

# All about control: political aperture and State project concealing crimes against humanity

Pilar de Arezzo Blanco Pereira<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of History (IHT), Fluminense Federal University (UFF), Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. email address: [pilararezzo@gmail.com](mailto:pilararezzo@gmail.com) / [pilararezzo@id.uff.br](mailto:pilararezzo@id.uff.br)

**Abstract.** This article is based on documentary research inside the digital archives of CPDOC from the Getúlio Vargas Faculty (FGV), concerning the Brazilian military dictatorship and Geisel's governance (1974-1979) procedure upon denounces of violations of human rights. In 1975 those complaints reached international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the Organization Of American States (OAS) through a dossier gathered by International Amnesty. The methods used were Marc Bloch's critical method, a document does not speak unless is questioned, also the work of a historian is to comprehend through an analysis. Some other articles and books were used to corroborate my arguments as well as to explain the context of the period. The material gathered as well as the documentary work helped to show that the choice of a diplomatic exit was part of a State project to undercover those crimes and to control the aperture of the regime with an iron fist.

**Keywords.** Human rights, dictatorship, Brazil, diplomacy, aperture.

## 1. Introduction

This theme was first introduced in the class "Brasil 3", the idea was to search and work on a document from an online archive regarding the Brazilian military dictatorship. Talking about the military regime in my country is still taboo, our fellow neighbors from Argentina, Chile, and many other countries in Latin America seemed to have clarified and worked better with that traumatic past. Since the beginning of the UNIGOU program and my contact with the memory studies field especially the works on memory and the Second World War, the authoritarianism in Europe, I have realized that such themes as the human rights should be more worked on by historians as well.

The first part of my article is related to describing the document number 341 from the Ministry of Exterior relationship entitled "information to mister president of the republic" (Informação para o Senhor Presidente da República), as well as other documents and its archive where all of them can be found. Since they are all in Portuguese all that is cited is going to be translated by me. Therefore, they will be analyzed using a methodology linked with a bibliography search, from books to articles of importance for the

subject of history but also the subject of international relations.

The background of the military regime will also be presented as well as an approach to the international organizations (UN, OAS, and international amnesty) and the works they have done regarding Human rights and human rights defense.

The present work analyzes document number 341 from the Ministry of Exterior relationship entitled "information to mister president of the republic" (Informação para o senhor presidente da República) dated December 22nd of 1975. However, the document is not alone, it is placed in the archive "Antônio Azeredo da Silveira" along with notices, reports, correspondences, and among others that will sometimes be cited. An example is "Relatory from the Working Group of Human Rights to Mister Minister of State" (Relatório do Grupo de Trabalho sobre Direitos Humanos para o Senhor Ministro de Estado) (MRE,1975, P.145-149), that served as an appendix of the informative above mentioned. Produced between 1974 e 1979, period that Silveira worked as Minister of State of Exterior Relations, all the manuscripts have a convergence point, the preoccupation with national security.

## 2. Methodology

For the methodology, since there has been a work with documents, I have chosen to use Marc Bloch's critical method presented in the posthumous book "Apologia da História, ou, O ofício do historiador". As pointed out by him, documents don't "speak" unless they are questioned, most of these questions are based on a common-sense questionnaire. What happened when people were exiled? Did they stay quiet about the tortures and imprisonments? Those were my first questions, and just to give a little spoiler, the exiled spoke and from that other questions came, the most important ones were: How was the human rights issue treated by the international organizations that defend it? What was the military response to those allegations from exiled people?

Another point underlined by Bloch is that the work of a historian is to comprehend, and for that is necessary a choice but also an analysis. I have also used two other authors, Achille Mbembe, his article "Necropolitics" and his approach upon sovereignty; also João Roriz's article entitled "Os donos do silêncio: a política externa do regime militar brasileiro e a comissão de direitos humanos das nações unidas.", where he analyses some of the documents I have worked with but also brings an interesting look from an international relations perspective.

## 3. Context of the Brazilian military dictatorship

From 1964 to 1988 (the year of implementation of a new constitution) a military dictatorship happened in Brazil where after the 1967 constitution and its AI's, "Atos Institucionais"- mandates with the power of constitution- made the cancellation of political rights legal. As well as the violence of State, creating several centers of torture. Citizens were imprisoned, tortured, and exiled, first due to their political affiliation but after a while, all opposition was considered a threat to the harmony of the regime.

As well known, the elections remained with political bipartisanship, but, as well known the opposition party (MDB) was weaker, and only by the end of the '70s could they create a bigger resistance front against ARENA (the party that collaborated with State)[1]. So there was an air of democracy, of a democratic system that the military front wanted to maintain and perpetrate. There were five presidents, first, Castello Branco (1964-1967) followed by Costa e Silva(1967-1969)- the 5th AI, the most famous one that suspended political and civil rights, as an example, it ended with the guarantee of *habeas corpus*[2], was created during Costa e Silva governorship. The next was Médici (1969-1974) then Ernesto Geisel (1974-1979), and the last one

was Figueiredo (1979-1985). The first three governments are considered the most repressive ones, especially Médici's, since our time reference is 1974/75 due to the date of the documents, we will have a special look into Geisel's Government. But just to make clear even with different intensities the violence was something present in every presidential term.

