

The Crisis in the Relationship between Voters and Politicians

FERNANDO GABEIRA (INTERVIEW)

IN SUMMARY, these are statements made in Brasilia by Federal Deputy Fernando Gabeira in an interview given to journalist Marco Antônio Coelho in the middle of August.

He believes that now is the time for deep modifications to Parliament, considering the great demand by Brazilians at the present time for the establishment of a new relationship between voters and politicians.

For the Green Party (PV – Partido Verde) deputy, this is a central question to be examined in next year's elections and that could mark the beginning of a second step in the process of the democratization of Brazil.

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ESTUDOS AVANÇADOS - How do you analyze the crisis in Congress, in the Federal Senate and in the Chamber of Deputies?

Fernando Gabeira – The crisis isn't new, but today its characteristics are more dramatic as a result of the country's own development. It has advanced greatly in science and socially. Through this one area, the computer revolution, we have progressed in the demand for transparency and in technology. For the first time, therefore, we have a great demand for transparency and the technological means to implement it. To a certain extent the Brazilian Congress has addressed this demand; however, it was not prepared to work with it. When there have been windows into the inner workings of Congress, the defects of Brazilian society have surfaced, principally of politicians. The first is the tradition of waste of public resources by politicians; the second is the allocation of positions to maintain themselves in the government.

This new situation contains another aggravating element: the Congress, above all the Federal Senate, is dominated by politicians from the least advanced regions of Brazil. Today we have a president who is from Maranhão, one of the poorest states in Brazil, and a leader of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB) who is from Alagoas. These are the two most important government leaders of the Congressional governing base. They have as their experience the regional media, which is dominated by the Brazilian "colonels."

Therefore they are unprepared for the situation of transparency through advanced technological means. The result is increasingly greater aggravation due to the crisis and the great isolation of Congress in relation to public opinion.

This crisis is simply a time in which we see these deficiencies, and that there are other very serious matters. For example, the lack of Congressional independence. This happens because the great crush of deputies and senators that come to Parliament know that their political career depends on a good relationship with the government which, in turn, systematically uses that power to influence them. Thus the government authorizes payment of parliamentary amendments (which means works in the regions of those representatives), in exchange for votes in Congress. In the same way the government concedes a piece of the machine in the various regions to these politicians. They benefit from providing favors for the realization of local works as much as from filling positions that will facilitate their reelection.

Thus a delicate balance was established. In the first place, because the deputies of the opposition have access to these favors that should be allocated in a republican form. In other words, everyone should be considered from the standpoint of the Union Budget. In the second place, owing to this situation of the government holding an absolute majority in Congress, what takes place there is of no importance. In only one case, the CPMF (Provisional Contribution to the Financial Market), was the government defeated in an important question.

We can go more deeply by asking whether deputies and senators have an intrinsic tendency to corruption and cowardice, or if they reflect a national condition. I think that they do not have this tendency inherently. What exists are conjunctions that strengthen this tendency. At the present time the most important political data in Brazil says that a great part of the voters from among the election base their vote on the concrete benefits for their region and also for themselves.

The deputies who do not work in terms of this system of benefits in exchange for a vote in Congress are a minority. Today, in the major urban centers, deputies who follow public opinion numerically are rapidly diminishing. At the same time the stream of public opinion that elects them is increasingly lessened and, at times, they are chosen only on the basis of a name

As a result of democracy we are seeing a permanent process of behavioral change in the configuration of Congress itself. This brings newness but it also results in problems. A large number of deputies come from radio programs and in a general way play on themes of urban insecurity and violence as a means of consolidating their election. We also have an impressive number of unionists, from leaders of the urban periphery, who are welcome, but many of them envision this arrival to Congress as a form of social elevation and use their presence as a means of material ascent because they are afraid of returning to their previous condition.

ESTUDOS AVANÇADOS – Recently the influence of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Iurd) was denounced.

Fernando Gabeira – The problem of the Evangelical Church is a new

factor. In truth it follows entirely from the process of growth in Brazil, which has brought many rural people to the major cities, primarily to the poorest peripheries and communities. They feel insecure in this new world that they have come to inhabit, since they no longer have the references that they had in their original places. The evangelical churches have come to mean a safe harbor, also serving to retain them. In the relationship that the Church establishes with these faithful, they also propose specific candidates who are, theoretically, friends of God. The pastors present themselves as intermediaries of God.

