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BRAZILIAN POLITICAL ISSUES: INFORMED QUESTIONS

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BRAZILIAN POLITICAL ISSUES: INFORMED QUESTIONS

Inter-Government Relations and Functions:

1. Brazil's Constitution grants its 26 states and federal district a high degree of political and fiscal autonomy. In addition, the Constitution's requirement for mandatory revenue allocations to states gives governors considerable power. States, consequently, are able to exert a considerable amount of influence on the federal government.

What is the relationship between states and the federal government? How is the federal government able to effectively govern in view of the states' autonomy? How is the federal government able to obtain the resources necessary to govern? Which level of government do most Brazilians consider to be more powerful?

2. Brazil's legislative branch consists of two chambers, the 513-seat Chamber of Deputies and the 81-seat Senate. Fifteen political parties, none of which has more than twenty percent of the members, are represented in Congress. Because no one party holds a majority, parties tend to form coalitions. The current government coalition is composed of five parties – the centrist party, one center-right party, and three center-left parties. The coalition holds 378 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 68 seats in the Senate. In spite of his coalition holding an overwhelming majority, the President has, at times, had difficulty advancing his agenda. (Department of State, Background Note and Montero, p. 114.)

In view of his coalition, why is the president unable to exert more influence over Congress? Why does party membership shift so frequently? Given weak party loyalty, how is Congress able to avoid gridlock? How often do coalitions change? How does

Brazil's party system and coalition government compare to those in other countries in the region?

3. Congress recently passed a constitutional amendment limiting the President's authority to legislate by provisional measures. The President used to be able to enact 30-day measures that could be reissued indefinitely, pending congressional deliberations. Some provisional measures were in effect for more than three years. (DeSouza, p. 61.) Provisional measures had been used in the past to implement controversial legislation, such as the Real Plan in 1994. (Fleischer, p. 126.) Under the new Constitutional amendment, the President may issue a provisional measure for a 60-day period, which is renewable only once. Additionally, the President is prohibited from issuing provisional measures dealing with nationality, citizenship, political rights, legal due process or the judicial branch. The provisional measures also may not change the constitution or, except under extraordinary circumstances, the budget. (Department of State, Human Rights Report and EIU Country Report.)

In practice, has this Constitutional amendment radically altered the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches? How would you describe the strengths and weaknesses of the executive branch compared to the legislative branch? What checks and balances between the branches exist?

4. Brazil's judicial system is considered inefficient and open to corruption. Too many cases and too few judges prevent its criminal courts from ensuring the right to a fair and speedy trial. Its police tribunals, established to handle allegations against the uniformed police, are likewise backlogged. Believed to neither thoroughly investigate nor zealously prosecute allegations, the uniformed police tribunals are said to "contribute to a climate

of impunity for police officers involved in extrajudicial killings or abuse of prisoners.” (Department of State, Human Rights Report.) Brazil’s civil courts are flooded with appeals because the law does not require state courts to follow the rulings of the Supreme Federal Tribunal and intermediate federal appeals courts. In a survey of 300 business leaders, over ninety percent rated the system’s lack of agility as “bad” or “terrible.” These business leaders expressed concern that such an inefficient and cumbersome system may inhibit new investment. (Fleischer, p. 128.) Additionally, pointing to low salaries for overburdened judges and the influence of political and economic interests on courts, especially at the state level, critics have expressed concern about potential corruption. (Department of State, Human Rights Report.)

How do you respond to these criticisms of the judicial system? What reforms, if any, have been proposed? What are the chances of reform initiatives being adopted, either before or after the October 2002 elections? How does Brazil’s judicial system compare to others in the region in terms of structure, processes, and efficiencies?

Role of Non-Government Actors:

5. Brazil is said to be a corporatist society in which many diverse groups advocate their interests in the political system. (Perry, p. 403.)

What types of interests groups exist in Brazil? Are they regulated in any manner, especially with regard to political campaign contributions? How influential are interests groups in Brazil? Which groups are most influential? Do other countries in the region also have such structured interest groups?

