Military Dictatorship: A View From Below

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This happened when I was in college in my native Brazil. One evening, a group of about 8 students, including a friend of mine, were leaving class together. When they reached the gate, two military police vans appeared and rounded them up. They were told nothing, grabbed and thrown face down into the vans and then told they would be killed if they dared to look up. Face down! They all knew that the threat was real. Brazil was at the time under a military dictatorship, so they knew that military police could kill them with complete impunity. They were all separated upon arriving at a police station. Each was sent into a separate room. It was bare. No windows, nothing on the walls and no furniture except for a single chair. Still nothing was said. They were ordered to surrender their ID cards and to just sit and wait. And wait and wait. Hours went by. Then, at about 3 or 4 in the morning they were separately taken to see an officer. No dialogue. My friend was simply told that he was not the one they were after and that he would be released in the morning. Back to the chair. Seven of the eight students were told the same thing. The last one was never heard from again. Disappeared. Gone. End of story.

This chilling story has nothing to do with the official title of my essay. When Tom Katzenmeyer asked me for a title last Fall, I had a different essay in mind. I had actually done some research into it already. But then, while driving one day, and after

the Kit Kat Member Directory was printed, I had an "aha" moment. It occurred to me that I have an experience that might be rare among members of this club. It could even be unique, though I don't know for sure. And that is I grew up living under a military dictatorships. What was that like?

So I need a new title: "Military Dictatorship: A View From Below." This essay is not intended to be an academic or formal study on military dictatorships. There are more qualified people to do that. Instead, this is a very personal view relating things I observed, heard and felt while growing up under the regime. It is quite different from how dictatorships are usually depicted in movies.

The Coup

The Brazilian military took over power in the last day of March 1964. I was a child but I still remember clearly. The next morning my father took my brother and I to school but no one was allowed to speak in the car. He was glued to the radio. It was the standard language of right-wing coups-de-état where the military announced that they were going to save the country from communism and economic collapse. The coup was wildly popular. No shooting needed. The civilian government was incompetent, corrupt and most thought it was leading the country toward a communist dictatorship.

The popularity of the military takeover can only be understood with a little bit of economic and political context. The economy had been in disarray for several years

since the fifties, when a civilian elected president decided to build a new capital for the country – the city of Brasília. Brasília is a beautiful city. Great architecture - you should visit! – but the fact of the matter is that the city was built with money the country did not have. Corruption was rampant. The city cost much more than it should have. To pay for it the government printed and printed and printed a lot of money. Inflation rose; first steadily, then suddenly and peaked at over 90% a year in 1964.

On the political side, trouble started with the presidential election of 1960. The winner was a populist center-right candidate. His vice-president was either center-left or far-left, depending on who you talked to. Note the odd combination of a rightist president and a leftist vice-president. This happened because at that time in Brazil the president and vice-president were not elected in the same ticket. Voters picked separately from candidates that needed not be in the same party. As the country would soon learn, this is not a good idea.

The vice-president's name was João Goulart but everyone knew him by the nickname Jango. To most of the military, the middle class and the elite, Jango was positioned on the far-left of the political spectrum, which made him unacceptable as a political leader.

Then, after the 1960 election, things got weird. A really bizarre sequence of events destabilized the country's institutions and created the economic and social

chaos that lead to a military coup four years later. The new president, that's the center-right populist, resigned after only nine months in office. Just resigned without explanation. While he wouldn't give a reason, it is believed that he wanted to negotiate a return to office after being given special or even dictatorial powers. The theory is he knew that the country's military and elite would not accept the vice-president being elevated to the presidency. A toxic vice-president, he thought, gave him a lot of bargaining power. So he gambled.

The resignation strategy failed spectacularly. Congress and the military smelled the rat, worked together and devised a plan to allow the vice-president to takeover. The solution was radical. The country's political system was turned on its head and changed from a presidential system to a parliamentary system. All the power would be held by a prime-minister. Everyone was happy except for the new president, who got the trappings of the presidency but no power. He immediately began to conspire to get power back. He finally got it in January of 1963 after a country-wide vote restored the presidential system. He would only last 15 more months as president.