There was a time when we could reduce this type of pulpit. It was during the activities of the Parliamentary Commission for Ambulance Inquiries, popularly known as the Parliamentary Commission for Inquiry (CPI) of Bloodsuckers. The evangelical pulpit (not because they were evangelical) was reduced by half, going from 70 to 30 deputies, because they could not maintain a Christian posture while responding to a series of questions concerning the misuse of public money.

The Reality of the Political Situation

In this new composition we have a political situation that favors the great number of deputies that depend on the government and, at the same time, the retention of various governors that rely on this composition. This is due to the Brazilian political structure and the manner in which it is organized.

The two major parties that contend for Brazilian hegemony – PT and PSDB – are based in São Paulo. Whenever they move into the national arena they must search out alliances to defeat the other and to govern without the other. This search for alliances has occurred to win over the most backward sector, contending between them for the position of standard-bearer for the underdeveloped. At the same time a major national party, PMDB, which does not have aspirations toward hegemony, lacks a national program and the intent to control the central government. It only wants to be a partner to all governments. This is the strategy that Bismarck used in Germany to neutralize the parties, i.e. attending to their specific complaints so that they would not have national aspirations. On the one side, PMDB is exploiting this state, and on the other side there are PSDB and PT exploiting this fragility, while both (PSDB and PT) address PMDB with regard to all of its specific claims (which are not all republican).

PT and PMDB also maintain the primacy of the national program, which they have come monopolize and which alternates between them. These political parties have transformed themselves into the *establishment*. They contend with each other, but they have associates waiting for the victory of one or the other in order to enter government.

We are reaching a point in which this situation can no longer be sustained. First, because Brazil has advanced considerably in the democratic period. If, through the PSDB, we have achieved a stable economy (which

has earned the respect of the PT), inside the PT we have a respected social policy (although we can criticize them) and which was incorporated into the democratic process. Today the requirements of a new economic policy and the demands of a new social policy are tenuous. At the present time, the greater demand is for political change, for a new relationship between politicians and electors.

In a general way, this need is usually bombarded by the left which makes an “udenista” claim (referring to the old UDN party, which is unknown to many people), trying to see history through a vision condemned by the left as a repetition of moralism. But this is not what is at play: it is dealing with the capacity for trusting politicians (not in the sense of saints). In other words, they hope to have politicians that recognize their mistakes and correct them, which doesn’t happen in Brazil because of the idea that it is possible to manipulate people and public opinion.

This game is increasingly gross. This advance is necessary in Brazilian politics and is going to result in the governments having a different relation with Congress. No one is going to say “I don’t respect the amendment because you are the opposition” or “vote with the government that gave this to you” It will be a process in which a common political program will be in play and the relations between the parties will be established around this program.

Other Aspects of the Crisis

There are other aspects of the crisis that don’t appear within public opinion. One of them is Brazil’s growth in international importance in recent years. While not participating in the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA /ALCA), Brazil sought out a range of bilateral support producing commercial treaties. Starting with the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and with great emphasis in the Lula government, presidential diplomacy was inaugurated. In Congress we have been receiving politicians from the entire world who have questions about our position in diverse fields. It happens that Congress was not prepared to accompany and advance in international politics, since it is pre-globalization. This means that it has difficulty finding deputies who speak another language. We have a great number of important international agreements without representatives and interested parties able to read and understand these conventions.

Congress is going through a time in which it needs to renew and address these needs, but it is difficult to have this renovation without the Executive also renewing itself, because this combined renovation is what will provide the basis for a new phase, which I classify as the second wave of democratization.

We complied with the first wave directly, with relatively democratic elections, with an economic and social program. Now we lack the second step, responding to these modern necessities: credibility, international integration, independent relations within the governmental structure.

The elections of 2010 will contribute to the clarification of these intersections and somewhat more. Contrary to what might be thought, since the basic themes are already in position, the next elections will be important from the standpoint of political modernization. Some believe that this is “udenism” and that ethics in politics is only of interest to the middle class, since the people don’t want to know who is corrupt (since, all being corrupt, they will choose whoever will give them something!).

It happens that this process is not simple; it is a very great advance. Television deals with politics more intensely than in the past. Thus, people have contact with political information. There is also a growth of computer access in the poorest sectors. To give an idea, in my electoral campaign for mayor in the city of Rio de Janeiro, we counted six thousand LAN houses and internet cafes in the slums and they constantly receive young people.

