

## Report from Rio by Silvia Palacios

### Agrarian reform: Brazilian crossroads

*Brazil's government can either challenge the landed oligarchy, or succumb to destabilization by fascists.*

**T**he credibility of the Sarney government in Brazil is hanging in the balance: It can carry out the agrarian reform promised by José Sarney's late predecessor Tancredo Neves as one of the central themes of his electoral program, a theme which won him the support of the population and that of the Church, or it can retreat under the threat of general upheaval at the hands of the land-owning oligarchy.

Upon Tancredo's death, Sarney inherited the pledge and in May of last year determined to fulfill that commitment. However, under the pressures of an old and powerful anti-Catholic group made up of large landowners, bankers, and politicians allied to the European oligarchy, he has retreated. Further, Sarney's original plan, intended as the simple fulfillment of the Land Statute formulated under the government of Gen. Castelo Branco, has been rewritten.

The Land Statute was intended to resolve land conflicts in the most important states of the republic, colonizing public lands and expropriating a lesser number of unproductive large holdings. As such, the Land Statute is not only limited, but a far cry from the radical changes implemented by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, when he created new forms of property by eliminating the old British plantation system—so often encountered in Brazil—and turned the United States into the world's number-one food producer.

The slowness in executing agrarian reform has opened the doors in Bra-

zil to growing rural violence, forcing the mobilization of state security forces. President Sarney has thus far refused to involve the army in the conflicts.

Since May 1985, the large landowners began to organize the Democratic Rural Union (UDR), supported by the extremist Tradition, Family and Property (TFP). The UDR has grown in Sao Paulo, Minas Gerais, Goias, Paraná, Maranhão and Rio Grande do Sul, and its TFP partners have dug up legal precedents to give the landowners the right to defend their property with arms.

In January, the question of agrarian reform and the need for militias was debated by the TFP in a Latin American seminar secretly convoked in Sao Paulo. In April, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, TFP published enormous ads inciting the landowners to "armed resistance."

The landowners have received support from politicians linked to TFP and also from ultra-liberals, as in the case of the governor of Maranhão, Luiz Rocha. In this state, a leftist priest was recently assassinated, bringing to light the combat readiness of the landowners who have set up a security company called "A Solução-Empreendimentos e Serviços em Imóveis Ltd.," which has been denounced as the armed force of the UDR in Goias, and probably behind the priest's murder.

The TFP is controlled by the aristocratic families, Thurn und Taxis and Braganza. This year, the TFP's activities escalated at the moment that

Prince Johannes von Thurn und Taxis made his periodic visit to Brazil. The Thurn und Taxis family not only owns the TFP, but also counts among its Brazilian properties at least 57,000 hectares of land in Mato Grosso. Thurn und Taxis has no intention of allowing his properties to be affected by agrarian reform.

The Braganzas are also vast property holders in Brazil, and are notorious for their proposal to create a monarchist party in Brazil capable of intervening in the next Constituent Assembly, which the UDR has targeted as well.

Government vacillation on agrarian reform has seriously damaged relations between the government and the Church, and the threat of a genuine break is not impossible. While it is true that the theologians of Marxist "liberation" promote conflicts in the countryside, conflicts which ultimately benefit their supposed enemies among the landowners, the reader should not confuse these incidents with the genuine contributions of the Church.

The Brazilian Church has drafted a constitutional project reflecting the resolutions of the recent Extraordinary Synod of Bishops and the observations on freedom made by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Citing John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, the Church proposes that the agrarian reform be carried out from the point of view that "The Christian tradition never defended such a right [of property] as something absolute and untouchable, but on the contrary has always understood it in the broader context that all should use the benefits of creation; the right of private property is subordinate to the right of common usage, which is subordinate to the universal destiny of all property."