

Report from Rio by Geraldo Lino

Collor looks for escape hatch

The church, the army, and the people marching in the street all want Collor out, but what about the establishment?

Although Brazilian President Fernando Collor de Mello has lost his mandate to govern because of the bribery and corruption scandal against him, he has given no sign that he will voluntarily give up his office anytime soon. Indeed, Collor appears to be betting that a combination of bribes, legal flim-flam, and parliamentary cretinism will save his job, notwithstanding his lack of support among Brazil's elites, the military, the Catholic Church, and the 75% of the people who have told pollsters that they want him out, and who are marching in the streets by the millions demanding his removal.

The *Washington Post* is one Anglo-American establishment mouthpiece that believes Collor may have a chance to pull it off. "The laws governing the impeachment process are ill-defined, so he may be able to win time with legal maneuvers," the *Post* said in a Sept. 8 article. Collor can also allocate federal funds to get politicians on his side. The article added that according to a recent poll, most Brazilians "do not trust the Congress that is to decide Collor's fate."

Whether that will be enough to stanch the damaging effect of the flood of daily revelations about official corruption, remains to be seen. The latest was a 10-page spread in the Sept. 9 issue of the newsweekly *Veja*, dedicated to the gardens installed in Collor's private residence in Brazilia. Built with \$2.5 million from the funds handled by Collor's campaign treasurer, businessman Paulo César Farias, Collor's "Babylonian gardens" include eight

artificial waterfalls. Insultingly referring to Collor as a "sybarite," *Veja* noted that the President started building his "private Disneyland" at a time when most Brazilians were being forced to live in reduced circumstances because their savings were confiscated by the fiscal measures decreed by Collor at the beginning of his term. But Farias and others in the presidential inner circle knew to take out their money in advance of the measures.

Because of the President's growing unpopularity, the military, in particular, feared that there would be uncontrollable protest demonstrations during the official Sept. 7 Independence Day celebrations, even by members of Brazil's Armed Forces. There were even published reports that a group of officers would refuse to salute Collor during the military parade. To avoid incidents, a number of changes were made. Instead of an open car, the President arrived by helicopter, and the traditional review of the troops was canceled.

Despite the precautions, Collor was booed by the public, many of whom were dressed in black as a sign of protest. Later, Collor's reception for the diplomatic corp was marred by a noisy bunch of demonstrators outside the Foreign Ministry.

Disruption and ridicule aside, Collor's strategy is to use every political and legal trick at his disposal to remain in office until the end of his term. His first line of defense is to avoid the opening of a formal impeachment process, for which he

needs the support of one-third of the lower house of Brazil's Congress. Also, according to the Sept. 7 issue of the weekly *Relatorio Reservado*, Collor is attempting to open channels to negotiate what he considers an "honorable withdrawal," an arrangement by which he would remain as head of state, anticipating that a parliamentary regime will be adopted in the plebiscite scheduled for 1993.

On the other hand, the ranks of those seeking a rapid resolution to the crisis are also growing, particularly among the military. The Sept. 5 *O Estado de São Paulo* reported that a group of reserve officers that includes former Minister of the Army Gen. Leonidas Pires Gonçalves, and the chairman of the influential Military Club, Newton Cerqueria, has declared itself in favor of strong measures to force Collor's resignation. Collor's erstwhile backer, Lincoln Pereira da Cunha, head of São Paulo's Federation of Commercial Associations, said that "an anxious nation awaits a bold act by the President," according to the Sept. 4 *Folha de São Paulo*. Until now, the commercial associations were among Collor's strongest supporters and an important channel of influence for the Anglo-Americans' "Project Democracy" in Brazil.

Perhaps even more serious, is that Collor may be losing what the Chinese call the "mandate of heaven." Among the many anti-Collor demonstrations on Independence Day, one of the most significant was the one staged in the town of Aparecida, where thousands marched in front of the basilica housing the revered and reputedly miraculous statue of the black Virgin Mary known as Our Lady of Aparecida, Brazil's patron saint. The marchers were responding to a call by the National Bishops Conference for Brazilians to pray for an end to corruption and the country's "moral crisis."