6. The Ministry of Labor estimates that nearly 11,000 labor unions operate in Brazil. Although unions are independent of political parties, a number of labor leaders are

prominent members of political parties. Additionally, labor unions have been known to form alliances with social movements and political parties when advocating individual issues. (Department of State, Humans Rights Report.)

How influential are labor unions in the political process? Has their influence increased or decreased over time? What factors caused their influence to change?

7. The Brazilian Constitution prohibits all forms of censorship and provides for a free press. The media actively covers controversial political issues and government performance. Media owners are said to pursue political agendas. In fact, some politicians have media licenses. The Liberal Party, for example, controls several radio and television stations. Radio and television are reputed to influence voters' opinions about certain political groups by weaving political subplots into soap operas and situation comedies. (Department of State, Human Rights Report and Miguel, p. 77.)

Do you agree with this characterization of the Brazilian media? Have there ever been attempts to legislate the ability of political parties to control media outlets? How much influence does the media has on politicians?

8. Although there is no favored or state religion in Brazil, eighty percent of the population is Roman Catholic. (Department of State, Background Note.) The Roman Catholic Church interacts with the government through several non-governmental organizations. (Library of Congress.)

What political issues has the Roman Catholic Church tried to influence? How much influence does the Catholic Church, or other churches, have on the political process in Brazil? How much influence do churches have on voters, as opposed to politicians?

Foreign Relations:

9. Brazil is the largest country in South America and borders on every country on the continent, except Chile and Ecuador. Historically, it has taken a leading role in the South American community. Brazil is a party to the Rio Treaty and a member of the Organization of American States. It is also a founding member of the Amazon Pact, the Latin American Integration Association and Mercosul. Brazil is also one of the guarantors of the Peru-Ecuador peace process. (Department of State, Background Note and CIA World Fact Book.)

How would you describe Brazil's relationship with other South American countries?

What type of role, if any, does Brazil intend to play with respect to the political unrest in Colombia and Venezuela and the economic problems in Argentina? How are the conditions in those countries affecting Brazil?

10. In the past, Brazil has expressed concern about armed intervention in the hemisphere as well as increased foreign influence in the Amazon Basin. Colombia recently asked for more military support from the United States.

What is Brazil's position on the United States' support to Colombia under Plan Colombia? Is Brazil concerned about the possibility of increased involvement by the United States in Colombia? What actions, if any, does Brazil recommend the United States take in response to drug production and trafficking in Colombia, as well as the insurgency there?

11. Brazilian-United States relationships have strengthened considerably over the last decade. Since 1995, President Cardoso has visited Washington on two separate occasions, and former President Bill Clinton and key cabinet members have visited

Brazil. In addition, numerous exchanges between other Brazilian and United States officials have occurred. The two countries have engaged in discussions and cooperative efforts on a wide variety of subjects including: democracy, trade and investment, energy, environmental issues, nonproliferation and arms control, human rights, education, space, and counternarcotics. (Department of State, Background Note and Levitsky, pp. 65-66.)

What does Brazil consider to be the most important Brazilian-United States issues to be addressed in the next year? Over the next five years? How does Brazil propose these issues be resolved?

12. Following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Brazil led the push within the Organization of American States to adopt a resolution to strengthen hemispheric cooperation to prevent, combat and eliminate terrorism. Commentators have opined there is little popular support among other American countries to back the United States' campaign against terrorism because of concern over becoming targets of terrorism and concerns about higher priority domestic issues. (EIU Country Report.)

What do South American countries think about the United States' campaign against terrorism? What effort is Brazil making to strengthen hemispheric cooperation against terrorism? From Brazil's perspective, how have the events of 11 September changed the United States relations and interaction with Brazil and other South American countries?

13. With its increasing economic strength, Brazil has become more involved in international affairs. A charter member of the United Nations (UN), it has provided armed forces to UN peacekeeping efforts throughout the world. It was a member of the UN Security Council between 1998 and 2000, as well as on three other occasions. Brazil

is also a member of numerous international organizations and a party to many international treaties and agreements. (Department of States, Background Note and Levitsky, pp. 66-70.)