It’s a mistake to think that our people are static. The people, just like us, are subject to an increasingly greater volume of information. I believe that the elections in 2010, in the city-wide elections are going to register what is happening Rio de Janeiro. Thus, while my adversaries might say that my proposals would only be approved by the middle class, I received 49.2% of the votes. Therefore, if the middle class in Rio de Janeiro were this percentage, we would be in a far better economic situation.

The Repercussion of the Crisis in the Presidential Elections

ESTUDOS AVANÇADOS – How will this crisis determine political reform in 2010?

Fernando Gabeira –There will be a demand for credibility. Everything that is there is committed compromised and people are going to say what they are doing in terms of this issue. Probably some candidate is going to say: “Let’s have political reform.” This theme has served as balm in Congress. Whenever the situation becomes complicated such a reform is promised, but we know that the people involved will make no reform against themselves. This is a great impasse. Because of this we need to take other roads. First, for a new Executive and afterwards, develop some themes for political reform. Parliamentary immunity is one of them, since in our country we have first and second class citizens. If I, a deputy, run over someone, I will be treated one way, but if just anyone runs over someone, they will be treated completely differently. This is anti-democratic. There also is an odd situation in Brazil. To be a public servant, the citizen needs to have a clean record, but this is not essential for being a parliamentarian. It is enough that in the end he has not been sentenced to be able to calmly fulfill his term.

There is a long road ahead to resolve all of these problems, but they can’t all be solved at once. We have to go little by little and for this a new relationship between the Executive and the Congress is indispensable. It is necessary that the two parties, in controlling the government, break this

impasse and not attempt to set it aside in order to govern, because the question of governability is always present. They say that they can't turn their backs to the PMDB (corruption, patronage, "colonelism") because they won't let us govern. But governability should be understood in another manner. It should be born from a political policy supported by votes. We should try to approve the essence of this program with the support of the population confronting resistance by Parliament. But it is not necessary to support everything, only what is essential in its program. It is necessary to have a more limited vision of governability since today it is being understood as a victory in all cases. Look at the question, for example, of the CPMF. The government thought that with its loss governability couldn't be maintained, but it saw that collections grew and that it was not really necessary to keep the tax.

ESTUDOS AVANÇADOS – What is your analysis of the interventions of the Judiciary in the Legislature?

Fernando Gabeira – I understand that they are positive. The insertion of the judiciary into politics already exists in the United States, where help for the solution to delicate problems is sought in the justice system. In the case of Brazil, the themes that have been decided by Justice should be resolved in Parliament. However, since we are subject to the Executive with its provisional measures, which stifle our functioning, the president prefers to govern with provisional measures. Thus, whenever Justice has interfered it has been quite positive for the country. I believe that we should treat these subjects in Congress, but since we are in an impasse, it is Justice that can intervene and resolve.

In case of the election, for example, it was a scandalous. If it would depend on members of Congress there would be no elections, since they would never reach an agreement. It is necessary for the Supreme Court to step in and determine the rules of the game.

Thus there are positives for these interventions. This is because there are no vacant positions in politics. With its provisional measures the Executive intensively occupies space in the Legislature, which prevents its complying with its function. Then another Power has to occupy this space. We are beset by the two powers, one of which leads us to incompetence, while the other supplants us.

ESTUDOS AVANÇADOS – Do you believe that this crisis will have a quick solution or even by the end of the year?

Fernando Gabeira – There was a misconception by the government in supporting Sarney's leadership in the Senate. This is not the cause of the crisis, but it is an important factor. No one today is interested in the crisis being resolved: it doesn't interest the government because it supposes that everything is all right with these people, it doesn't interest the opposition because through its extension it sees a force to strengthen itself. The government has the illusion that it is strong. We have public opinion against it, but we lack the internal dynamism to realize this will.

Because of this I think that transparency in itself and the indignation of public opinion in itself are not capable of resolving the problem. A series of internal legal proceedings are indispensable for modifying the way Congress functions. Nevertheless, we notice that the more the crisis is aggravated, the more people will understand that the framework of Congress will need to be modified.

Fernando Gabeira is federal deputy for the Green Party (PV). @ – dep.fernandogabeira@camara.gov.br

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