

“I Want to Vote for President”

Diretas Já, the Political Class, and the Demise of the Military Dictatorship

As the sun set on April 16, 1984, a multitude the likes of which Brazil had never seen marched through São Paulo, demanding the approval of a constitutional amendment establishing *diretas já*—direct presidential elections now. Clad in yellow shirts emblazoned with the slogan, “I want to vote for president,” undeterred by sporadic showers falling from a cloudy sky, 1.5 million Brazilians of every age, color, and class chanted, “Cry Figueiredo, Figueiredo cry! Cry Figueiredo, your hour has arrived,” as they converged on Anhangabaú Valley, which separated the two halves of the city’s center. From a massive stage, politicians and pop culture icons demanded direct elections to replace the stacked electoral college that was to select Figueiredo’s successor in January 1985. Two decades’ worth of opponents of the regime were there—from old leftists such as Brizola and Arraes to veterans of the struggle against the dictatorship like Guimarães, Montoro, Quércia, and Covas to new leaders such as Cardoso and Lula, as well as former student leaders, some of whom were now politicians after once having hated them. As the rally ended, the multitude, arms held high, sang the national anthem as yellow confetti fell. That night, in the words of the journalist Ricardo Kotscho, “democracy was within the reach of the hands of everyone, in the fluttering of the green and yellow flags, in the heartfelt sincerity of the singing, in the joy of a people reencountering their destiny.”¹

The *Diretas Já* campaign of 1984 provided some of the iconic images of Brazilian history. It appeared that the regime’s demise was nigh, that the generals would finally have to accede to popular demand. A poll showed that 83 percent of Brazilians, including 75 percent of those who identified with the government-allied party, the Party of Social Democracy (PDS), which replaced ARENA after the 1980 reform, supported direct elections.² After two decades of the regime’s attempts to

deny, demonize, or deflect discontent, the message was unmistakable: Brazilians had rejected military rule. As the twentieth anniversary of the “Revolution” passed on March 31, it appeared more like a funeral to most.

Like the strikes in São Bernardo, the denouement of the regime in 1984–85 featured the enthusiastic support of opposition politicians—and greater tolerance among many members of the PDS—for the sort of popular mobilization that Brazilian elites had always seen as a threat. Yet after the amendment failed to pass, PDS delegates dissatisfied with their eventual candidate abandoned the regime and engineered a deal to support the PMDB’s Tancredo Neves. Ultimately popular mobilization was not sufficient to topple the regime; it only fell when the heartfelt cry of the streets was complemented by the discontent of the political class. It is in *Diretas Já* and the electoral college negotiations that we see the culmination of politicians’ dissatisfaction, which manifested itself most powerfully when it was the product of factionalism and self-interest. The problems with building a democracy in which the political class was never forced to confront its penchant for authoritarianism and residual unease with the expansion of citizenship would become clear only gradually over the next three decades.

HANGING ON BY THEIR FINGERNAILS: THE MILITARY ATTEMPTS TO RETAIN POWER

Between 1980 and 1984, Figueiredo and his military collaborators stubbornly attempted to maintain control. Having failed to win politicians’ enthusiastic collaboration and no longer able to threaten them with *cassação*, Figueiredo nonetheless hoped to perpetuate military influence to keep the Left, politicians, and the masses under control. The government thus utilized a host of electoral manipulations to keep its dubiously reliable PDS allies in power. As the Portuguese embassy telegraphed home, “It has become definitively evident [that the] regime only plans [to use the] liberalizing process to recycle its internal and external image, attempting to make any eventual alternation in power as difficult as possible.”³ In 1981, a new law instituted mandatory straight party voting for the 1982 municipal, state, and congressional elections, with the expectation that local votes for the government-allied party would carry PDS gubernatorial candidates to victory and preserve the party’s congressional majority.⁴ The next year, a constitutional amendment changed the means of determining the composition of the electoral college that would elect the next president so as to guarantee a PDS majority. The same amendment also changed the quorum for approving future amendments back to two-thirds; even if the opposition took control of Congress, they would be unable to change the rules.⁵

These efforts were challenged by the deteriorating economic situation, as the 1980s witnessed Brazil’s most dire recession in half a century. In the wake of the Iranian Revolution, the second oil shock again drove up the price of petroleum.

A simultaneous rise in world interest rates raised the cost of servicing the foreign debt, which had risen tenfold from 1970 to 1980. To stimulate an increase in exports, the government devalued the currency; inflation rose accordingly, from 55.8 percent in 1979 to 223 percent in 1984. Inconsistent wage policy and inflation caused a precipitous decline in real wages as the "lost decade" wore on. After averaging 8.9 percent growth between 1968 and 1980, GDP fell by an average of 0.6 percent between 1981 and 1984.⁶ The regime's chief source of legitimacy had always been its economic record. Yet now, with the economy in freefall, the generals stubbornly held on.

In 1982, the opposition won a collective five-seat majority in the Chamber of Deputies, though the PDS retained a comfortable majority in the Senate.⁷ The PDS also secured a thirty-vote advantage in the 686-seat electoral college. At the state level, the opposition won ten governorships, including Rio de Janeiro, where Brizola was elected. In São Paulo, Montoro achieved his dream of becoming governor, frustrated in 1978 by the April package, with Quéricia as his running mate; together, the four opposition candidates won 77 percent of the vote.⁸ Cardoso, as the MDB's runner-up in the 1978 Senate race, assumed Montoro's seat. After debate about whether the PMDB could in good conscience nominate a mayor for the city of São Paulo (mayors of state capitals were still appointed by the governors), Montoro chose Covas, who was promptly approved by the opposition-dominated state legislature.⁹ Paradoxically, it was the PDS that protested that the mayor should be chosen by direct election or, failing that, by a "broad popular consultation."¹⁰ Montoro refused the latter option, fearing that a poll of the populace might express a preference for a non-PMDB politician.¹¹ Even for the most committed oppositionists, democracy was suspect if it might produce an undesired outcome.

Though straight party voting was supposed to help the PDS, it had the opposite effect in São Paulo, as Montoro's voters also voted for PMDB mayors; as a result, the party increased its control of municipal governments from 41 to over 300. The number rose as new PDS mayors began switching to the PMDB, fearful that if they remained in what was now the opposition, their municipalities would lose benefits from the state government.¹² As for Maluf, he was elected federal deputy with the highest vote total in Brazilian history.¹³ Maluf had no interest in a legislative career; he was going to Brasília to build ties with the senators and deputies who would select Figueiredo's successor. When he took his first postelection trip to Brasília, he told Nelson Marchezan, PDS leader in the Chamber, "I've arrived for my internship."¹⁴

The military claimed that the "Revolution" had been necessary to neutralize a communist threat, repair the economy, and reform the political class under military tutelage. Yet by the end of 1983, no one besides the most paranoid members of the intelligence services feared a communist revolution. The economy was in collapse, and Figueiredo had submitted to an International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity plan. Finally, most of the regime's remaining politician supporters were

sycophants who could abandon the party as soon as it lost an election—precisely the kind of politician the generals had claimed to revile in 1964 and 1968. And all the while, Figueiredo and his cronies continued to manipulate the rules to perpetuate what remained of a “Revolution” in crisis. It was at this moment that some in the opposition saw an opportunity to end the generals’ project. It was time for direct presidential elections.

“DEMOCRACY WITHIN REACH”: THE POLITICAL
CLASS AND MASS MOBILIZATION IN DIRETAS JÁ

A month after arriving in Congress in February 1983, first-term PMDB deputy, Dante de Oliveira, proposed a constitutional amendment instituting direct elections for Figueiredo’s successor.¹⁵ The amendment’s passage would be an uphill battle in light of the two-thirds requirement for passing constitutional amendments in a Chamber of Deputies where the PDS controlled 235 of 479 seats, not to mention a Senate that included the indirectly elected PDS senators of 1978. Traditional political bargaining would not convince PDS politicians to vote against a system that guaranteed their party the presidency and the purse strings it controlled. But what if they were pressured by a populace that could vote them out?

