

Brazil: Evangelical leader tied to Lula government charged with wholesale fraud

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15 September 2009

Last month, prosecutors in Brazil charged the founder of one of Brazil's largest evangelical churches with committing fraud against its followers, many of them poverty-stricken, as well as the church itself.

Bishop Edir Macedo and nine other people associated with the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (*Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*) are suspected of diverting hundreds of millions of dollars in donations to businesses and television stations, and for their personal enrichment. The majority of donations to the church are from working class followers, many of whom live in poverty.

"São Paulo state's prosecutors office alleged in a statement that Macedo and others took more than \$2 billion in donations from 2003 to 2008 alone, but charged that the alleged scheme went back ten years," the Associated Press reported. The church receives hundreds of millions of dollars in donations from followers spread across thousands of temples in Brazil.

Prosecutors said the church asked followers for donations to fund new temples and religious television programs, but Macedo and his partners used the funds to purchase businesses to enhance their personal wealth.

While the accused have denied the latest charges brought against them, there is no denying that the charges are part of a larger pattern. The church was under investigation for embezzlement and tax evasion during the 1990s, although the number of members has continued to increase rapidly since then, with its leaders claiming that they are victims of religious persecution.

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God was founded by Macedo in 1977. He now owns Rede Record, the country's second-largest TV network, several radio stations, a tourism agency, and an air taxi company. While the majority of his followers endure poverty and social inequality, Macedo has done quite well for himself.

The church has also been accused of having money-laundering ties to Colombian drug lords. Brazilian prosecutors believe these ties could go back to the 1980s.

The charges against Macedo came just over a week after two other evangelical leaders returned to Brazil from the United States after serving a two-year sentence for attempting to smuggle money into the US. Estevam Hernandes Filho and Sonia Haddad Moraes had attempted to smuggle more than \$56,000 through the airport in Miami in 2007. The couple stuffed their luggage and their child's backpack and Bible case with cash, hoping to bypass a law that requires visitors to the US to declare if they are bringing more than \$10,000 with them into the country.

Following their arrest in the US, Brazil sought to have them extradited on charges of fraud, larceny, and money laundering. These

charges are still pending.

Brazilian officials accuse the couple of spending donations they received from their mostly impoverished followers on personal luxuries like mansions and horse farms.

Estevam Hernandes Filho and Sonia Haddad Moraes founded the Reborn in Christ Church in 1986. The church has a large number of members and more than 1,200 temples in Brazil.

Although Pentecostal churches have existed in Brazil since the early twentieth century, the movement did not begin to spread until the 1960s and 1970s—the period of military dictatorship—mostly through religious radio and television programs, often backed by US Protestant denominations.

The number of evangelicals doubled in Brazil during the 1990s, and there are now more than 30 million in the country. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God has turned Brazil into an exporter of religion, having set up branches in scores of countries, including nearly 80 churches in the US.

The growth of the movement has come at the expense of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1980, Catholics represented 88 percent of the Brazilian population; they now represent less than 70 percent. The growing number of converts from Catholicism is a direct challenge to the political power of the Roman Catholic Church. The Vatican has accused the Pentecostal churches of being overly aggressive in seeking converts and refers to these churches as "sects."

The success of the evangelicals can be attributed in no small measure to the disillusionment of more impoverished sectors of Brazil's working class with the failure of a succession of corrupt and reactionary civilian governments—including the present administration of Workers Party (PT) President Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva—to produce any significant improvement in social conditions. The evangelical churches have attracted converts through a gospel of faith-based individual financial success and a populist style incorporating pop music and a stripped-down theology.

The evangelical movement's influence on Brazilian politics has increased drastically since the movement's early days. In both 2002 and 2006, Lula chose as his running mate Jose Alencar, a textile magnate and leader of the right-wing Brazilian Republican Party (PRB), which functions virtually as a political arm of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. There are more than 60 evangelicals in the Brazilian parliament, including PRB senator and Lula ally Marcelo Crivella, a nephew of the church's indicted leader, Edir Macedo.

These evangelical legislators usually come together to vote on so-called social issues, opposing abortion rights, stem cell research and homosexual marriage. Evangelicals have repeatedly controlled the

governorship of the state of Rio de Janeiro. Religious rhetoric has routinely been used as a campaign tactic by candidates in this state, which is one of Brazil's most populated.

The movement is influential enough to have compelled Brazil's president to meet with evangelical leaders at least three times during his 2006 campaign for re-election. Lula went so far as to say, "For many years of my life, people said if I was elected, I would close the doors of the evangelical churches. I say today that the evangelical church doesn't have any doubts about President Lula, and President Lula doesn't have any doubts about the evangelical church."

