

Report from Rio by Silvia Palacios

Era of the centurions?

The vacuum of power in the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches is bringing the military to the fore.

The Supreme Court's shameful decision to postpone stripping former President Fernando Collor de Mello of his political rights, the result of his impeachment on corruption charges by the Senate one year ago, leaves the Brazilian Armed Forces as the only institution that can offer a solution to the growing instability of the country. Army Minister Zenildo de Lucena openly criticized the judiciary's decision, declaring, "As a Brazilian citizen, I am disappointed; the military would never do such a thing."

During the past few weeks, and especially since President Itamar Franco's surrender to the free-trade economic policies of Finance Minister Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a Hobbesian climate of each against all has reigned within the three branches of government. The Executive is virtually nonexistent; President Itamar Franco rarely appears in public, except to greet each new crisis with the refrain that Brazil will never have a "Fujimorazo" (suspension of Congress as President Fujimori did in Peru). The National Congress is increasingly swamped by corruption scandals, while at the same time it has launched a series of attacks against the Judiciary. And so on.

The military has responded to this vacuum of power through a speech by Gen. Benedito Onofre Bezerra Leonel on Dec. 5, at the annual officer corps' graduation ceremony. Although it is traditionally attended by the President of the Republic, Franco did not attend General Bezerra's presentation, which was directed exclusively to the

invited military officers.

The crisis facing the country today, said Bezerra, "has generated desperation, a sense of loss, even a dangerous generalized discrediting of institutions and leaders." He added, "History shows that military chiefs prove their true leadership in moments of turbulence, when tempests threaten the citizenry itself. . . . The moment has not yet arrived for us to identify with Marcus Flavinus, Centurion of the 2nd Court of the Augusta Legion, as narrated in his letter to his cousin Tertulius in Rome."

In order to clarify any doubt about his reference, the general annexed to his speech the letter in question, which describes the sacrifices made by the Roman legionnaires in contrast to the intrigues, treason, conspiracies, and corruption rampant among the political elites in Rome. He concludes, "If things were different, if we were to leave our whitened bones on the desert in vain, beware the fury of the legions."

During the ceremony, but now in the presence of President Franco, Air Force Minister Brig. Lelio Viana stated, "Let us hope that 1994, under the command of Your Excellency, will be a year of ethics, morality, dignity, and work, so that these become the true guides of the democracy to which we all aspire for our country."

Such speeches have the liberal political sector sweating bullets. Some journalists attempted to minimize the content of the speeches, while others began to speculate about a military coup, complaining that the military

was taking too political a posture. No one denied that the military's attitude is in direct response to the spreading chaos and misery which threatens to lead to social convulsion.

Indeed, according to press reports, the Army high command met with a group of businessmen in Brasilia on Nov. 29, at which Gen. Glauber Vieira characterized conditions in the country as the moment before "a convulsion."

However, the final straw as far as the military is concerned appears to be the decision of Finance Minister Henrique Cardoso to carry out, on orders of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the most brutal budgetary cutbacks in the history of Brazil. Should his proposal be approved by the Congress, the already minuscule military budget would be slashed in half, effectively putting the Armed Forces out to pasture.

The military directly responded to the provocation, with Navy Minister Ivan Serpa challenging Planning Minister Alexis Stepanenko: "How would you like your wages cut in half?" Military Supreme Court president Gen. Cherubin Rosa revealed, "The Air Force reserve supply is at zero."

The military ministers are not the only ones to confront the IMF policies of Henrique Cardoso. On Dec. 4, Culture Minister Jeronimo Moscardo submitted his resignation after publicly slamming the government's economic policy. Moscardo accused the minister of trying to "dollarize" the economy, stripping Brazil of its monetary sovereignty. "The proposed project would transform Brazil into a Panama," he said.

Moscardo lamented that in Brazil, "Everyone seems to follow international dogmas. There is no resistance and few people are speaking up." He warned that it just might take the "centurions" to restore the national dignity.