Starting in November 1983, the three largest opposition parties—PMDB, PDT, and PT—developed a plan to apply that pressure. Together with the country’s labor and student unions and the progressive Catholic Church, they organized a rally outside São Paulo’s Pacaembu Stadium. There was no hint that history would remember this as the beginning of the greatest mass mobilization Brazil had ever seen. Although the organizers invited opposition governors and passed out nearly a million flyers, only fifteen thousand people gathered in the Charles Miller Plaza on November 27. It was not even clear what the purpose of the rally was: in addition to direct presidential elections, the flyer cited rising unemployment, declining real wages, IMF austerity measures, and US interventions in Grenada and Nicaragua.¹⁶ Most striking was the near-total absence of politicians, other than Cardoso and Lula, even though six opposition governors had arrived in São Paulo the day before to join Montoro to sign an open letter demanding direct presidential elections.¹⁷ Politicians’ spirited defense of striking workers three and a half years before notwithstanding, men like Montoro, Tancredo Neves, Paraná governor José Richa, and Pará governor Jader Barbalho still prioritized political manifestos over popular mobilization.¹⁸

Meanwhile, PDS presidential hopefuls began to prepare for indirect elections. In three of the previous four successions, the president had designated a general as his successor, and the military and ARENA had fallen in line. Figueiredo, however, was determined to hand power to a civilian, and aspirants began jockeying for his favor, just as gubernatorial hopefuls had for fifteen years. As early as January 1983, the divergences ran so deep that Army Minister Walter Pires privately confided

to a friend that he could foresee the military possibly supporting Tancredo Neves as a “name of consensus.”¹⁹ Things only grew more muddled in December, when Figueiredo announced that he would allow the PDS to select a candidate on its own.²⁰ Successfully selecting one’s successor is the ultimate mark of prestige in Brazilian politics, and Figueiredo’s lack of interest was the most dramatic example of his exhaustion in the wake of serious heart problems.²¹ Yet it is also likely his decision was due to the difficulties of keeping his allies in line. Far from becoming the selfless ruling class the generals envisioned, the PDS was showing that when the opportunity arose, they would fall back into the same self-interested bickering that had led the military to distrust them all along. As Tancredo Neves presciently observed, “The PDS succession is going to be like a fight with sickles in a dark room.”²²

By this point, three leading PDS candidates had emerged. For Maluf, Figueiredo’s withdrawal was the best possible scenario, since, notwithstanding his best efforts to ingratiate himself, the president still saw him as a shamelessly corrupt self-promoter—the very type of politician the “Revolution” was to have reformed.²³ On one occasion, Figueiredo’s sons had approached Maluf to request public financing for a business venture. Maluf scoffed at their plan to build a *drive-in* (a parking lot with individual cubicles to provide privacy to amorous couples): “This is ridiculous. You are General Figueiredo’s sons; you have to think bigger than that.”²⁴ Figueiredo, incensed, fumed to PDS president José Sarney, “I am going to kill Maluf, with a dagger in his belly, if it’s necessary. He tried to corrupt me through my sons.”²⁵ A secret report from the National Security Council (CSN) shared some of Figueiredo’s concerns, for although Maluf was “a successful businessman, intelligent, ambitious, and courageous,” he was believed to seek “personal projection,” and although he was “a legislator from the party, he is not part of the government.”²⁶ Although Maluf denied it in our interview, it seems probable that part of the resistance to him was based on his Syrian Lebanese ethnicity. The Brazilian popular imagination has long cast Arab Brazilians (together with Jews) as grasping, conniving, and indiscreetly dishonest.²⁷ Regardless of his actions, his ethnicity rendered him inherently corrupt in the eyes of the press, ARENA leadership, and the generals.²⁸

The second candidate, Vice President Aureliano Chaves, had as federal deputy voted against the 1968 request to prosecute Moreira Alves. After escaping the 1969 purges, he worked his way into the military’s good graces by being exactly the sort of politician they professed to want: honest, hardworking, and obedient. Geisel selected him to govern his native Minas Gerais beginning in 1975, and in 1978 he was named Figueiredo’s running mate.²⁹ When Figueiredo twice went to the United States for heart surgery, Chaves assumed the presidency on an interim basis, winning universal praise for his work ethic, equanimity, and leadership. The sense that Chaves was taking advantage of his illness to audition for the presidency infuriated Figueiredo. Unlike Maluf, his campaign was based on pronouncements

to the press and meetings with politicians and businessmen. Polls indicated that the hardworking administrator would stand an excellent chance in direct elections; not coincidentally, Chaves affirmed his support for Diretas Já in early February.³⁰ The only military candidate was Mario Andreazza, an army colonel who had spent much of the previous two decades in political posts, first as minister of transportation under Costa e Silva and then as minister of the interior under Figueiredo. Although he demonstrated neither Maluf's gusto for campaigning nor Chaves's political skill, there were rumors that Figueiredo might support him given his aversion to the other two.

As 1984 began, the opposition parties found themselves shut out, except for the occasional observation that if Maluf or Andreazza were the nominee, an opposition candidate would need only twenty-nine defections in the electoral college to win an indirect election.³¹ But no one knew for certain who the PDS candidate would be. If it were the popular Chaves, would it be possible to peel twenty-nine electors away from him? And if it were Maluf, might he buy off the electors as he was rumored to have done in São Paulo in 1978? As a result, the PMDB and PDT made the strategic decision to join the PT in building a mass movement to obtain approval for the Dante de Oliveira amendment reinstating direct elections immediately.

The first rally held with the support of an opposition governor was in Curitiba, on January 12. It was an unqualified success, with a crowd of over fifty thousand, though the SNI reported only fifteen thousand.³² The master of ceremonies, at this demonstration and subsequent ones, was Osmar Santos, perhaps the greatest play-by-play commentator in Brazilian soccer history. Singers such as the samba composer Martinho da Vila entertained the crowd between speeches by film and TV actors and leading opposition politicians. Argentine president Raúl Alfonsín, whose own election two months before had ended his country's violent 1976–83 military dictatorship, sent an emissary to communicate his support. Paraná senator Álvaro Dias exclaimed, "This demonstration of ours is going to drown out the whisper of that spurious electoral college." To thunderous applause, Guimarães shouted, "We are going to take this disgusting and repugnant Bastille that is the electoral college. . . . The outstretched hand of President Figueiredo has not touched the desperate hand of unemployed Brazilians."³³

Bolstered by Curitiba, the parties ramped up their planning for a "monster rally" in São Paulo. Pamphlets were passed out across the city and at mini-rallies held in neighborhoods, with residents invited to participate in mock elections. The women's movement, civil servant organizations, and a host of other groups organized their own events.³⁴ The movement gained an influential ally in the *Folha de S. Paulo*, which began to run almost daily editorials demanding direct elections.³⁵ Leading opposition figures went on radio or television to encourage people to attend.³⁶ Organizers chose a local holiday, the anniversary of the founding of the

city, to maximize attendance, and Montoro announced that public transportation would be free.

