

Facing up to the Failure of “Racial Democracy” in Brazil

Hisham Aidi

What do the Brazilians who call themselves “pardo,” “pardo” and “mestizo” have in common? Despite a dizzying array of options when it comes to racial classification, all would be considered “black” by US standards. A DNA study by Brazilian scientists found that 80 percent of the population has at least some African ancestry, and fully half of the nation’s 165 million inhabitants consider themselves to be of African descent. Brazil, the largest country in South America, is home to the largest black population outside of the African continent.

But despite the widely held and consciously promoted view of Brazil as a “racial democracy,” vast inequalities exist between the country’s white minority and the mixed and black majority. Afro-Brazilians live in appalling conditions often concentrated in impoverished, crime-ridden favelas (slums) of Brazil’s large urban centers; very few Afro-Brazilians are in government, whether in the legislature, state bureaucracy or the military. Afro-Brazilians have also long been excluded from the civil service and other professions, with newspapers advertising private sector jobs stipulating “good appearance,” a code word for “white.” And only two percent of Brazil’s 1.6 million college students are black. In an effort to address the racial disparities, Brazil’s government (led by sociologist/

president Fernando Henrique Cardoso) recently initiated legislation to create a groundbreaking affirmative action/racial quotas program that would guarantee blacks 20 to 25 percent of the positions at universities, in the civil service and even on television programs.

The Racial Equality Statute, currently being debated in the Brazilian congress, also attempts to rectify the under-representation of Afro-Brazilians in the government (less than 5 percent of Brazil’s mayors, governors, senators and members of congress are black) by insuring that political parties allot 30 percent of candidacies for public office to blacks.

The proposed bill is widely seen as the product of pressure from Brazil’s quilombos, communities of Afro-Brazilians who occupy villages originally founded by runaway slaves. Quilombos, numbering an estimated 1000, have been fighting for ownership rights to the land they have inhabited for years and now spearhead Brazil’s black consciousness movement.

Afro-Brazilian leaders often find themselves fighting two battles — one against inequality and another against the notion that Brazil does not suffer the same kind of racial acrimony

that afflicts the United States. Spurning the myth of racial democracy, blacks here speak of exposing Brazil's "racismo cordial," or polite racism.

According to a study published in the newspaper *Folha de Sao Paulo*, 89 percent of Brazilians said they believed there was racism in the society, but only 10 percent admitted they themselves were racist; 87 percent of those surveyed, however, manifested some sort of prejudice in agreeing with some popular racist statements and admitted having exhibited some racist behavior in the past. Nearly half the Afro-Brazilians surveyed agreed with popular statements such as "Good blacks have white souls."

Critics point to Carnival, Brazil's famous pre-Lenten celebration, as a forum for more explicit manifestations of the racial tensions that exist below the surface of Brazilian society. In the informal segregation of Carnival troupes and samba schools, as well as lyrics of popular carnival songs like "O Teu Cabelo Nao Nega" (Your Hair Can't Deny It) and "Nega do Cabelo Duro" (Hard-Hair Blackie), racial stereotypes and questions of identity are played out openly.

The proposed legislation could also serve to bring into the open issues formerly obscured in Brazilian society. "I see this as a positive development," said Michael Hanchard of Northwestern University, author of *Orpheus and Power*, a book about Afro-Brazilian movements. "The Brazilian government is at last acknowledging the existence of long-standing inequalities based on racial and phenotypic distinctions. Brazil [in terms of race] has long been considered a special, atypical case; racial distinction has long been considered an American peculiarity. This development is an acknowledgment of the needs of Afro-Brazilians, who are represented

in areas of cultural and corporeal expression, but hardly represented politically.

"This is a positive first step, but it will come with a set of problems," Hanchard continued. "First, unlike the United States, there is no 'one-drop' rule, so how does one determine if people are considered black or 'pardo' or 'prieto'? Also, you have conditions of inequality affecting all Brazilians. How should this program be made to provide social access for all?"