Once attaining real power Jango proceeded to propose a far-left agenda. It included a doubling of the minimum wage, confiscation of some lands and of industrial property in the oil industry. Then, in February of 1964 he visited China and met with Mao Zedong. He was also friendly with Castro at a time when Castro was

beginning to export the Cuban revolution. As you can imagine, all of this wasn't great news for the country's elite. Nor was it in Washington, DC.

At that same time the economy was in shambles and the political system nearly paralyzed. Jango kept pushing forward until three major events sealed his fate. First, in a speech in January of 64, right before going to China, he signaled a further major shift to the left in a speech to more than 200 thousand people. The speech promised further radicalization in the confiscation of agricultural lands and other measures. That did not go well with landowners, the middle class or the elites. Second, shortly after this speech, low ranking sailors in the Brazilian Navy revolted against the military hierarchy to support Jango's reforms. To the astonishment of the admirals, the president supported the sailors, in effect subverting military hierarchy. Just imagine this here, the president siding with low ranking officers rebelling against the Pentagon. It is unthinkable! Nonetheless the rebellion was eventually controlled. However, the president incredibly pardoned the sailors just a few hours later. The military were infuriated when the pardoned sailors actually had the gall to stage a public demonstration afterwards. Some say Jango's fate was sealed at that point. Regardless, a few days later Jango attended a meeting of other low ranking officers, this time from the Army and again stressed his far left policies. That was the last, last straw. He was removed from office the next day.

My parents had me skip school the day after the president supported the sailors. We went to get passports for the whole family. We were not going to stay in a communist country. My parents and grandparents had prior experience with these kinds of situations. It reminded them of the climate in Europe prior to the Nazi takeover. They recognized the tell-tale signs of civil unrest, bad economy, and a break down of government institutions.

My grandfather had managed to leave Nazi Europe in 1938, shortly after the Crystal Night. He took his family of four to Bolívia, the only country that would take them on very short notice. They lived there for nine years. In that short period Bolívia had seven changes of government, one per year almost, and two of them were military coups. Bolívia gave our family an additional opportunity to learn about dictatorships and military takeovers. After some time my grandfather decided to move the family to a more stable country and one with better prospects. He went to Argentina first, where he heard dictator Juan Domingo Perón speak. I heard this type of extremist speech before, he thought. So no to Argentina. Next he visited Brazil and eventually settled there. It was a democracy then.

Incidentally, in one of those violent changes of government in Bolívia, a dictator named Villarroel, a Mussolini admirer, was deposed by a mob that invaded the presidential palace, killed him, threw him out the window from the third floor of the presidential palace and then hung him from a utility post in the city's main square

wearing nothing but underwear. Unfortunate as this was for the dictator, our family in a small way participated in the drama. It just so happened that the underwear's brand, clearly visible, was from my grandfather's textile company. Free publicity.

In Government

And so, the Brazilian military took over with promises to stop communism, fix the economy, beat corruption and restore civilian power before long. Life under the Brazilian military regime could be reasonably normal or really bad. Normal for those living under the political radar and actually better for allies of the government. It was bad for those actively opposing it. Still, the military tolerated some level of opposition, though restrictions made opponents harmless. Debate inside universities and think-tanks was tolerated. In college I had classes with leftist professors. Some of them had been arrested by the regime. They spoke freely nevertheless. One had been tortured and had a limp to prove it. He was actually proud of it. Most students agreed with these leftist views. I recall one professor, a labor law judge who had right of center views, being vigorously challenged by my classmates. There was no consequence, either with their grades or with the police.

In one incident, I was returning home late one night after studying with colleagues for a political science exam. There were books on Marxism and other political philosophies in my car. I don't really know why – it might have been due to the late hour – the military police stopped me and checked the car. A soldier noticed

the books and called the captain. After a short interview the captain let me go; books and all. He believed my "I am just a student reading my homework" story. I also had no anti-government pamphlets and no weapons, which certainly helped. But it was scary for a while.