By late afternoon on January 25, at least 300,000 people had arrived for what became a four-hour rally. Osmar Santos led the crowd in a chant, “*Um, dois, três, quatro, cinco mil!* We want to elect the president of Brazil!” The actor Carlos Vereza quoted a Charlie Chaplin line from *The Great Dictator*: “Dictators die. And the power they took from the people will return to the people.”³⁷ Guimarães called the electoral college “a pestilent cellar where the dictatorship has imprisoned 60 million voter registrations.”³⁸ Even a PDS state deputy spoke, though he was nearly drowned out by boos. Montoro told the crowd, “I was asked if there are 300,000 or 400,000 people here. But the answer is different: the hopes of 130 million Brazilians are here.” Agents of federal and state security agencies sent to monitor the event could not help but marvel. An observer from the Department of Social Communication (the security agency that replaced DOPS—with many of the same officers—when Montoro abolished it in 1983) captured how this protest differed from any Brazil had ever seen: “In contrast with what used to happen, when the multitude was carried along by the speakers, today what one could see was the multitude running the show—clapping, singing, waving banners and flags.”³⁹

For three months the demonstrations continued: 60,000 in Belém; 300,000 in Belo Horizonte; 250,000 in Goiânia; 200,000 in Porto Alegre. Some politicians feared this unprecedented mobilization. “What are we going to with all these people?” Neves asked Lula and Brizola in Belo Horizonte. Yet other politicians—patriarchs like Guimarães and Montoro and upstarts like Lula alike—were moved, even energized. Montoro mused, “The people have wisdom. They know what they need, and this is the foundation of democracy.”⁴⁰ As Lula remarked years later, “All we want is the people in the street, damnit! You don’t have to be afraid, do you? Put them in the street and see what happens.”⁴¹ At every step, through speeches, media appearances, interviews, and newspaper columns, opposition politicians were at the center of the organizing. Guimarães became a national superstar; there was little doubt that the once timid people pleaser would be elected president if the amendment passed.

Yet it was not only the rallies that made *Diretas Já* remarkable but also the intensity of organizing at the neighborhood level. The Cultural and Recreational Association of the São Paulo neighborhood of Vila Prudente held a simulated election, won by Guimarães.⁴² A “*diretas*” versus “*indiretas*” soccer match organized in São Paulo’s Acimação Park by student and neighborhood organizations featured a *pró-indiretas* team made up of players representing Figueiredo, Maluf, and other regime figures, with the IMF as referee. The Maluf player carried the ball in his arms, Figueiredo nearly collapsed from a “heart attack,” and the IMF referee allowed all the *indiretas* players to act as goalkeepers. In the end, rule-breaking notwithstanding, the “*diretas*” side, comprising players representing women, students, workers, and the press, won 4 to 3.⁴³ In Bela Vista, Carnival festivities were

transformed into impromptu *diretas* demonstrations.⁴⁴ These local protests were often organized in concert with the official organizing committees for the rallies, as a way to encourage greater attendance.⁴⁵

What made the demonstrations so successful? The support of leading media outlets may have contributed, although the Globo television network's position was ambivalent. Certainly Brazil's economic crisis played a leading role. And the presence of actors, singers, and athletes, along with opposition governors purchasing publicity and waiving public transportation fares on rally days, could not have hurt. Yet, above all, *Diretas Já* showcased the democratic potential of an alliance between a vibrant, mobilized civil society and the political class. As *Veja* put it, "Never before have so many people wanted the same thing at the same time."⁴⁶

As momentum built, PDS politicians began to join the cause. Before the first rally in São Paulo, 75 percent of the 247 PDS mayors in the state signed a manifesto in support of direct elections.⁴⁷ A *pró-diretas* group of PDS politicians actively participated in organizing rallies.⁴⁸ Even the PDS's national president, José Sarney, announced that he would not enforce party fidelity when the amendment came to a vote.⁴⁹ With such staggering numbers in the streets, with opinion polls showing such support, many PDS politicians were unwilling to risk their careers over this. Motivated by expedience above all else, they knew a sinking ship when they saw it.

As the congressional vote on the amendment drew near, the opposition parties planned two massive final demonstrations—one in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's cultural soul, and another in São Paulo, its economic heart. At the Rio rally on April 10, a million people gathered behind the city's Candelaria cathedral on the avenue named for Getúlio Vargas, filling the 12-lane, 72-meter-wide avenue for an entire kilometer.⁵⁰ The rally was not without minor incidents; the tensest moment came when a PT faction called the Foundation of Socialist Youth unfurled a huge red banner near the stage calling for a general strike. Brizola asked them to take it down, saying, "This is going to ruin the rally." When they refused, he urged the crowd around the students, "Pull that banner down! This isn't the place to create disorder."⁵¹

But the enduring memory of that day was its intense emotion. The press called it a combination of the World Cup and Carnival—the two events that give Brazilians joy like no other.⁵² The only word *Jornal da Tarde* could find to describe politicians' feelings was *perplexidade*—astonishment. "I've never seen anything like this," said Lula, the man who had once spoken to a stadium of 200,000 striking workers. Neves turned to Guimarães and told him, "Congress cannot remain indifferent to a demonstration like this." Guimarães nodded: "We are going to have *diretas*." The ninety-year-old lawyer and legal scholar Sobral Pinto, veteran of the resistance against Vargas, gazed over the crowd and pronounced, "The people want to get their citizenship back."⁵³ Or as the journalist Ricardo Kotscho put it, poetically as always:

The artist, the factory worker, the teacher, the liberal professional, the unemployed, the businessman, the white-collar worker, the laborer, the student, the journalist, the poet, everyone, of every color and size, with every fear and dream, yesterday let out their holy wrath and their beautiful certainty that . . . being Brazilian is something to be proud of.⁵⁴

But the denouement of *Diretas Já* would happen in São Paulo. Indeed, for a century, Brazilian democracy has lived or died with São Paulo. Amid Vargas's assault on state autonomy, paulistas rebelled in the Constitutionalist Revolution of 1932. Three decades later, São Paulo's March of the Family with God for Liberty tolled the death knell for the Goulart presidency. And in 2016, even larger demonstrations on Avenida Paulista would help legitimize the political class and judiciary's congressional coup against President Dilma Rousseff and the PT. But on this night, 1.4 million paulistas stood together against authoritarianism and for democracy. As Lula pointed out in his speech, “Twenty years after [the March of the Family], I think that 80 percent of the people [who were there] have realized their mistake.”⁵⁵

Practically all the politicians who had led the opposition were there, along with several who had supported it. Neves came down from Minas Gerais, and Brizola flew in from Rio. Francisco Pinto, who had been imprisoned a decade before for criticizing Pinochet, was there, as was Miguel Arraes, former governor of Pernambuco who had been purged in the first days after the coup. Severo Gomes, former Geisel cabinet member, now a PMDB senator, attended with fellow senator Cardoso. Quéricia was there. New politicians like Lula and his former union colleagues attended.⁵⁶ Even Teotônio Vilela, who had died in November, was present, represented by a four-meter puppet made of steel, styrofoam, paper, and paint.⁵⁷

Nearly one and a half million people filled the center of São Paulo for a march from the Praça da Sé to Anhangabaú Valley. Covas commented on its historical significance: “I think that today will be the day that the people will demonstrate this new posture: they are no longer a passive actor, an amorphous mass who don't know what they want and need tutelage from immobilizing forces that maintain them captive and submissive.”⁵⁸ Speaking with a reporter, Brizola recalled that the military had justified its coup by claiming that popular mobilization had demanded an intervention. “Now on the same streets,” he said, “multitudes many times larger are marching and gathering, also requesting the end of the present regime, through direct elections. If they were so in touch [with popular demands] in 1964, why aren't they now?”⁵⁹

When the rally departed the Praça da Sé, politicians experienced a moment of panic as their security team was unable to keep control of the half-kilometer march to Anhangabaú. Eventually, they had to give up on their plan to reach the valley and simply let the crowd sweep them along, as they locked arms and clutched a long banner like a shield. Montoro was sweating heavily, Guimarães looked pale, and Cardoso desperately tried to keep order; the only politician who

looked at ease was Lula.⁶⁰ It was Diretas Já in microcosm. What had begun as an attempt by opposition politicians to use the people to achieve their goals was now on the verge of escaping their control. Their only choices were to be swept along or trampled.

