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## Abstract

This article examines Brazil's shift from authoritarianism to democracy, focusing on crucial factors and actors involved. It analyzes the role of social movements, institutional changes, and external influences, particularly from the Cold War context. Through a historical lens, it highlights events like the 1964 Coup D'état and the impact of the Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5) on civil liberties. The study underscores resistance efforts by groups such as the MDB, labor unions, students, and the Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU). It tracks the gradual erosion of military rule and the socio-economic pressures driving demands for democratization. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of vigilance against threats like populism and corruption to safeguard Brazil's hard-won democracy.

## Keywords:

Authoritarianism - Social Movements - Cold War - Civil Liberties - Democratization

# How the 1964-1985 Military Dictatorship in Brazil

## provoke a Social and Political Democratic Movement that shape Brazilian Democracy

### Introduction

A democratic government often comes from a change in a non-democratic regime, which makes us question how one state transforms into a democratic one. To answer this question, we can consider social and political movements or institutional changes that provoke a sentiment among the population about wanting more representation in the political system. Specifically, researching how an authoritarian regime transforms into a democratic one can have multiple answers, and actors participating in democratization can be an exhausting list. Instead, focusing on specific themes, such as how labor movements impacted society to rise against authoritarian regimes, can contribute significantly to understanding a system-wide change. Notably, looking into governments operating through a military junta proves essential cases for studying democratization because of the differences between civilian and military rule. In (Huntington 1991: 592), Samuel P. Huntington recognizes that there could be democratic transformations from a military regime through gradual democratization within the authoritarian regime's control. To prove how a state democratizes from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one, we will look at the example of Brazil during the 1964-1985 military rule.

### Historical Context

Meanwhile, to understand the transformation into a democratic system, we must study the historical and political background a state has faced leading up to democratization. Following the fall of the dictatorship led by Getúlio Vargas in 1946, Brazil converted to a liberal-democratic republic for the first time. Populist figures and large national parties characterized this democratic period. An injunction by the military forced Getúlio Vargas, elected in 1950, to step down and eventually commit suicide in 1954 (Napolitano 2018). From this event, we can see the deterioration of Brazilian democracy as the military imposed

power over the civilian counterpart. Another factor that led to political tensions between the armed forces and the presidency was the rise in social movements, particularly by labor unions. Conservatives were against social revolts that threatened free enterprise and promoted labor laws that would hurt the power of businesses. The military held these values and sought to eliminate any movements, such as communism and socialism, that would seek state control of companies. Essentially, the Brazilian army rose in frustration towards the elected government for not containing these social movements and resisting using force to suppress them. Specifically, the presidency of João Goulart (1961-1964), leader of the Brazilian Labor Party, caused tensions among conservatives because of policies, such as the agrarian reform that sought to distribute lands more equally. Brazil's historical and political background can answer how a military dictatorship took power in 1964 while providing a clear example of democratic backsliding.

## Methodological Approach

The main argument defended in this work will be how the militarized government of 1964-1985 eventually proved that frustration among the autocratic regime could succeed in becoming democratic if social and political movements promoted institutional change. A deep look into the characteristics of the military junta and the impact of the Cold War on this event will be necessary. Also, how specific actors, such as the military junta, proved important triggers to the population wanting institutional change in Brazil. The mentioned periods in history (1964-1985) shaped and inspired movements within Brazil that eventually led them to become one of the biggest democracies in the world. This hypothesis will be tested through three fundamental themes: (1) the military regime, in due part to the Cold War, that led to intervention and the censured of certain political ideologies, (2) the military junta attitudes and progression towards democratic rule, and (3) the post-regime democratization period that was led by the enticing union and labor movements that shape Brazil into a country with a less-divisive political tolerance and consolidated democracy. The main objectives of this work will center on discussing how Brazilian democracy came to be and how it is shaped through the military junta and Brazilian movements as principal actors. Another important aspect is how democracy in Brazil stands today and what undemocratization threats affect the well-being of Brazilian democracy.

## Cold War and Foreign Influence

Apart from the internal events before the military regime, the 1964 Coup D'état was also a consequence of the Cold War between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), significantly affecting the political development of Brazil. The Cold War greatly influenced Brazilian political institutions as the United States sought to strengthen American industries and saw Brazil as crucial to the geopolitics of Latin America. The fear of communism in Brazil spreading across Latin America, especially after the Cuban

Revolution of 1959, led the United States to support the military junta of Brazil. As the United States implemented anti-communist initiatives in Brazil from the 1940s and 1950s, Brazil mainly had democratic governments (Battibugli 2001). The fear of leftist ideas spreading across Brazil made it a key player for geopolitical and Cold War reasons for the United States. The support of the military coup was no doubt a strategic move by the United States to deter possible leftist propaganda in Latin America. In principle, the military coup orchestrated by the United States essentially dwells down any possibility of opposition and a clear dominance for the military government to rule.