Geisel wanted to propose a "distensão", an aperture of the regime, in a "slow, gradual and safe" way straight to a "relative democracy". There is one more point that should be marked, regarding the procedure from both international organizations (OAS and UN), even though they have a long history of defending human rights, especially the United Nations after the trauma that the Second World War brought to Europe, was only after the pressure of the exiled from Brazil and also the horror that it was uncovered from several other dictatorships from Latin America, such as Argentinian and Chilean, that those organizations actually took action. Unfortunately, due to my own limits and the limits of pages for this paper, this point cannot be fully treated.

## 4. Description of the documents

### 4.1 Main document or "Informação para o Senhor Presidente da República"

Produced by the Interministerial Working Group about Human Rights (Grupo de Trabalho Interministerial Sobre Direitos Humanos) convened by the Ministry of exterior relations and composed by the Ministry of Justice, the National security Council (CSN, as in Portuguese), and the National Information Service (SNI, as in Portuguese), the document number 341 presents three pages and its main goal is to propose an action measure for the president regarding the denounces of violation to the human rights received by the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of the American States (OAS). All gather in a dossier, the denunciations made by internal civilians but also by exiled people from the dictatorial period pointed out crimes against humanity focusing on three big areas: "(...) a) Genocide or inhuman treatment of indigenous people; b) social injustice and inequality in the distribution of national income; c) repression, torture or elimination of political opponents." (MRE, 1975, Pg.146), being the last of the complaints, the one that we are sticking to.

The accusations are dated from 1968 until 1972, year that the same was delivered by the International Amnesty, a Non- Governmental Organization founded in 1961 in the United Kingdom, to the already mentioned organizations and others[3].

There is a first movement from the government trying to create a dialogue, especially with the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), because the country was already part of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, an autonomous organ of the OAS [4]. Therefore, the means chosen were the diplomatic ones with a clear purpose to postpone the analyses of the dossier, a goal that was achieved in the UNCHR session of march 1975, the tactics used so the postpone really happens are not fully clarified. However, the preoccupation remained, since a new session would be made upon the answer from Brazil to the allegations. In the 7th item, it was decided that the response should have a "(...)generic tone, not trying to refute each case, (...)” and also made clear that the Brazilian Government respects and defends human rights on its soil. Besides, it was necessary to continue emphasizing a dialogue with the commission and show interest in becoming a member of it.” (MRE, 1975. Pg.143).

In other words, we can see a sort of procedure that is created with no intention of denying such crimes but also not confirming them, since the informative it self made clear that the message to the committee should not give a glimpse of necessity of defense (this choice, I assume, it was based on the assumption that defense is only necessary when there is a crime);

#### **4.2 “Prezado ministro Silveira”**

Anyway, those measures were approved by President Geisel on December 29th of 1975, as informed by a brief note attached to the archive entitled “Prezado Ministro Silveira”, which only has one page. (MRE, 1975. [*prezado ministro Silveira*], Pg.141).

#### **4.3 Appendix or “Relatório Grupo de Trabalho sobre Direitos Humanos para o Senhor Ministro de Estado”**

Regarding the appendix, it gives a deeper look at the members of the working group, as well as the information that is summarized in the main document. With five pages is the longest of the documents that are going to be cited here, it has a huge range of themes but we are going to focus on the 9th item, since it underlines a prediction made by the Working Group that, regarding the human rights issue, OAS and the UN would try to extend their power over nations. And, as a consequence, it would reduce the space for management, something that was considered a national responsibility.

### **5. Analysis**

Now, heading to the analysis, the point that is constantly reassured in the documents involves the image created internationally about Brazil. All the decisions taken, the diplomatic exit, integrating the

committees, involved the construction of Brazil as a country open to dialogue.

Another highlight from the documents goes to a certain indetermination of the existence or not of human rights violations. It can be explained by the international image of the country, as said before, but also, by the project of the regime aperture as proposed by the Geisel Govern (1974-1979). This “change” in the regime is worked by Marcos Napolitano in his book “1964: *História do Regime Militar*”(2014). Napolitano points out that those measures were a way to institutionalize much more the dictatorship, even though, it was only in 1977 that the aperture started, a few policies were implemented. And by institutionalize he meant to “(...) inscript itself in a clear strategy to reassure the authority of the State and, as a consequence, equip the regime and government with tools to conduct the transition to civilian government with an iron fist.” (Pg. 207). This means that, although some concessions were done, any transformation should have passed the general’s office.

As the documents show, there had been another preoccupation with the same problematic of control of the regime, it was the fear of losing the sovereignty in State administration. Sovereignty will be treated in terms presented by Achille Mbembe in his article, “*Necropolítica*”(2016)- “Necropolitics” as the English version published in 2003- where sovereignty is not only related to the geographic limits of a nation but by the power of decision upon who lives and who dies. Here we can see the concept of “biopoder” (biopower) from Michel Foucault, where “who lives and who dies” is not just related to a direct violence but marks that even smaller choices can cause an impact over the population.