After the rally had ended, as the crowd was dispersing, Brizola, hair wet, dripping sweat, shirt unbuttoned to his chest, stood for a moment on the edge of the stage, gazing out over the multitude. He turned to former federal deputy Adhemar de Barros Filho, a regime supporter from the beginning, and said, "Brazil has changed with this magnificent demonstration." He was right. The rally in São Paulo was the moment when the potential of an alliance between liberal politicians and the masses was on display. It was a moment when radical change appeared possible, not just a change of government, but a fundamental reordering of one of the world's most unequal, unjust countries. It was exhilarating undoubtedly for leftist militants, social movement leaders, and even a few politicians; it was certainly cause for concern for others who wished only to seize the reins of power for themselves. But on the night of April 16, 1984, for one brief moment—perhaps the only such moment Brazil has seen before or since—what the political class and the military alike wanted did not seem to matter.

"I SAW THE PEOPLE BORN
OF THE MASSES": THE PROMISE AND LIMITS
OF POPULAR MOBILIZATION

This unprecedented challenge to the military's project forced Figueiredo to make concessions. In February, he called prospective PDS candidates to Brasília for a meeting whose sole objective was to convince Chaves to cease his support for direct elections.⁶¹ The next month, he explained that he supported direct elections but not right away: "I know that many people are in favor of direct elections. I am too, but all things in due time, . . . for the next presidential election."⁶² After the April 10 rally in Rio, Figueiredo, who was on a trip abroad at the time, commented that if he had been in Brazil, "I would have been the million-and-first person at the rally."⁶³ On April 17, Figueiredo proposed his own amendment, which would maintain the indirect election for 1985, followed by direct elections in 1988.⁶⁴ While Figueiredo could sense the regime's impending demise, he and the generals who supported him were still hopeful that they could salvage something of their project. A regime that had resorted to extralegal measures for two decades may have dreamed that by 1988 it could engineer another solution. Or perhaps the generals and their civilian allies could find a popular candidate by 1988 who could win a direct election and help the military's project survive just a little longer.⁶⁵

Yet when none of this was enough to stem the tide, the military resorted to its time-honored tactic of repression. Hoping to impede demonstrators from converging on Brasília, Figueiredo imposed a state of emergency in the Federal

District. Checkpoints along highways and at airports, manned by eight thousand soldiers, kept out anyone without official business in the capital.⁶⁶ Even politicians arriving by plane to vote were subjected to questioning by military police as they disembarked at the airport.⁶⁷ Television coverage was tightly controlled.

But Figueiredo's greatest weapon was still regime-allied politicians. To achieve a two-thirds majority, 76 PDS deputies would have to vote for the amendment.⁶⁸ Tacitly acknowledging the unpopularity of voting against direct elections, Figueiredo encouraged PDS governors to pressure deputies from their states to skip the vote if they could not bring themselves to vote no.⁶⁹ He also summoned PDS deputies in favor of *diretas já* to the presidential palace to lobby them directly.⁷⁰ And the day before the vote, the military announced that the restrictions on TV and radio broadcasts would be expanded to include a prohibition on reporting the names of deputies who voted for or against the amendment—a clear attempt to make PDS deputies feel less concerned about voting no.⁷¹ Would Figueiredo's actions be enough? Would PDS politicians be willing to break with the regime so dramatically? After all, the times when they had done so had been few and far between.

The day before the vote, Guimarães gave one of the greatest speeches in Brazil's history, one that revealed how far he had come since his quixotic anti-candidacy offered paeans to democracy while almost ignoring the plight of ordinary people. The recording reveals Guimarães at his best. Echoing through a nearly silent chamber, his sentences begin with the high pitch of a prophet proclaiming a redemption that draws nigh; they end lower, shifting the emphasis to the weight of the responsibility that has fallen on the deputies as they make this historic decision.

The streets and plazas of Brazil were filled with the colossal and sonorous assemblies of protest and repudiation of the government. . . . I saw millions of unemployed . . . demand the right to help construct the prosperity of the Nation. I saw the workers rejecting the inhuman . . . deterioration of their earnings. . . . I saw also the strength of the Brazilian woman—citizen, worker, and housewife, demanding equality. . . . I saw the students . . . crying out for new jobs and access to education in an economy gnawed away by the cancer of 5 million unemployed, 12 million underemployed, 40 million souls in absolute misery. . . . I saw the artists, the churches, the journalists, the writers, the professors . . . standing on the platforms of the people. I saw minorities determined to break the handcuffs of discrimination, Blacks forcing open the doors of equal opportunity, Indians, the original owners of the land who are today without land. . . .

I saw yellow clothe Brazil in hope. I saw history gush forth on the streets and from the throats of the people. I saw through the omnipotence of the direct vote the resurrection of political participation and the legitimate pressures on behalf of those who have been left out and treated unjustly. I saw the largest movement of men, women, youths, and institutions in our nearly 500 years of history. I saw legions of democrats pitch the tents of struggle, not to support charismatic leaders or political parties, but rather to achieve a government that would be their allied brother, not their hangman. I saw the people be born of the masses. I saw the rainbow radiating the alliance

between the workers and democracy, I saw the disgraced, the dispossessed, and the unemployed convince themselves that there are no rights or well-being without citizenship, and that if bad politics destroy them, only good politics can save them.⁷²

Gone were the focus on liberal institutions as a means unto themselves and the abstract appeals to a faceless Brazilian people that had dominated the Moreira Alves debate sixteen years before. Now Guimarães cited the people he had encountered in the streets—workers, women, Afro-Brazilians, students, professionals, Indigenous people—conscious of their rights as citizens and determined to work to build a more just, democratic Brazil. Guimarães illustrates the transformations taking place among some in the political class at the twilight of military rule. Although they were still wealthy white men whose commitment to respecting popular demands varied, the strikes and *Diretas Já* had forced them to realize that the country could not continue to be engineered to benefit the few at the expense of the many. Brazil would never be the same.

MEDIA FILE 10. Clip of Ulysses Guimarães speech before the vote on the Dante de Oliveira Amendment, April 24, 1984.
SOURCE: Câmara dos Deputados, COAUD, Arquivo Sonoro,
<http://imagem.camara.gov.br/internet/audio/default.asp>.



Regardless of their commitment to liberal or participatory democracy, all the politicians present could agree that they were making history. That sense that no matter the result, this moment would reverberate through the ages to come, had perhaps not pervaded Congress so strongly since December 12, 1968, the day of the vote on Moreira Alves's immunity. The parallels with 1968 were on vivid display after Guimarães finished his speech, to thunderous applause. Students in the gallery began chanting, "Um, dois, três, quatro, cinco mil / We want to elect the president of Brazil." Joined by the politicians on the floor below, they sang the national anthem. A *Folha* reporter turned to his old friend, São Paulo mayor Mário Covas, and asked, "Doesn't this party remind you of another one, oh, about fifteen years ago?" Another politician who had been purged from Congress after the Moreira Alves vote commented uneasily, "I don't think the national anthem should be sung at times like this. It never ends well."⁷³

Sure enough, a scant two hours after Guimarães's speech, hundreds of military police surrounded Congress to prevent any more protesters from joining the eight hundred students already inside. When a reporter tried to film the human wall around Congress, he was detained; when PMDB deputy João Herman Neto jumped in to defend the journalist, an officer arrested him, until his commanding officer reminded him that legislators could not be arrested while carrying out their duties. After three hours, the three military ministers called off the troops, but huddled in their offices, grabbing dinner in one of Congress's buffets, or wandering

the halls, politicians worried into the night whether the same thing might happen the next day.⁷⁴ If the troops did return, perhaps that would be the final push the amendment needed, as this assault on their dignity might affect PDS politicians in a way that millions in the streets had not.⁷⁵

