

Legacy of dictatorship

Brazilian police chief resigns over torture

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On June 18, less than three days after accepting the post of director general of Brazil's national police force, Joao Batista Campelo was forced to resign over mounting charges that he was a torturer under the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1964 to 1985.

The crisis over Campelo's nomination came at a most inconvenient moment for the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. It is preparing for a summit conference that will bring together 49 heads of state from the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe at the end of this month in Rio de Janeiro. The Brazilian police force was preparing to impose an unprecedented security crackdown.

So great was the controversy over Campelo's past that the parties of Cardoso's ruling coalition joined the opposition in publicly calling for his dismissal. Nearly 15 years after the end of military rule, the crimes committed under the US-backed dictatorship remain such an inflammatory issue that no section of the political establishment wants to see them brought back into public consciousness.

The police officer asked to resign in a letter to the president, saying that it was necessary "in light of the serious political situation the country is going through at this time".

The fate of the Brazil's top cop was sealed after growing numbers of his victims came forward in the media to denounce him for torturing them in the northeastern state of Maranhao in the late sixties and early seventies.

Campelo had appeared before the Brazilian Senate's human rights commission to deny the charges and threatened to file lawsuits against his accusers.

The nomination was a matter of controversy within the coalition government from the outset. Justice

Minister Renan Calheiros, who had proposed another candidate for the post, openly snubbed the new police chief, giving him a cold reception of no more than 18 seconds after he was sworn in.

The former police chief had been forced to resign after revelations that he was involved in tapping the phones of various figures vying to take control of Brazil's phone service once privatization is completed.

The testimony of a former priest, Joao Antonio Monteiro, proved decisive in forcing the resignation of the successor chosen by Cardoso. Campelo admitted that he had arrested the priest, who had been a classmate of his at seminary school. The arrest was carried out in 1970 without any warrant and the priest was held incommunicado for 12 days while he was interrogated.

Monteiro accused the policeman of having ordered his torture and forcing him to sign a false statement that he was a communist. He said the policeman was there when he was subjected to repeated beatings and helped tie him upside down to a torture device.

The policeman, as well as government spokesmen, denied the charge. However Bishop Xavier de Maupeou, who was Monteiro's cellmate at the time, confirmed the former priest's accounts, saying that he had seen the scars left by the torture on Monteiro's body.

Others offered similar testimony. The mayor of the town of Belagua in Maranhao, Rosalina Costa Araujo, and the former dean of the Federal University of Amapa, Joao Renor Ferreira, both identified Campelo as their tormentor in the early 1970s. Ms. Costa Araujo said that the policeman had forced her to sign a statement falsely accusing the priest of "communist activities". The former dean said Campelo was the head of a team that abducted and tortured him in 1972 when

he was the member of a leftist organization.

They were not the only ones to remember Campelo's deeds under the dictatorship. *Jornal do Brasil*, the Rio daily, interviewed workers from Urbanos Santos, a poor town in the state of Maranhao, who remembered Campelo from that period. "This was the same man of terror," said Jose Ferreira da Silva, 61, after seeing photographs of the policeman in the newspaper. He remembered the day when Campelo had come to the settlement where he lived and put a gun to his head. "He said I was a communist, pointed a revolver at me and threatened to blow my head off," he recalled. "I said, 'Doctor, you're the one who knows, but I'm completely innocent.'"

Another worker, Jose Pereira Dutra, 65, said he was jailed six times during the early 1970s. He recalled that Campelo and his team's main aim was to force people to give incriminating testimony against the priests. He said that the policeman also put a gun to his head. He recognized Campelo as soon as his picture appeared in the paper as the new national police chief. "He was the commander of threats," he recalled.

Monteiro, the former priest, called Campelo's resignation "a victory for the Brazilian people" while warning that the president had "forgotten everything that he stood for" before taking power.

Cardoso, a self-styled "Marxist" professor during the era of military rule, embraced the policies of the International Monetary Fund and the "free market" in his later years, becoming the favored political spokesman for Brazil's ruling elite and coming to power as the candidate of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party. His government rests upon a repressive apparatus that was forged under the dictatorship and therefore he is at pains to prevent any criticism of the military from getting out of hand.

After the end of military rule, an amnesty was declared which protected the military and police from any prosecution for the murder and torture of thousands upon thousands of political oppositionists, journalists, militant workers, peasants and students under the dictatorship. Those who carried out these crimes for the regime that came to power in the CIA-backed coup of 1964 remain the backbone of Brazil's police-military apparatus. Campelo's resignation is the third that the Cardoso government has been forced to accept because of revelations that high-ranking officials served as

torturers for the dictatorship earlier in their careers.

Gen. Armando Avolio Filho, the former military attaché to the Brazilian embassy in London, and Gen. Ricardo Fayad, the army's ex-director of health, were both compelled to leave after evidence emerged that they were involved in torture under the military regime.

While the Brazilian government has provided limited compensation to the families of political prisoners who were murdered or "disappeared" under the dictatorship, it has offered no assistance to the many thousands who passed through the regime's torture chambers.

"There are survivors who are completely incapacitated for work, in many cases because of psychological damage caused by the violence they suffered," said Cecilia Coimbra, president of the organization "Torture, Never Again" in Rio de Janeiro. The group has presented proposals to the government for the payment of medical and psychological care as well as, when needed, lifetime pensions for the victims of repression.



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