Meanwhile, as noted in (Power 2016: 20) the Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5) of 1968, the Brazilian government restricted civil liberties. For example, anti-regime advocates faced harassment and imprisonment, while some had to flee Brazil because of their views against the military government. Also, universities were constantly quietly monitored by the regime to prevent any anti-regime propaganda. The AI-5 provides a vital example of the censorship of ideologies and views that went against the government. From the abstract and chapter 4 of *Modern Brazil: A Very Short Introduction* (Pereira 2020: 47), the author argues that the AI-5 provoked the autocratic peak of the military regime from 1969-1974 when executions, disappearances, and torture were used to suppress Brazilians. The AI-5 certainly was a key piece of legislation that kept communism, socialism, or any ideological threat that was not treated kindly by the United States or the Western world from dominating Brazilian politics. Significantly, it proved essential in the Cold War to establish a government that would repress the opposite ideological change that would hurt the chances of Brazil eventually becoming a democracy.

Although the intervention of the United States was common and unpopular in Latin America, they conducted a policy to keep power in the Western Hemisphere, not to help democratize the region. The United States acted upon its security concerns and not for the benefit of Brazilians, who were left facing atrocious human rights abuses, mainly during the early part of the dictatorship. However, the primary influence of the United States left Brazil with a tumultuous government regarding respect for human rights enacted upon the AI-5 legislation. Undoubtedly, one of the main actors in Brazilian political history is the United States government's actions as facilitators of the 1964 Coup D'état, which influenced policies of repressions the government pursued against their citizens. Notably, the ideological war against the USSR prompted swift action from the United States foreign policy; meanwhile, it led to ample violations of democratic principles from 1969-1974 in Brazil.

## Authoritarian Regime and Democratization Period

The Brazilian government began with a transition into democracy, starting in 1974 with a plan for democratic liberalism. Although the autocratic regime had values opposed to democracy, this type of military government was never meant to be permanent. The goal of Western powers, specifically the United States with Brazil, was a slow transition to liberal democracy. The MDB (*Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*) was the opposition party and constantly promoted liberal values in Brazil and became a critical movement for liberalism

after 1974. Sectors of the military that sought to maintain Brazil as an autocratic state opposed the democratization process. The provisions established to make Brazil democratic from the start of military rule significantly helped labor, liberal, and democratic movements to become vital in this process. Notably, the liberalization faced opponents from conservatives and the regime, but the 1974 competitive elections were a blow to them as the *MDB* won unexpected support (Mainwaring 1986: 153-157). The *MDB* power of mobilization to seek a broader range of civil liberties was a social movement that characterized the rough transitional period of 1974-1989. From the liberalization period, Brazil transformed its path toward democracy with political and social events that strengthened its democratic institutions.

In addition, the military junta began to debilitate its power in favor of a slow liberalization and democratic transition. It marked a historical event when in early 1979, the AI-5 was revoked, and a period of military regime decomposition started (Nervo Codato 2006: 8). The

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downward trend of the military regime signifies an era of momentum for the Brazilian pro-democratic movements, which gives us an idea of how progress took place in Brazil. Also, in (Nervo Codato 2006: 15), two key figures that led liberalization and political change were Ernesto Geisel and Golbery do Couto e Silva. These two figures, through the government of 1974-1979, partially suspended censorship, election results were recognized, and the regime tolerated protest against the economic model. Although small, these steps prove essential to liberalizing the Brazilian government. These political changes are not regarded as a complete transition to democracy but, at the time, presented a positive atmosphere for further reforms toward a democratic regime.

The most significant reforms enacted to progress to a democratic regime were conducted during the João Figueiredo government (1979-1985), called the *Abertura*. Policy changes impacted how the Brazilian political systems would transform. Notably, allowing people to protest would prove significant as mobilizations emerge from this openness, such as the labor and student movements. Also, opening elections, as stated in (Pang 1981: 57), allowed for a multi-party system where different forms of communist, pro-democracy, and far-right parties surged. Due to these reforms, political tolerance increased, as the division proved challenging to battle for the pro-military regime government officials that did not back the liberalization of Brazil. The military junta had important figures, such as Figueiredo and Geisel, who saw an opportunity for growth and change in democratizing Brazil. This slow change in the Brazilian government was influential in establishing a democratic system. From the small power held by the *MDB* to the substantial significance debilitation of the military junta, Brazil's institutional changes prove essential to the democratic country seen today.