However, while there was freedom of speech in some places, it was quite another story to go to the streets. Those who protested publicly or took up arms against the government were arrested, exiled, tortured and/or killed. That's where the fear was. The streets. Army officers and the police operated with complete impunity. They did not need probable cause. If police asked you for your documents, where you were going and why, you just answered. Politely. Mouthing off was not wise.

Another factor reminding us of the military on a daily basis was censorship. It was everywhere. Newspapers, TV programs and movies were all censored. The main newspaper in São Paulo rebelled to the extent that they could by regularly publishing cooking recipes or excerpts of Portuguese literature in spots where the censors had removed information. They wouldn't replace censored news with approved news. They put in recipes, so that everyone would know they had been censored. The government tolerated the practice.

The military otherwise carried on with the usual functions of government. Crime was low. The police's liberty to act kept streets safe. It was far safer to walk the streets at night in São Paulo back then than it is today. The government was also pro-

business and with an instinct to protect local industry with high tariffs, which allowed Brazilian industry and businessmen to prosper – at least during the first few years. There was also no longer a fear of communism, the biggest boogeyman of the age. Remember, this is the sixties and seventies when communism was a realistic fear throughout Latin America and many other places in the world.

For the middle class everyday life was pretty commonplace. We did not live looking over our shoulders worrying about government agents. I grew up going to school with other kids in my social group. Their fathers all had jobs, most mom's stayed home or worked part time. On weekends we went to a country club or to the beach. Soccer was a thing, as you can imagine. Still, when traveling outside the country I would notice things that were different. One time, when I was a teenager, we went on a vacation to neighboring Uruguay. Walking the street I saw a newsstand selling copies of Mao Zedong's famous little red book. Remember the one the Red Guard would brandish throughout the Cultural Revolution? How exciting! This was censored in Brazil! I browsed through a copy inside the newsstand. Found it to be silly. Nothing to it. Still, it was prudent not to bring back a copy, so I didn't buy one.

The Resistance

Despite the regime's support among some sectors of Brazilian society, other sectors supported a resistance movement. This happened especially after the military tightened its grip on society a year or two after the coup. The resistance was made up

of a set of uncoordinated fronts; each treated very differently by the military. These included academics, think tanks, parts of the press, a political opposition party that the government tolerated, liberal members of the church, sectors of the labor movement, many student clubs and even guerilla groups.

There was a political opposition party. After the coup the military outlawed all political parties and created two new ones. One for supporters of the government. The second was formed by dumping all opposition politicians into one bag. Many of them did not like each other. But somehow the party survived its feeble beginnings and remains as a major political party to this day in Brazil. The opposition was tolerated but toothless, though it was able to speak on national issues and win votes during elections. They won seats at the local and state levels, had a presence in Congress, but did not fill any jobs of consequence at the national level. Thus, the military succeeded in creating a system with the appearance of democracy but at the same time maintained complete control. Candidates supported by the military amassed an amazing record of electoral success.

Notwithstanding the "soft hand" approach with some sectors of society, the military asserted its heavy hand with crushing efficacy whenever threatened. Public figures with recognizable names or high profile jobs were typically sent into exile. These included major political leaders, known intellectuals, members of the church and known artists such as actors, writes or musicians.

But the worst was reserved for those who either took up arms or voiced support for taking up arms against the military. It was equally bad for members of the banned Communist Party or any of its many ideological variations: Stalinists, Leninists, Trotskyists, Maoists and too many others to matter. Mere suspicion of being one of these things was very bad news. The security apparatus was ruthless. The possibilities included extra-judicial killings, prison without trial, torture and/or death. People disappeared without their families or anyone else ever knowing what happened. There were cases when the security apparatus ambushed guerrillas and killed them on the street and in broad daylight. Brazilian society still carries the scars today.