What is Brazil's approach towards international relations? Why does it prefer multilateral to bilateral agreements? What are Brazil's foreign affairs priorities?

Election Issues:

14. Brazil is a vibrant democracy in which candidates from 17 political parties vie for elected office. On 6 October 2002, Brazil will hold a general election for the presidency, as well as numerous congressional and state offices.

With potentially 17 candidates from for any one office, how can a candidate garner the required majority of the votes? Historically, how well have coalitions held up from election to election? What will be the likely issues in this year's presidential campaign?

15. By law, the media is required to provide candidates televised broadcast time.

(Miguel, p. 73.)

How are the allocations of broadcast time determined? Who oversees the process? How much broadcast time does a candidate typically receive? What do candidates typically present during this free broadcast time? Are candidates allowed to purchase additional broadcast time?

16. The news media reports that public safety is expected to become a top issue in the 2002 election. According to reports, violent crime in Brazil is increasing. Last year, the state of Sao Paulo recorded 307 kidnappings, up from 63 in 2000. Another 45 occurred in January 2002. (Latin America Regional Report, February 5, 2002 and Inter Press Service, January 24, 2002.) Private citizens are hiring bodyguards and bulletproofing

their homes and cars, spawning a \$2.5 billion annually personal security industry in Brazil. Police corruption scandals and strikes by police officers demanding pay raises have heightened concerns over crime and security. In the first six months of 2001, over 2800 police officers were arrested in Rio de Janeiro. In addition, 226 police officers were accused of murder and 41 of drug trafficking in Sao Paulo. According to an opinion pollster, “the middle class has never been so worried about crime.” (Boston Globe, August 12, 2001.)

What is the government doing to prevent crime and protect its citizens? Is this the responsibility of the federal or state governments? What is being done to deal with the alleged corruption of police officers? What factors have contributed to police corruption in Brazil? What are the views of the various political parties on how to deal with crime and police corruption?

17. Recently, politicians have become the victims of violence and threats. Several prominent mayors and members of the Workers’ Party, the main opposition party, were kidnapped and murdered. Other members of the Workers’ Party received death threats. The Brazilian Revolutionary Action Front (FARB), purportedly an extremist left-wing group, claimed responsibility for one of the murders and the threats. The FARB, in a manifesto listed on the Internet, claims to have 50 members willing to do anything to build a more just society. The document warns that Workers’ Party members, and members of other left-leaning groups, who move to the center or the center-right in order to build coalitions, are in danger. Some analysts have speculated that the FARB an ultra-conservative group masquerading as a left-wing group in order to undermine the Workers’ Party and other leftist political parties. (STRATFOR, 23 January 2002.)

Have the police been able to identify the killers of the two Workers' Party politicians?

Has the government determined if the FARB actually exists and if so, what is its political leaning? Could the existence of such an extremist organization dramatically alter the election?

18. Brazil has been hit by a dengue fever epidemic. As of 26 February 2000, the Rio state had registered 43,000 cases of the mosquito-transmitted viral infection this year. Fourteen people reported have died of dengue fever in 2002. Experts estimate that if the epidemic follows previous patterns, one million people in the city of Rio alone may get infected. (The Guardian, February 27, 2002.) The current epidemic is the worst in Rio de Janeiro's history since 1991, when 24 people died of the disease. The news media reports that the dengue epidemic has become a political issue in the presidential election campaign. Rio de Janeiro Governor Anthony Garotinho, a candidate from the opposition Brazilian Socialist Party, has blamed Health Minister Jose Serra for the epidemic. Serra, a presidential candidate from the ruling Brazilian Social Democratic Party, has in turn accused Governor Garotinho of withholding \$5 million in federal funds slated for anti-dengue programs. (EFE News Service, February 7, 2002.)

How likely is such a health issue to be a factor in the October presidential election, especially compared to other issues? In view of the candidates respective accusations, to what extent are the federal government and the state governments responsible for combating dengue fever? Given dengue fever has infected other countries in the region, is Brazil engaged in any cooperative international efforts to eradicate the disease?

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