Finally, the morning of April 25 dawned. After over a decade of playing by the military's rules, painstakingly building support at the local and state levels, promising a better life for ordinary Brazilians, and finally standing shoulder to shoulder with the working class, the opposition had its best chance to undo the military's project, using against it the very institutions it had manipulated for two decades. Although only the Chamber of Deputies would vote, Congress would meet in a joint session; if the amendment passed, the senators would hold their own vote. At last the time came for the vote, late in the evening of April 25—a strategic decision by party leaders, who allowed debate to drag late into the night in the hopes that if the amendment were defeated restless crowds gathered in the streets to await the results would have dispersed.⁷⁶ One by one, the deputies voted. It did not take long for the PDS's strategy to be revealed. As the president of the Senate, Moacyr Dalla, called on the PDS deputies by name, more often than not he received silence in response; they had decided to skip the session. Since constitutional amendments required a two-thirds majority of the entire Congress, not simply a two-thirds majority of those present, it soon became clear that Diretas Já would fail. A more cynical reading might point out that this was simply the latest act in a two-decade drama in which government-allied politicians put the will of the generals before their constituents. But there is another way to see the PDS's absence: not even the generals' most stalwart allies were willing to take a public stand in favor of the regime by voting no. They might not be ready to rebel, they might hope the regime endured, but now they were hedging their bets. As Neves presciently put it, when a close journalist friend called with the words, “It's all over,” to tell him that the amendment would not pass, “Of course it isn't over. It's only just begun.”⁷⁷

“ONLY GOOD POLITICS CAN SAVE THEM”:
THE POLITICAL CLASS AND THE 1985 ELECTION

In the weeks following the defeat of the amendment, the opposition debated its next move. Despite this setback, there were still other options for achieving immediate direct elections, such as an amendment to Figueiredo's proposed constitutional amendment. Of course, any legislative solution would require a two-thirds majority, which would only be achieved through more popular mobilization. But there were risks to holding new rallies; if they were smaller than the recent ones, they could doom a new amendment. Worse yet, the popular disgust with the defeat of Diretas Já could lead to unruly demonstrations that might escape the control of opposition leadership.⁷⁸ Whatever had changed since 1964 in the political class's atti-

tudes to popular mobilization, crowds were still sometimes as threatening as they were inspiring.

Another possibility was compromise, perhaps via a shortened term for the president chosen by the electoral college, with direct elections to follow in one to three years. However, as Guimarães pointed out, the regime had failed to deliver democracy in two decades; there was no reason to think it would do so in one or two more years.⁷⁹ Brizola proffered another solution—that the PMDB compete in the electoral college but that the president chosen have but a two-year term—an idea that would conveniently allow him to serve out his gubernatorial term before running.⁸⁰ Two months later, Montoro offered the same idea, certainly for the same reason.⁸¹ Despite their admirable willingness to endorse popular mobilization, Brizola and Montoro were happy to accept indirect elections, provided it served their ambitions. These discussions were also occurring internally among the military, and a late April or early May analysis by the CSN's general secretariat identified nine possible solutions.⁸²

The third option was to play by the rules of the game whose legitimacy Doretas Já had challenged: to participate in the electoral college and try to flip sixteen PDS deputies. This had been discussed as early as the day Doretas Já failed, when the PMDB's governors met in Brasília and concluded that the fight for direct elections was lost.⁸³ The problem was that this option had several possible results. What if some PDS politicians voted for an opposition candidate but more opposition electors boycotted the indirect election? How would the still-unresolved contest for the PDS nomination factor in? Were some candidates (i.e., Maluf) more likely to provoke defections, and were some (i.e., Chaves) more likely to unify? For his part, Neves continued to insist that he remained committed to direct elections: "I eat direct elections, drink direct elections, sleep direct elections. Good thing 'elections' is a feminine noun."⁸⁴

Keep fighting, negotiate, or change tactics? There were no easy answers. The strategy chosen—competing in the electoral college—not only had a clear path to success but was also the one with which most politicians were most comfortable.⁸⁵ Montoro, Brizola, and Neves may have been uneasy being swept away by protesters, but they were in their element when it came to backroom deals with men like themselves. Forced to choose between following up on their protestations of democratic commitment and doing politics as usual, the opposition chose the latter. This was an open secret, as a CSN report to Figueiredo made clear:

If the direct election of the President of the Republic is not desired at this time by the government, there are signs that it is also not [desired] by the main opposition leaders, above all from the PMDB. After all, the difficulty of finding a candidate capable of bringing together popular preferences, at a national level, combined with the perception that the electoral college offers conditions for an opposition candidate to be chosen, leads those leaders to prefer indirect elections.⁸⁶

Or as Maluf recalled, “When Tancredo saw that he could win through an indirect election, he became the biggest defender of indirect elections.” Diretas Já had been “just marketing.”⁸⁷

If Guimarães had been the face of Diretas Já, Neves became the face of *Indiretas Já*. Just as Guimarães, reviled by the military, would never have been a viable candidate in indirect elections, the conciliatory longtime federal deputy and current governor of Minas would never have won direct elections. In 1980, Neves had left the MDB to help found the short-lived Popular Party, which combined the most moderate elements of the old MDB with arenista liberals weary of military tutelage. He was someone who “had never revealed the slightest enthusiasm for popular pressure, instead preferring backroom deals.”⁸⁸ Now, however, Neves was the candidate most likely to siphon off PDS votes in the electoral college; his much-reviled moderation was what made him acceptable to PDS liberals and the military.

Thus to win Neves had to appeal more to the military and PDS than to the Left. Less than a week after the amendment failed, Neves briefly met with Figueiredo during a presidential visit to Minas. In a speech, he highlighted his state’s gratitude for what Figueiredo had done “to improve our institutions. And for what you will still do, in the attainment of your patriotic goals, Brazil and its people will grant you the recognition of history.”⁸⁹ By early July, he had also met with Chaves and PDS president José Sarney.⁹⁰ Neves’s appetite for a dialogue—in which he would become the consensus candidate—was clear. His very definition of politics illustrated his moderation. As he put it in an op-ed, he saw politics as “a discussion that leads to agreement, and as an agreement that leads to the realization of the common good, within the limits imposed by . . . our disagreements.”⁹¹ Left unstated was who would participate in this discussion, but it is easy to guess: the political class. Privately, Neves hedged his bets. His victory hinged on Maluf winning the PDS nomination; what if Figueiredo decided to endorse Andreazza at the convention to prevent this? As he explained to Andreazza in a private meeting, “I’m too old to chase after adventures. [If you are Figueiredo’s candidate], I’m not going to give up my position as governor of Minas. On top of that, I’ll personally guarantee you seventy votes [in the electoral college].”⁹² Neves’s commitment to democracy, while undoubtedly sincere, carried less weight with him than his own interests, and he had no problem supporting a sixth military president if the exigencies of the moment dictated it.