The Brazilian government has aided the growth of the evangelical movement by allowing some churches to directly distribute forms of public assistance including welfare checks. It is not difficult to imagine how this aid distribution helps win over converts in poverty-stricken neighborhoods and line the pockets of church officials.

Evangelical leaders have also come under fire for campaigning politically directly from the pulpit. Attempts to enforce the law barring such activity have been largely futile.

Politicians associated with the evangelical movement have been mired in corruption. They were prominently involved in the so-called *mensalao* scandal, in which legislators sold their votes to the government in return for monthly stipends. And nearly half of the members of the evangelical caucus in the Brazilian parliament were implicated in a scheme in which they took bribes to purchase overpriced ambulances. This latter scandal resulted in the RSB congressional delegation being virtually wiped out in the 2006 election.

This corruption has hardly distinguished them, however, in a political system that is overrun with bribes, payoffs and embezzlement, to the extent that it is increasingly threatened with paralysis. The latest scandal has involved former president Jose Sarney, a leader of PMDB, which has the largest bloc in congress and functions in an alliance with the Lula government. Sarney was found to have pushed a number of so-called "secret acts" through congress—laws passed but not publicly reported by the senate—handing out jobs, contracts and payola to friends and relatives.

The growth of the evangelicals has generated significant tension with the country's Catholic church, which, with 125 million Brazilian on its rolls, counts as the Vatican's largest national constituency.

In 1995, a minister of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God kicked the statue of Our Lady of Aparecida on a national television program. The statue is one of the most important icons for Catholics in Brazil. When Pope John Paul traveled to Brazil in 1997, many posters of the pontiff were defaced all over Rio de Janeiro. Many large billboards with the Pope's image had gun sight targets painted over his chest. Catholic officials blamed "radical fundamentalists," referring to the evangelicals.

Archbishop Lucas Moreira Neves stated, "Catholics are not bellicose, nor preoccupied with this holy war, but the lack of respect for our faith could prove a factor for reaction."

With both sides referring to the sectarian tension as a "holy war," the objective is to divide Brazilian workers along sectarian lines.

Brazil has experienced a significant amount of economic growth since the 1990s, but the growth has done nothing to reduce the rampant social inequality that pervades Brazilian society. The concentration of wealth is among the greatest in the world, with the wealthiest 10 percent of Brazilians receiving 50 percent of the nation's income, while the poorest 10 percent receive less than 1 percent of the income.

Poverty is endemic, with ~~favelas~~ favela-city slums (underdeveloped rural areas the most negatively affected). According to some recent estimates, over 30 percent of Brazilians live in poverty and over 10 percent live in extreme poverty, and must struggle with food insecurity. Malnutrition has been blamed for causing high rates of school non-attendance among children and is one of the most serious problems facing Brazil's education system. A lack of investment in education has caused a very high examination failure rate, which has contributed to students dropping out of school altogether. Most Brazilians who can afford to send their children to private schools do so.

Child labor is not uncommon in Brazil despite laws requiring children to remain in school until the age of 16. Many Brazilians are forced to give up on education even before reaching secondary school in order to assist their parents in making ends meet.

Social inequality has led to a society ravaged by crime, ranging from drug trafficking and gang violence to robberies and kidnappings. Brazil's homicide rate stands at well above 20 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, making it one of the highest in the world.

The Brazilian ruling elite has used police terror against alleged criminals residing in slums in cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Innocent bystanders have been killed or injured in brutal police raids in which anyone residing in a certain neighborhood is treated like a potentially violent criminal. Brazil's elite special forces unit, the Special Police Operations Battalion, or BOPE, has been trained in urban warfare and has been accused of killing innocent youths under the false pretense of them being drug dealers. According to Amnesty International, "Brazil's police forces use violent and repressive methods that consistently violate the human rights of a large part of the population."

Evangelical leaders seek to win converts by preaching against drug use and gang activity, in spite of multiple allegations concerning the movement's ties to organized crime.

But for all the hypocrisy and corruption of these leading church figures, the growth of the evangelical movement in Brazil is a manifestation of deeper processes whose source is to be found in the immense social and economic changes that have swept Brazil in the past quarter of a century.

The dramatic growth of Brazil's capitalist economy and its full integration into the world market have spelled the spectacular enrichment of a small layer at the top, at the expense of the country's working masses. Given this unprecedented class polarization, the country's ruling elite and its political parties—including Lula's PT—are incapable of advancing any economic and social programs capable of winning a genuine mass social base.

Religion has been injected into this political vacuum as a means of diverting the anger of an increasingly discontented population. A renewed upsurge in the class struggle in Brazil, spurred on by the deepening world capitalist crisis, will create the conditions for millions of workers to grasp this social and political role played by the evangelicals and religion in general.



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