Guerilla groups were violent too. Many received support from the Cuban government. They funded themselves with bank robberies and kidnappings. In one high profile case, the US Ambassador in Brazil, Charles Elbrick, was kidnapped for three days and exchanged for 15 prisoners, who were exiled to Mexico. Fidel Castro invited them to Cuba and offered them extra training. Incidentally, one of those freed, a man named José Dirceu, later in life became a key figure in the federal government. Today, he is back in jail, this time for corruption.

The military established army units specialized in combating guerrillas. They were very effective and, contrary to what happened in other Latin American countries, succeeded in completely destroying the guerrilla movement. They were

helped by the fact that guerrillas in Brazil never managed to accrue popular support. People just didn't like them.

As part of the government propaganda effort, as a teenager I was once selected to spend a day with one of these military units. We were in a large group of kids. I learned a little bit about the skills they had to survive and fight in the jungle. For the "grand finale" exercise we were put in a bus one early evening in a rural area, driven around for what seemed like an hour, then dropped off in the middle of nowhere and told to find our way back to camp without help. It took all night. And it didn't influence my view of the government at all. The kids could all see it was just propaganda.

On the subject of kids and propaganda, perhaps the most annoying idea the government had to win hearts and minds was to mandate civics classes to all school children under the pretense that it was to make us better citizens. Instead, it was to persuade us that the generals were doing great. It was an insufferable hour every week. Yuck! No one believed any of it. We all became proficient at snickering, and that includes some teachers who didn't believe any of it either.

Then, in the mid seventies, two high profile killings helped push public opinion against the military and emboldened the civilian opposition. One victim was a metalworker accused of being a member of the Communist Party. He was arrested, interrogated and then killed by the security apparatus. The second killing was a Jewish

journalist also tortured and killed for his political affiliation with the Communist Party. The government's official version was that he had committed suicide. They even published a ghastly picture in the press trying to persuade people that he had hanged himself. No one believed that. The case became high profile when his Rabbi refused to have him buried in the section reserved for suicides in the cemetery. Huge protests followed. This strengthened a civilian non-violent opposition and the military regime began to weaken after that.

The Legacy

In 1964 the military seized the government from civilians who could not manage the economy, tolerated a chaotic social order and threatened to impose on the country a far-left regime. In exchange for illegally doing away with the constitutional order the new rulers promised to establish law and order, eliminate corruption, improve the economy and free the country from the menace of communism. These were the grounds upon which the military claimed legitimacy to govern.

They succeeded in some areas but failed in most. There was more success in the beginning. Fear of communism ceased to be an issue in Brazil. On the law and order front, one might question their accomplishments on the law side but not on the order side. The military were very good at maintaining order. Crime was low and the streets were safe. To this day, there are people I know who long for the return of the military because they miss the safety they brought. For many, liberty is not the

number one priority. They simply want to stand on a bus stop without fear of being mugged. Or being kidnapped for ransom, which became a cottage industry in Brazil after civilians returned to power.

In the early years, the government made progress combating corruption. Soon, however, there was some sliding back and it became necessary to rely on censorship to manage impressions. Corruption in Brazil is as traditional as coffee, soccer and carnival. It is epic and thrives to this day.

But it was on the economic front that failures were most consequential to loss of legitimacy. There was a period of early success, mostly in the sixties. Trouble first came with the oil shock of 1973. Dependent on foreign oil, the economy faltered and the government borrowed heavily to counter it. This led to a massive debt crisis, made still worse by the second oil crisis in 1979. The economic failure stripped the regime from its legitimacy and brought its end in 1985. The middle class, which had been mostly pro-government in the early years, sided with the opposition as the economic problems piled up.

The decline and exit of the military dictatorship, which was gradual and controlled, nonetheless left, in my view, two huge problems as legacies that are hampering the country to this day: one is distrust in government and the other concentration of power. Both are proving hard to get rid of. Bad ideas, like, for instance, dictatorship, corruption or inflation, once entrenched in policy or in the

minds of people, become very difficult to remove. There are always individuals and institutions that benefit from a bad idea and resist its changing.