Meanwhile the PDS searched for a consensus candidate who could stave off defections to Neves. However, neither Maluf nor Andreazza nor Chaves appeared inclined to compromise. After twenty years of trying to reform the political class, the regime faced the same old contradiction: to achieve its goals, the military was forced to rely on the self-interested, “physiological” politicians who they had hated all along. And through mid-1984, it became clear that reforming politics and preserving whatever legitimacy remained to the “Revolution” were the last things

on *pedessistas*' minds. It never had been their priority; why would it become one now? Just as in 1964, what they cared most about was supporting the winning side. Attempting to break the impasse, Sarney proposed a party primary. With little time to organize, it would not include all party members but rather assorted elected and appointed PDS politicians, for a total of 80,000 to 100,000 voters.⁹³ The candidate chosen would likely have been Chaves.⁹⁴ Maluf announced that he wouldn't allow his name to be included, arguing, "The big primary, the constitutional one, is the PDS convention."⁹⁵ He recognized that a primary would have shut him out by taking the nomination out of the hands of the convention delegates whose loyalty he had cultivated.

On June 11, the PDS national executive committee met to debate Sarney's proposal. The 4-by-10-meter room was packed with malufistas, who arrived an hour early to ensure their entry. The night before, Figueiredo had asked Sarney not to push for the primary, since one of the candidates was not in agreement. Seeking to buy time, Sarney suggested that the party postpone the decision. The malufistas, however, were adamant: the primary could not happen. Tempers flared. Former Rio Grande do Sul governor José Amaral de Sousa protested that opponents of the primary were afraid of the people. The malufistas interrupted, "So why don't you support *diretas já?*," and started sardonically chanting, "Diretas Já!" The meeting was falling into chaos. At this point, Sarney—who had come to the meeting armed⁹⁶—made a shocking announcement: he was resigning as PDS president on the spot. Amid pleas to reconsider, he walked out.⁹⁷ Within two weeks, his replacement, Santa Catarina senator Jorge Bornhausen, resigned in turn, in protest of further malufista tactics to defeat the primary. He was replaced by Rio de Janeiro senator Ernâni do Amaral Peixoto, son-in-law of the late Getúlio Vargas, a long-time member of the MDB, and a Maluf ally.⁹⁸ Maluf's takeover of the PDS was complete—but at what cost?

The slow-motion implosion of the PDS created a new opportunity for direct elections. Figueiredo's proposed constitutional amendment instituted direct elections in 1988; an amendment to that amendment could change the date to 1985. Yet PMDB support was tepid. The party held a few rallies to demonstrate popular support for *diretas já*, but in São Paulo, despite projections of a crowd of 300,000, perhaps 100,000 showed up.⁹⁹ And as rumors grew that Figueiredo would withdraw his amendment rather than risk direct elections, PMDB leadership agreed to postpone the vote in Congress—giving Figueiredo more time to withdraw it.¹⁰⁰ This certainly had something to do with the fact that only a week before the ten opposition governors had met in São Paulo and announced their endorsement of a Neves candidacy in the electoral college, after Sarney's resignation had strengthened the opposition's hope that it could win over PDS defectors.¹⁰¹ Why bother with the uncertainty of a direct election if the PMDB could win in the electoral college? Allowing ordinary people to decide the fate of the nation was a solution best avoided—so long as one's own side could win by more failsafe means anyway.

Thus the PMDB continued to give lip service to *diretas já* while preparing to compete in the electoral college with Neves. On June 28, Figueiredo, unwilling to trust the PDS to pass it without alterations, announced that he was withdrawing his amendment.¹⁰² This was the death knell for *Diretas Já*. The election would be indirect.

An opposition victory in the electoral college, however, would be predicated on PDS defections, more likely if Maluf won the party's nomination. This possibility had been raised as early as mid-1983, in a confidential CSN report: “Maluf winning the party's convention . . . is a highly likely possibility. . . . The PDS could reach an agreement to defeat him through abstaining . . . , leading to the election of a united opposition candidate.”¹⁰³ By January 1984, the opposition had come to the same conclusion, as Neves confided to a reporter that he thought he could defeat Maluf in the electoral college.¹⁰⁴ Such speculation now became reality. Shortly after his resignation, Sarney told Fernando Henrique Cardoso, “The PDS dissidence had no leaders. Now it does. I am willing to march with Tancredo.”¹⁰⁵ By the first week of July, the press was rife with reports of a “liberal front” of Maluf foes within the PDS willing to support Neves, and on July 5 the Frente Liberal (FL) released its manifesto. “A government of national reconciliation is the path we identify to [bring] change and transformation,” it stated in part.¹⁰⁶ Chaves, however, conditioned his support on the PMDB giving the FL the right to select Neves's running mate, and after Pernambuco senator Marco Maciel turned him down, he approached Sarney. According to Sarney's biographer, when he protested that his recent position as PDS president should disqualify him, Chaves countered that that was exactly why he should be the vice presidential candidate: PDS dissidents would support their former leader who had stood up to Maluf.¹⁰⁷ On July 19, the deal was sealed: the FL would support Neves.¹⁰⁸ Quickly, Sarney agreed to be vice president. The regime's most erstwhile ally, who had stood with the generals through two decades of repressive and manipulative attempts to reform politics, abandoned it, in part, perhaps, due to principle but certainly also because it suited his personal aspirations.

The alliance between the FL and the PMDB should have ensured Neves's victory. But the opposition's advantage could be offset if its more “radical” elements, incensed with the selection of Sarney, failed to support him. This possibility was plausible enough that a CSN report proposed no fewer than eight potential permutations, of which only three favored Neves.¹⁰⁹ In late July, Federal Deputy Flávio Bierrenbach argued, “Any PMDB candidate who eventually manages to achieve power through the electoral college will have no authority or legitimacy to face the challenges that lie ahead.”¹¹⁰ In retrospect, Neves realized these concerns were unfounded: “When they realized that without this alliance, we would continue with at least twenty more years of . . . this regime that suppresses liberty, they fell into line.”

At any rate, PMDB opposition was more often personal than ideological. Minas Gerais senator Itamar Franco was one of the most forceful dissidents. “We are

stoned because we defend our principles and don't jump over to the other side. And these people [the FL] leave the side they were on, because the ship is sinking," he stated. However, Franco's displeasure probably had more to do with his rivalry with Neves in Minas; after Neves's PP had merged with the PMDB, the party replaced Franco with Neves as its 1982 gubernatorial candidate.¹¹¹ Similarly, some of the greatest opposition came from Sarney's own state. The Maranhão presidents of the PMDB, PDT, and PT lambasted him as "a delegate of the 1964 coup" who had used his posts to promote "oligarchical nepotism" and "the greatest administrative corruption in the history of Maranhão."¹¹² To complicate matters, the other opposition parties had little to gain from a PMDB-FL deal. The PDT argued, "The people did not go to the streets to ask for a president who would remain for four or six years. . . . Only the lust for power . . . would lead the opposition to the imprudent idea of believing it had a right to a full term through this mechanism that was built with the goal of keeping the people from making decisions."¹¹³ The PT was also intransigent. To those who argued that it was possible to participate in the electoral college while working toward direct elections, Francisco Weffort scoffed, "There is no way to reconcile the irreconcilable. It's like trying to suck on sugarcane and whistle at the same time."¹¹⁴ Or as PT vice president Jacob Bittar put it, "The people want to vote, and the PT prefers to err with the people than make a deal against them through backroom conclaves."¹¹⁵

If the number of oppositionists who refused to support the PMDB candidates counterbalanced the number of pedessistas who defected, the PDS could still win the election. PMDB leadership thus rebuffed accusations that they had abandoned their principles. In mid-July, as rumors of an accord between the PMDB and the FL grew, Guimarães, once the most forceful advocate for *diretas já*, insisted (with evident discomfort), "We are going to use the snake's venom to fight the snake. Use the tools of the System itself to enter the enemy fortress and defeat it"—a mishmash of metaphors that ignored the fact that snakes are immune to their own venom.¹¹⁶ As for Sarney, what could be done? "It was necessary to remind experienced comrades that politics is reality. . . . 'Mathematically speaking, we can't elect Tancredo without the Frente Liberal's votes. . . . Or do you think we should let Maluf be elected?'"¹¹⁷