"There is a consensus in Brazil that those who should benefit from an eventual affirmative action program for 'blacks' should be those who had self-identified themselves as 'preto' or 'pardo.' But this is the only consensus in this issue," said Professor Antonio Sergio Alfredo Guimaraes of the University of Sao Paulo, a prominent Afro-Brazilian activist and one of the brains behind the racial quotas initiative. "There are two main arguments against affirmative action in Brazil. First, people argue that because everybody has some black ancestry, there is no way to control 'free riders' and opportunists. Second, people argue that we are a poor country and it is not fair to make the life of poor whites even more difficult."

Another point of opposition often heard warns that importing American-style affirmative action programs will not work in the Brazilian context. Some have charged reverse discrimination, while others have said that Brazil's racial situation is not amenable to American solutions. Others have taken issue with the use of the term "affirmative action." Manolo Florentino, a history professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, stated that "it is necessary to be prudent in importing explicitly American guidelines," cautioning that the proposed legislation could further inflame racial tensions.

Others dismiss such warnings as politically motivated excuses. "When it's something that benefits the elite, they don't think twice about imitating it," Raimuno Santos, a Roman Catholic friar and educational lobbyist, told the *New York Times*. "But now that we are talking about importing something that benefits the population of African descent, they say they are against it."

Americans have long been fascinated by Brazil's racial tranquility and apparent absence of racial conflict, despite centuries of white domination. After a trip to Brazil in 1914, President Teddy Roosevelt wrote an article titled "Brazil and the Negro," observing that both the US and Brazil had "mixed" populations, and commented on "the tendency of Brazil to absorb the Negro...these white men draw no line against the Negro."

But with that relative tranquility has come a weak and slow-growing black consciousness movement in Brazil. Sometimes its growth was thwarted by outside forces, as when the government in 1937 outlawed the *Frente Negra Brasileira*, a black political organization created in 1931. The *Movimento Negro Unificado* (United Black Movement), inspired by America's civil rights struggle and Black Power Movement, emerged in the 1970s but dwindled soon thereafter — though not before proclaiming November 20, the anniversary of the 1695 death of legendary quilombo leader Zumbi dos Palmares, as a National Day of Black Consciousness, an event recognized with increasing participation in recent years.

In his book, *Making Race and Nation*, Anthony Marx compares the powerful black movements in America and South Africa to the relatively timid mobilization of blacks in Brazil. In the US, Marx argues, Jim Crow provided a target for black protests. In Brazil,

"with no clear target of state ideology and segregation policy to organize against — no apartheid or Jim Crow to challenge or reform — little Afro-Brazilian protest emerged, and racial conflict was largely avoided despite considerable socio-economic inequality."

According to Marx, Brazilian elites deliberately avoided creating an American or South African-style system of legal racial domination after witnessing the large slave revolts in the US: "They [Brazilian leaders] were eager to submerge potential racial conflict under the myth of 'racial democracy'...rather than reinforce past images of racial inferiority and domination." While the US used past discrimination to justify new systems of segregation and exclusion, post-abolition Brazil chose to create an ideology of "racial democracy" and to avoid legal distinctions based on race.

Myriad racial categories also hamper Afro-Brazilians' ability to mobilize. A 1974 census presented 134 categories, ranging from "bembranca" (real white) to "bailano" (ebony). In the most recent census only 6 percent of Brazilians classified themselves as black, while 40 percent preferred the term "pardo" ("brown") — and others chose one of the 100 different terms to describe their skin tone: "criolo," "moreno," "mulato," "mestico."

In addition, Afro-Brazilians struggle against a dominant history that paints Brazilian slavery as relatively benign, at least compared to slavery as practiced in North America. Theories advanced in the 1930s by noted Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre contended that because of certain Catholic and Portuguese cultural influences, the institution of slavery in Brazil recognized the slaves' humanity, allowed them to marry, own property, and even buy their own freedom. Recent historians, however, note that

Portuguese slavery was decidedly pernicious and cruel; marriage among slaves was rare, property held by slaves was often appropriated, and according to one historian, "Mortality among slave children was estimated to be about 80 percent, with slaves working in the mines generally surviving only for seven to ten years."

Proponents hope the racial quotas bill under consideration will debunk these ideas of

"benign slavery" and "racial democracy" once and for all. As Father Alexander Coelho, a quilombo leader told the BBC, "When we started to talk about race, we were accused of bringing racism to Brazil. But the facts show otherwise. Black women especially are marginalized ... most of the poor neighborhoods are black, and there's no racism here?"