In the 9th item from the appendix (MRE, 1975. Pg.147.), it was predicted that slowly the UN but also OAS would intend to extend their powers among the decisions that, for the militaries, it was concerned the Brazilian State to take. In “*Os donos do silencio:...*”(2021), João Roriz underlines that when forwarding a response, the Brazilian diplomacy believed to show an action of a “sovereign will”, that there was a choice and the same was taken not by the pressure of any organization but by a free will.

Thinking about the last of the measures proposed by the Working Group, concerned with taking part as a member of the committees of human rights, from both organizations. Roriz, in his article, confirms that those goals were achieved, it also highlights that the reasons for such an approach were linked to control any reaction from the inside of organizations to an eventuality of new denunciations.

### **6. Conclusion**

Therefore, the documentation elucidates about the movements of the Government to keep at all costs, a

good image of the country. Since participating in commission pro-human rights until creating a protocol in case there were new accusations. It can be explained by the context of the period as a form of perpetration of the sovereignty among choices inside the national territory, thereby keeping control of the political aperture of the regime. Those papers as well as many other documents from that time are considered sensible ones because they are marked by State concealing, and even being short can bring tones of problematics, such as the genocide of indigenous people and national income distribution, for an example. The document also makes us reflect on the importance of the constant defense of human rights so that crimes like this never happen again.

## 7. References.

- [1] Memorial da democracia. *MDB é criado para ser frágil oposição*. Fundação Perseu Abramo. Instituto Lula. <http://memorialdademocracia.com.br/card/md-b-e-criado-para-ser-uma-fragil-oposicao>
- [2] Atos Institucionais. Portal da Legislação. Portal do Governo Brasileiro. Conteúdo extraído do Portal da Legislação da Presidência da República em 10/03/2022, de caráter meramente informativo, não oficial. <http://www4.planalto.gov.br/legislacao/portal-legis/legislacao-historica/atos-institucionais>
- [3] Amnesty International. 1972. *Report on Allegations of Torture in Brazil* Palo Alto: Amnesty International. P. 01-08. <https://library.brown.edu/create/wecannotremainsilent/wp-content/uploads/sites/43/2012/11/amnestyreport.pdf>.
- [4] MRE. Ministério das Relações Exteriores. 1975. [*Informação para o Senhor Presidente da República*]. Destinatário: [Presidente da República, Ernesto Geisel]. [S. l.], 2 dez. 1975. CPDOC-FGV, Arquivo Antônio Azeredo da Silveira. Código: AAS mre ag 1974.03.25. P. 142-144. [https://www.docvirt.com/docreader.net/DocReader.aspx?bib=AAS\\_MRE&pagfis=50947](https://www.docvirt.com/docreader.net/DocReader.aspx?bib=AAS_MRE&pagfis=50947).
- [5] MRE. Ministério das Relações Exteriores. 1975. [*prezado ministro Silveira*]. Destinatário: [Ministro de Estado das Relações Exteriores]. [S. l.], 29 dez. 1975. CPDOC-FGV, Arquivo Antônio Azeredo da Silveira. Código: AAS mre ag 1974.03.25. P.141. [https://www.docvirt.com/docreader.net/DocReader.aspx?bib=AAS\\_MRE&pagfis=50947](https://www.docvirt.com/docreader.net/DocReader.aspx?bib=AAS_MRE&pagfis=50947).
- [6] MRE. Ministério das Relações Exteriores. 1975. [*Relatório do Grupo de Trabalho sobre os Direitos Humanos para o senhor Ministro de Estado*]. Destinatário: [Ministro de Estado das Relações Exteriores]. [S. l.], 1975. CPDOC-FGV, Arquivo Antônio Azeredo da Silveira. Código: AAS mre ag 1974.03.25. P.145-149. [https://www.docvirt.com/docreader.net/DocReader.aspx?bib=AAS\\_MRE&pagfis=50947](https://www.docvirt.com/docreader.net/DocReader.aspx?bib=AAS_MRE&pagfis=50947).
- [7] Mbembe A. Necropolítica. *Arte & Ensaios*, revista do ppgav/eba/ufrrj. n. 32, dezembro 2016. [https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/5290520/mod\\_resource/content/1/necropolitica.pdf](https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/5290520/mod_resource/content/1/necropolitica.pdf).
- [8] Napolitano M. “A democracia relativa”: os anos Geisel. In: 1964 : História do Regime Militar Brasileiro. São Paulo : Contexto, 2014. P. 206-228.
- [9] Roriz J. Os donos do silêncio: a política externa do regime militar brasileiro e a comissão de direitos humanos das nações unidas. *Lua Nova: Revista de Cultura e Política* (113). Maio-Agosto. 2021. <https://www.scielo.br/j/ln/a/v9wN6Ndt8RvF8kTyCkf7KxH/#>.