Meanwhile the PDS held its convention. It was eerily similar to the 1978 paulista ARENA convention, where Natel had basked in the generals' support while Maluf courted the delegates. This time the person filling Natel's role was Andreazza, who, despite his limited appetite for campaigning, could count on Figueiredo's (rumored) endorsement. As late as the day the convention began, the outcome remained in doubt; a rumored SNI forecast even gave Andreazza a razor-thin advantage.¹¹⁸ Also just as in 1978, "malufettes" (attractive young women hired to chant Maluf's praises before the overwhelmingly male delegates) appeared, though they had to compete for space with the *andreazzettes*, women of all ages who looked suspiciously like employees of the Ministry of Transportation.¹¹⁹ Maluf

spent the first day circulating among the delegates, hugging them and greeting them by name; when Andreazza briefly appeared, Maluf enveloped him in a hug as though Andreazza were his guest. Maluf correctly recognized that only a fraction of the delegates would be power brokers at the state or national level. If he bypassed state bosses and took his case directly to what Cardoso reportedly referred to as the "lumpen-bourgeoisie," he would win.¹²⁰ It was almost democratic. And it worked. Maluf won by a count of 493–350. Just as in 1978, when he dedicated his victory over Natel to Geisel, this time he credited his win to Figueiredo, gushing, "The political class has emerged victorious. It can take pride in having chosen the future President. Without pressure or backroom deals." "The PDS is the only party that gave this example," he continued, in a biting but reasonably accurate comparison of his campaign to that of Neves and Sarney.¹²¹

One day later, the PMDB held its convention. Since Neves and Sarney had no competitors, the only question was how many delegates would refuse to vote for Sarney. After the ballots for both offices were counted, Sarney had 113 fewer votes than Neves; about a sixth of the delegates were still unwilling to accept him.¹²² In his victory speech, Neves did his best to balance faithfulness to his party's platform with the need to reassure the military. While he called for a new constitution, the renegotiation of Brazil's foreign debt, and land reform, he also praised the military for "sustaining our free institutions, projecting our national pride, and [serving as] an instrument for the consolidation of our democracy."¹²³ Meanwhile, the delegates taunted Maluf, chanting, "Salim, Salim, Salim, your joy is at an end!"¹²⁴

The best chance the PDS always had was to find a consensus candidate, and Maluf was anything but. Although Andreazza announced that he would support Maluf in the electoral college, he added that his support was "merely personal" and that he would not campaign for the PDS nominee.¹²⁵ To drive the emptiness of that endorsement home, Andreazza's vice presidential candidate announced that he would support Neves.¹²⁶ Meanwhile, Figueiredo warned his cabinet that he would dismiss them if they refused to support Maluf.¹²⁷ But the very day he endorsed Maluf, Figueiredo met with PDS governors and told them that they should only decide whether to support Maluf after consulting their constituents.¹²⁸ One can nearly feel sympathy for Figueiredo's quandary. As he allegedly put it to two cabinet ministers in a private meeting before the convention, "We should not support Andreazza because he's from the military, and we shouldn't support Maluf because he's a thief."¹²⁹ Party leadership was similarly disinclined. Nelson Marchezan, leader of the PDS in the Câmara, told Figueiredo, "I will only vote for that son of a bitch . . . if it comes down to my vote, and only out of solidarity with you!"¹³⁰ It was clear that Andreazza, Figueiredo, and party leadership would do the bare minimum—or nothing at all—to help Maluf. Even before the convention, it seemed likely that enough regime allies had defected to the FL to decide the election. Over the coming months it became a certainty, as a stream of pedessistas announced their support for Neves.

Only one possible barrier remained to Neves's election, but it was formidable: the military. Since the decree of AI-2 in 1965, every time the political class challenged their "Revolution," the generals had resorted to extralegal measures or electoral manipulations. Might the military step in again? Most of the military was not enamored with Maluf, but they were also enraged at the betrayal of their civilian allies. Some also feared that the opposition might punish them if it came to power; hadn't Argentina's civilian government recently put generals—including former presidents—on trial? Might Neves attempt this? These generals and officers thus attempted to stoke mistrust of Neves. On more than one occasion, "students" caught spray painting communist slogans or wielding communist banners at rallies turned out to be undercover members of the military.¹³¹ Could another coup be on the agenda?

Perhaps. On August 24, Army Minister Walter Pires released a statement lamenting the existence of "those who abandoned their commitment to a past so present that it appears recent . . . as though it were ethical to forget, to satisfy personal interests, attitudes and positions freely adopted." "The Army will be vigilant and will not fail the nation," he warned.¹³² Less than two weeks later, Air Force Minister Délio Jardim de Matos railed, "History does not speak kindly of cowards, and even less so of traitors. It is necessary to distinguish between the moral courage of those who change their points of view and the audacity of those who seek only to preserve their own interests."¹³³ Then, on September 21, for the first time since 1969, the high commands of all three military branches met to discuss politics. Afterward, the army and air force released statements bemoaning "the increasing and worrisome radicalization" and "the campaign to discredit civil and military authorities." They warned of "the risks that radicalization can represent for the stability of the succession."¹³⁴ There was indeed legitimate cause for alarm. In a September 19 emergency meeting that included Figueiredo, the ministers of the army, navy, and air force, the military chief of staff, the head of the SNI, and the chief of the joint military staff, one of the attendees stated, "If anything goes wrong, we can turn the tables."¹³⁵ As the *Folha* put it, "Something is in the air, . . . but no one knows what it is."¹³⁶

But every time a threat appeared, something else happened to reassure politicians that a coup was unlikely. As Senator Afonso Camargo noted, "In every [military] statement, there was something positive we could take advantage of. And we did."¹³⁷ After the meeting of the military high commands, the aggressive statements of the army and the air force were counterbalanced by the navy: "The Navy . . . reaffirm[s] before public opinion its position of faithfully fulfilling its constitutional duties, . . . maintaining itself, as always, removed from political-party activities."¹³⁸ Without the support of the navy, it was doubtful that the army or air force would act. Internal discussions reflected this. A report of the general secretariat of the CSN, likely from late July or early August, stated, "The Armed Forces have disengaged themselves from politics."¹³⁹ And although politicians

could not have known it, Figueiredo was privately proclaiming his openness to an opposition victory. As early as the eve of the rejection of the Dante de Oliveira amendment in April, he had confided to a PDS politician, “Tancredo Neves is a trustworthy name for national conciliation. He is moderate and acceptable.”¹⁴⁰ The president is reported to have responded to the private suggestion that the military might turn the tables, “You’ll have to overthrow me or kill me to turn those tables.”¹⁴¹

To be on the safe side, Neves continued to meet with top military brass. Between August and December, he met with all three military ministers—with Pires of the army thrice and with de Matos of the air force and Alfredo Karam of the navy once each—and assured them that his government would have no hint of *revanchismo*, or revenge. He hinted to de Matos that he would not pry too deeply into possible corruption by one of Figueiredo’s sons and assured Pires and Karam that he would listen to them as he chose their successors.¹⁴² So blatant were Neves’s attempts to reassure the military that Maluf would later claim, “Tancredo baptized me as the military regime’s candidate, when he was actually [their] candidate.”¹⁴³ At any rate, by November it was clear that the military would not step in to save what remained of its “Revolution.” When the Supreme Electoral Court twice ruled against Maluf when he attempted to invoke party fidelity requirements to force the PDS to vote for him, there was no doubt about the outcome: Neves would become president. The military regime was over.¹⁴⁴

On January 15, 1985, the electoral college met for Brazil’s last indirect election. Before the vote, Maluf gave a speech. At first glance, it was largely self-promotion. The man who had resisted direct elections every step of the way now took credit for Brazil’s democratization: “My candidacy guaranteed the political process. Civilian. Free. Democratic. . . . The firmness of my decision [to participate in the election] made possible and sustained the candidacy of my illustrious opponent.” But it would be a mistake to see this speech as simple self-flattery. For much of Maluf’s speech focused not on his own role in Brazil’s democratization but rather on the problems the next president would face. The solutions he identified were a testament to how far the political class had come. He called for a constitutional assembly to write a replacement for the military’s 1969 document. He advocated raising taxes on the rich and lowering them for the middle and working classes, using “fiscal justice to end unjust and excessive income inequality.” He suggested a significant increase to the minimum wage. “I became a brother to the dreams of the emergent classes, to build the foundation of the just and modern society we wish for.”¹⁴⁵ When even the politicians who remained faithful to the regime to the bitter end accepted, even if only discursively, that Brazil belonged to all Brazilians, not simply the elite, it showed how much the political class had changed under the military regime.

