recently shifted more development funds to the northeast. But it is not prepared to accede to the demands of reform-minded churchmen for rural labor unions or far-reaching land reform. Moreover, though investment incentives have channeled large sums of

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money to the northeast since 1964, massive unemployment continues to plague the area, and the chief beneficiaries of the government's emphasis on industrial development will continue to be those in the southeast. Medici has also given high priority to opening up the relatively uninhabited interior by construction of a trans-Amazonic road system plus a broad colonization program. Some churchmen and others have criticized the government for allocating too much money for the project; such conflicts over national priorities will probably add to the government's critics within the Church hierarchy. Many Church leaders will try to make the Church more of an instrument for social change, and a few of the younger, more militant clergymen are likely to feel strongly enough to join with radical students in various kinds of subversive plots.

9. The Church over the years may have lost influence as a religious institution (only about ten percent of Brazil's 80 million Catholics actively practice their faith), but it was a powerful force in unifying the nation and has become increasingly important because of its other service functions. The Church supplements government services by providing the only medical facilities in many areas, running schools at all

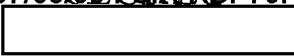
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levels, organizing literacy campaigns, and attracting a huge audience for its adult education programs on radio. In some areas, the Church is more visible than the State.

10. Moreover, the liberal and moderate wings of the Church have been so active in promoting social reform that the Church has become a rallying point for those opposed to the present government. The various crusading lay organizations offer opponents of the regime a respectable alternative to the terrorist groups. In an era of censorship and cassations, Church leaders are about the only public figures the government finds difficult to muzzle. Brazilian military men feel enough threatened by them to continue various kinds of harassment. Though some government leaders, Médici included, want to avoid creating more martyrs of the cloth, some field grade officers seem destined to create them.

11. Continued semi-official mistreatment of Church figures will further damage the Médici regime's image abroad and may eventually crack the veneer of stability at home. Perhaps there will be some similarity here to the events which occurred in Argentina in 1954. There Perón's attacks on the Church backfired badly and contributed to his downfall. Perón's

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campaign against the Church was occasioned by his fears that the Church was trying to undermine his control over organized labor, and he reacted by attempting to extend his controls over religion as well as education. Médici is no Perón. He will seek to avoid such a rash act and will try to smooth over difficulties that arise. Yet some of his more zealous and intolerant subordinates, particularly the middle grade officers, might some day be in a position to bring about a major confrontation with the Church. This would be more likely if such a grouping of officers became strong enough to challenge their superiors and either replace them or play a greater role in the government.

12. The odds are still good that the Médici regime will retain power over the next few years. By itself, the opposition of many Church leaders is unlikely to bring about the downfall of the present government. The military rulers seem pretty well entrenched, and the majority of the public appears to be either pleased with their performance in office or apathetic. Indeed many churchmen are probably also content with the government, and a sizeable wing of the Church hierarchy is preoccupied with combatting what they see as a growing "Communist" influence



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in the Church. Over the longer term, however, the self-righteous character of many military officers, their intolerance of any vigorous opposition, and their tactics in dealing with subversion might seriously aggravate the differences between Church and State, and could lead to a dangerous polarization of Brazilian society.

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