The distrust in government remains powerful. How can one trust a government if it rules by committing crimes, telling lies, cheating in its relationships with society and arbitrarily extending privileges to allies? Now, one might argue that all governments do these things to some extent. But in the case of a dictatorship it is a matter of degree, of intensity. It is in the DNA of this type of government because they do not have a legitimate institutional order to rely on. And the sad thing is that the civilian government continues to do these same things more than 30 years after the military left. What a legacy.

As a consequence of the distrust, people are unable to relate to government as their own. There is a gulf separating government and society. So, with this separation, many things that should not be ok are socially tolerated as accepted reality even if not morally condoned. For example, corruption is commonplace. Here is a personal experience. I once got an internship with a consulting company that specialized in helping troubled clients renegotiate government debt. All pretty normal until the day I discovered that the company was owned by the same government officials charged with the negotiations. The same guys were on both sides of the table. Clients got an unbelievable good deal and the government did not. Pure corruption and an eye

opening experience for this college freshman....ahhh, so that's how this works! By the way, no one ever got punished for any of this.

Distrust in government also creates red tape and bureaucratic tar pits. Brazil is a world leader in red tape. Any transaction that somehow involves the government, and that's nearly all of them, must be heavily documented because the government trusts no one and vice-versa. This results in a high cost of doing business because transactions are slow, document heavy and laden with arcane rules. For every document there is a cost and a wait time. Bureaucrats have no interest in making it simpler and efficient. For example, Brazil's tax code is among the most complex and most difficult to comply with in the world.

The second negative legacy I observed is concentration of power. It creates a state-of-mind that the government is expected to solve every problem. Society does little to self-organize to solve problems like they do here, for example. To illustrate the state-of-mind, I had an experience once trying to explain to a group of Brazilian faculty and students how the AACSB, a US association of schools of business, works. It uses a self-regulated system to accredit schools without government oversight. The students and faculty understood the concept intellectually but at a gut level kept expressing that without the government it couldn't work; certainly not in Brazil.

Concentration of power weakens social institutions and sectors of the government itself. It is difficult for them to reestablish themselves once the

dictatorship is gone. For example, the judiciary in Brazil is in many places is still subservient to the executive power. Concentration of power also takes away from economic decision making. Decisions, even very important ones, become political because they need approval from the powers-to-be. Investments go to the most influential actors, not to the best returns. And corruption often plays a part too, as those in power are in a position to extort bribes.

But perhaps the most damaging legacy is the huge bureaucracy that was established to impose controls on society and to make sure the dictator's decisions were implemented. Brazil's bureaucracy remains a power center of its own, even though the military left power decades ago.

Bureaucracies grow in predictable ways. No one, to my knowledge, explained this better that the German sociologist Max Weber. I read his "Treatise on Bureaucracy" in college and found that it explained a lot of the behavior of the federal bureaucracy in Brazil. Weber's book made me rather fearful of concentration of power of any kind. An influential bureaucracy will emerge whenever power concentrates regardless of the ideology of the power holder: left, right, religious, dynastic...it doesn't matter.

Brazil's government bureaucracy is today a privileged class focused mainly on their own interests, commanding high salaries, superior benefits and nearly impossible to get rid of. Their compensation is out of line with private industry. There have been

several attempts to curtail privileges and, despite popular support every time, all failed. Presidential support notwithstanding.

So, to summarize, how was it to grow up under a military dictatorship? While life felt mostly normal, one needed to always be mindful of red lines. The military were serious about the red lines. Cross one and you end up tortured or dead. On the other hand, the streets were safe. The political struggles of the early days, especially the fear of communism, became economic struggles after the oil crisis of 1973. Distrust in government and concentration of power are the lasting troubling legacies. Oppression switched from the security apparatus to the government's bureaucracy. But, for the most part the dictatorship was all I knew growing up. It was what it was. You don't know better until you travel abroad. In my first trip to Europe I made a stop in London. I was in college then. One of the first things I did was to stop by Parliament and sit in the gallery listening to the debate. Just taking in a little democracy. I still remember what they were talking about, but that is another story for another day. Thank you.