The time came for the final roll call vote. One by one, senators, deputies, and representatives of the state legislatures voted. Although the written record did not

transcribe their statements, the audio recording reveals that many politicians did not simply vote but also sought to justify their vote. “For changes to the economic model and the tax model, Tancredo Neves.” “Out of respect for the institutions of our political parties, I vote for Paulo Salim Maluf.” “In the name of Rubens Paiva and all those the dictatorship killed or disappeared, Tancredo Neves.”¹⁴⁶ Fittingly, the deciding vote that toppled the regime was cast by PMDB deputy João Cunha, probably the most fearless politician of all in his uncompromising opposition, who hailed from São Paulo, the state that led the resistance to the regime. Cunha’s unrehearsed words captured perfectly the significance of that day: “Twenty-one years ago I thought that the dream of [becoming] a great nation had ended. God has granted me the honor to today, with my vote, strike the final blow against the fascist, sell-out dictatorship that made my Pátria unhappy. I vote for Tancredo Neves and for victory!”¹⁴⁷ The military regime had begun in the Chamber of Deputies on April 1, 1964, when Congress declared the presidency vacant in the wake of the coup. It was fitting that it ended in the same room.

MEDIA FILE 11. João Cunha electoral college vote, January 15, 1985.

SOURCE: Câmara dos Deputados, COAUD, Arquivo Sonoro, <http://imagem.camara.gov.br/internet/audio/default.asp>.



CONCLUSIONS

The military regime finally came to an ignominious end in the wake of the two things the officers of 1964 most loathed: popular mobilization and self-serving politicking. With *Diretas Já* defeated, the military could have kept a vestige of its project under Maluf. Yet it was their disgust with Maluf, the unprincipled, self-interested type of politician they had spent two decades relying on while unsuccessfully seeking to reform, that led the Armed Forces to accept Neves. As Andreazza confided to a friend, “The ones who made the Revolution of 1964 were us, the colonels, Figueiredo and me. We took to the streets, and we exposed ourselves to [possible] defeat. . . . Now, it’s all being thrown away. It was all for nothing. Corruption is running rampant, and it will only get much worse.”¹⁴⁸ Like Emperor Pedro II and Getúlio Vargas before them, and like the PT governments (2003–2016) after them, the generals’ national project was stymied first and foremost by the political class.

In many respects, the political class that toppled the regime in 1985 was the same as that of 1964: self-interested, rich white men motivated by the desire to keep their privileges, more comfortable making backroom deals than coexisting with popular mobilization. The eagerness of the PMDB to embrace a negotiated

solution after Diretas Já failed is illustrative. Similarly, the PDS dissidents betrayed the regime not out of principles—for they had few to begin with—but rather because they refused to go down with a sinking ship. And the aristocratic, conciliatory Neves was closer to the values of the political class than the brash Maluf, who bypassed the national political elite and took his case directly to his party’s rank and file, the *baixo clero* (lit., “low clergy”) of the political class. Maluf’s efforts to cultivate about 1,000 convention delegates and 670 or so electoral college members were too crass, too democratic, for PDS politicians to stomach.¹⁴⁹ PDS dissidents’ support for Neves was significant for many reasons, but it did not signify an awakening democratic consciousness. But this is only half the story. In the face of a mobilized civil society that expanded their conceptions of democracy, they realized they could no longer rule Brazil alone, and over the coming three decades they would be forced to accept a greatly expanded political role for the popular classes. Unlike the generals, politicians were beholden to an electorate whose desires they could not entirely ignore. Yes, they were always self-interested and often corrupt. But since the regime ended, they have been responsive to popular demands like never before.

The year 1984 offered a clear contrast to 1964, when a faction of conservative officers infatuated with modernization, national security ideology, and morality had inaugurated an audacious authoritarian project that would attempt to demobilize the Left, engineer lasting economic development, and impose military tutelage on politicians and the nation. Although the first decade of military rule had witnessed resounding success on all three fronts, by the end of the second decade, the project lay in tatters. The Left, after the failure of its armed struggle, had come to embrace the sole channel of resistance that the regime was unwilling to close—parties and elections—creating a generation of student leaders, guerrillas, and returning exiles who were becoming a force in electoral politics. On the economic front, the Brazilian “miracle” had shattered under blows from rising oil prices, foreign debt, and inflation. Even amid these failures, the regime might have endured if its leaders had been able to convince the political class of the wisdom of a tutelage that impinged on their honor and privileges. Like Vargas before them, the generals who led the regime dreamed of reshaping the political class to fit their vision for Brazil. In their attempts to accomplish this, they employed both sticks (the usurpation of the political class’s presumed prerogatives) and carrots (the promise to return some of what had been taken). Yet the failure of politicians to accept their permanent subordination meant that the military’s political project remained fundamentally unstable. Politicians were transformed under military rule but not in the way the military had hoped. And even as they became more willing to accept a more participatory democracy, they preserved the group consciousness that had inspired much of their resistance all along.

Whether intentional or inadvertent, the resistance of politicians took many forms: the principled stance of the *autênticos*, the ambition-driven electioneer-

ing of Quércia and Maluf, or the stubborn refusal of untold thousands of others to give up their plotting and bickering as they waited for the storm to pass. In so doing, they made the storm pass. The dilemma only gradually became clear to the military, steeped in 150 years of Brazilian liberalism. From the outset they had been unwilling to do away with legislatures or elections. Yet by maintaining these institutions, by admitting that they needed the political class, the military laid the groundwork for its “Revolution’s” undoing. By the time they realized what was happening, it was too late.

. . .

On January 15, 1985, moments after the electoral college chose him as Brazil’s first civilian president since 1964 and brought the regime to a close, Neves gave a speech:

It was not easy to get here. Not even the anticipation of the certainty of victory these last months erases the scars and sacrifices of the history of struggle that now comes to a close. . . . There were many moments of discouragement and tiredness, when we asked ourselves if it was worth it to fight. But every time this temptation assailed us, the moving sight of the people resisting and hoping re-created within us all the energy that we thought lost, and we began anew, the next day, as if nothing had been lost. . . .

Never in our history have we had so many people in the streets demanding the recovery of the rights of citizenship and demonstrating their support for a candidate. . . . We will not disperse. We will continue gathered, like in the public plazas, with the same emotion, the same dignity, and the same resolve.

Nearly two hundred years ago, Tiradentes, that hero driven crazy by hope, told us, “If we all want to, we can make this country into a great nation.”

Let’s do it.¹⁵⁰

MEDIA FILE 12. Clip of Tancredo Neves speech before the electoral college, January 15, 1985.

SOURCE: Câmara dos Deputados, COAUD, Arquivo Sonoro, <http://imagem.camara.gov.br/internet/audio/default.asp>.