In the early 1980s, many conservatives were wary of liberalization's effects in Brazil, specifically on the economy. The high inflation during this time caused many groups to take to the streets. As stated in (Pang 1981: 60), the *Abertura* provoked social unrest due to the economic well-being of Brazil, most noticeably led by the labor movement of São Bernardo

Metalworkers who successfully demanded higher wages. Led by Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, these metalworkers were critical in pointing out Brazil's economic struggles without a reliable economic and labor policy. The Worker's Party was founded in 1980 to advocate better treatment of workers and people from underrepresented socioeconomic backgrounds. As a subsequent effect of the metalworker's movement, the Worker's Party influenced other labor movements to do the same in requesting higher wages. The emergence of a force, such as a labor movement, proved essential for more democratization during the transitional period. Protests by the labor movement were vast and numerous, although the militaristic government often oppressed them. As advocates for a social cause, the workers showed how a movement could become a significant cause of democratization through political pressure and socioeconomic desire.

## Social Movements and Liberalization

Another movement that influenced Brazilian liberalization sentiment was the student movement of the late 1970s. According to (Martins Filho 1998: 163), the student movement was not as significant as in the 1960s, but the activity was closely associated with anti-dictatorship advocacy. University students around Brazil impacted the democratization struggle by jointly engaging in protests that numbered thousands. Although it was not as big as the labor movement, the students assembled a new generation of pro-democratic people in Brazilian society. Also, in (Martins Filho 1998: 166), the author notes that the 1977 movement of students wanted to mobilize students like the 1968 mobilization but could not gain that momentum. The struggle of this mobilization emphasizes the lack of organization that they were able to achieve in the shadow of the famous 1968 movement. Even though they could not significantly impact Brazil's democratization, many developed sympathies towards the leftist parties, which could indicate further repression against liberalization by the military regime.

The *Movimiento Negro Unificado* (MNU) was another attempt to liberalize the institutions of Brazil towards less racism and more inclusion of the black race in various Brazilian sectors. In (Ardoín 2023: 31-33), it is emphasized that the movement looked to fight inequalities, racism, segregation, and prejudice during the democratization period. Importantly, they fought for civil liberties through regional organizations that advocated for regime change and ample rights for Afro-Brazilians. The MNU was mainly a socialist group but was not directly involved in electoral politics. Democratization in Brazil allowed for a new contemporary approach to race in Brazil, with multicultural tolerance and acceptance of diversity as prime examples of calls for liberalism. The three movements studied: (1) the labor movement, (2) the student movement, and (3) *Movimiento Negro* provide an essential account of resistance to dictatorship and willingness to liberalize and democratize Brazil as a response for freedom and rights.

## Conclusion

A combination of outside factors, such as the intervention of a Western power like the United States, the openness of the military junta to allow for democratic reforms, and the social movements highlighted by labor and student mobilization, helped democratize Brazil. As a result of this work, it can be concluded that Brazil went through an early dark period during the military regime. But soon, this changed with a gradual progression toward democratization. Although slow, this change in policy from the military government and the transformative movements eventually led Brazil to come out of foreign intervention that impacted the 1964-1985 period with a liberalization era. Despite the transition to democracy, Brazilians faced detrimental human rights abuses, and thinking about this dark past still affects them today. Due to the transcendental movements during the military regime, policy changes formed after Brazil democratized. The significance of these changes regarding labor, students, and race establishes a more tolerable democratic country with respect for civil liberties and rights. It was also proven that the foreign interest of countries from Western powers impacted the directives of the military government while promoting democratic values abroad over socialist and communist ideologies. Today, democracy in Brazil is strong, but threats, such as populism, misinformation, and corruption, should be closely watched as they can deter this historic progress. Furthermore, the strength of the Brazilian democracy could be tested again, and the grit of their institutions will be crucial to contract these threats. The argument successfully showed how a democratic regime could be formed after an intolerant, authoritarian regime takes place. Also, it provided an actual example of a gradual and slow 20-year progress and liberalization period toward the democratic government that stands today. Essentially, democracy can be built through key pro-democratic actors within an authoritarian rule and with the support of movements that tend to liberalize institutions inside the government.

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