

Report from Rio by Lorenzo Carrasco

The barracks are boiling

The fast-spreading corruption scandal in Congress is threatening to bring down the institutions of government.

Despite denials by the country's military ministers that a military takeover could occur in Brazil, the truth is that the deeper a congressional probe into corruption digs, and the longer the list of suspects grows, the more compromised the functioning of the Congress appears. Ever larger sectors of the population now think that an intervention is needed by the Armed Forces, which they consider the only institution with the credibility to reestablish conditions of stability and governability in Brazil.

The newest layer of the corruption scandal, which began in early November, was unearthed when the Federal Police seized documents from the Odebrecht company, one of the country's largest construction firms, which described the several-score congressmen who had been channeling national budget allocations to this and other construction companies. The breadth of the corruption uncovered has suggested the existence of a criminal cartel, a virtual "parallel government" controlling disbursement of the national budget.

The scandal confirms the view that the political system, with the exception of a few honest people, is based on corrupt party rule, sustained through corrupt ties to various economic groups which are the ones really defining the agenda of Brazilian "democracy."

The November issue of the newspaper *Ombro a Ombro*, linked to various groups of nationalist retired military officers, had a major impact on the media in Brasilia, due to its characterization of the situation as "the

shipwreck of the Brazilian social, political, and economic system, which is sinking under the weight of wretched, selfish interests that are transforming the ritual of democracy into the most lucrative business in the Republic.

. . . In fact, behind the cover story of a return to democracy lay the greed of powerful interests eager to win access to the national treasury. With the so-called re-democratization, professional politicians regained positions from which they had been ousted, but now with an appetite greater than ever."

Ombro a Ombro's editorial emphasized that "out of the rottenness of the current situation come the worms which feed upon the cadaver of the Workers Party (PT), which is already considered the virtual winner in the next presidential elections. . . . And yet, we cannot allow [Brazil] to follow the example of Haiti, where President Jean-Bertrand Aristide—with the same affiliation to Theology of Liberation—turned his formally democratic election into an act of personal revenge against his enemies, leading to his departure from power and the current strategic impasse that surrounds that country.

"In Brazil, an analogous scenario would lead irremediably to civil war, in which the poverty of the Armed Forces could cause splits with ominous consequences, which in turn could cause a national tragedy. Thus we feel we must reject, in the name of all society, that system which some call democracy but which is nothing but a corrupt-ocracy."

As the system sinks, creating an

enormous vacuum of power, the Armed Forces are feeling impelled to intervene, as can be seen in the events surrounding the revelation that the Odebrecht documents implicated more than 100 congressmen. The gravity of the revelation was such that those in charge of the investigation ran first to the military ministers, to inform them of the latest developments. Sen. Jarbas Passarinho, president of the congressional investigatory committee looking into the budget scandal, told his colleagues confidentially, according to *Veja* magazine of Nov. 8, that "Army Minister Gen. Zenildo Lucena said that everything must be investigated . . . and that nobody can be let off the hook. He also said they are prepared to intervene, if necessary."

Senator Passarinho, himself a retired colonel, explained to his colleagues that "in the past three years, I have been in discussions with the military. I have always held the impression that the situation was under control. But recently, I have felt that the climate is changed. I have information that groups of reserve military figures are even suggesting an institutional act to close Congress."

Other generals have also quietly communicated their demand that the investigations be carried through to their final consequences, which would entail bringing in new lists of congressmen, former ministers, and others, on charges of embezzlement of public funds.

The capture and extradition from Thailand of Pablo Cesar Farias, the campaign treasurer of former President Collor de Mello who was at the center of the scandals leading to Collor's impeachment in the fall of 1992, promises to exponentially broaden the corruption scandals, given Farias's threats to reveal all the financial sources of Collor's presidential campaign.