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Political Institutionalization, Economic Development and Cooptation in the Brazilian *Détente* (1974-1979)

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Abstract

Besides its gradualism and long duration, the Brazilian *détente* (1974-1978) was characterized by high levels of institutionalization and by its compatibility with the strategy undertaken by military regime in other policy areas. The federal government steadily abandoned preceding tactics of repression and coercion, and improved its apparatus of cooptation and political concessions. In line with the emerging literature on the relevance of institutions in authoritarian regimes, this study demonstrates the consistency between institutional and political economic decisions undertaken by authoritarian governments to guarantee their political survival. It also makes clear the systematic reasons for institutionalization and policy concessions when there is a need to extend the base of support of authoritarian regimes and underlie some of the reasons for the long-duration of the military dictatorship.

Keywords: Brazilian military dictatorship, political institutionalization, cooptation strategy.

Thematic Area: Political processes in Latin America.

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1. Introduction

1973 was a particularly turbulent year for political regimes in South America. In Argentina, the military dictatorship allowed the celebration of elections because of societal demands while in both Uruguay and Chile, military coups overthrew democratically elected presidents. The international economy was deeply affected by the decision of the OPEC to raise oil prices in late 1973. The survival of political regimes considered to be is vulnerable to economic recession, and dictatorships tend to be more susceptible than democracies (Przeworski and Limongi, 1993). The Brazilian economy was specially exposed to such crisis because of its dependence on oil imports and the full utilization of its productive capacity (the economy had grown an average 11% in the period from 1968 to 1973).

From 1968 onwards, besides economic growth, the military dictatorship in Brazil had relied on fairly high levels of repression (censorship, arbitrary persecutions, torture, killings). The new circumstances presumably threatened the maintenance of economic growth and the intentions pointed out by new military leadership elected in 1973 of a “slow, gradual and safe”¹ *détente* (also sometimes referred to as “decompression”). The new government had to deal both with strong opposition by hardliners inside the military and by unsatisfied sectors of population which demanded immediate democratization. Despite the adverse context, the plan of action adopted by the government was highly successful and allowed the military to be in a privileged condition not only to control significantly the implementation of the *détente* but also to influence the transition to a civilian government, which occurred only in 1985, from a privileged position.

The central hypothesis of this essay is that this happened because of the coherence of the strategy undertook by the government during Geisel's presidency (1974-1979). The increasing degree of institutionalization of the regime, the II National Development Plan (PND, in Portuguese acronym), the tax reform and the changes in social spending were crucial components of the strategy which allowed the government to broaden its base of support, and therefore, push forward its plans for “slow, gradual and safe” political liberalization.

The aim is to contribute to the current literature on the role of institutions under authoritarian regimes in light of the Brazilian historical experience². Recent studies, which mostly rely on the construction of large panel data, have suggested a series of insights on the mechanisms developed by such regimes to pursue their interests such as remaining in power. The section that follows deals briefly with some of the characteristics preceding period, which combined economic “miracle” and political repression. Section 3 reviews the strategy of political liberalization undertaken by Geisel focusing on its institutional aspects. In section 4, we present some evidences which suggest that a series of policies adopted by the government (public investment, social spending on education and tax reform) leaned towards the direction of the preferences of the newly co-opted social groups.

2. Economic “Miracle” and Repression (1968-1973)

The repression imposed by the military regime in Brazil achieved its climax in the period between 1968 and 1973. Exclusionary authoritarian characteristics of this period contradict the experience of the first years of the regime, when, after banning all politicians associated with the left and political parties, the regime had created a bipartisan system to keep the appearances of “normality”. In December 1968, the Institutional Act 5 (AI-5) announced the closure of Congress and the declaration of “state of emergency”, one year after the creation of a Constitution which created the set of rules for the authoritarian government to operate. The armed forces used a high degree of discretionary powers (e.g. in 1969, President Medici was chosen only directly by the chiefs of the army, the marine, and the air forces). The expansion of the repressive apparatus in order to

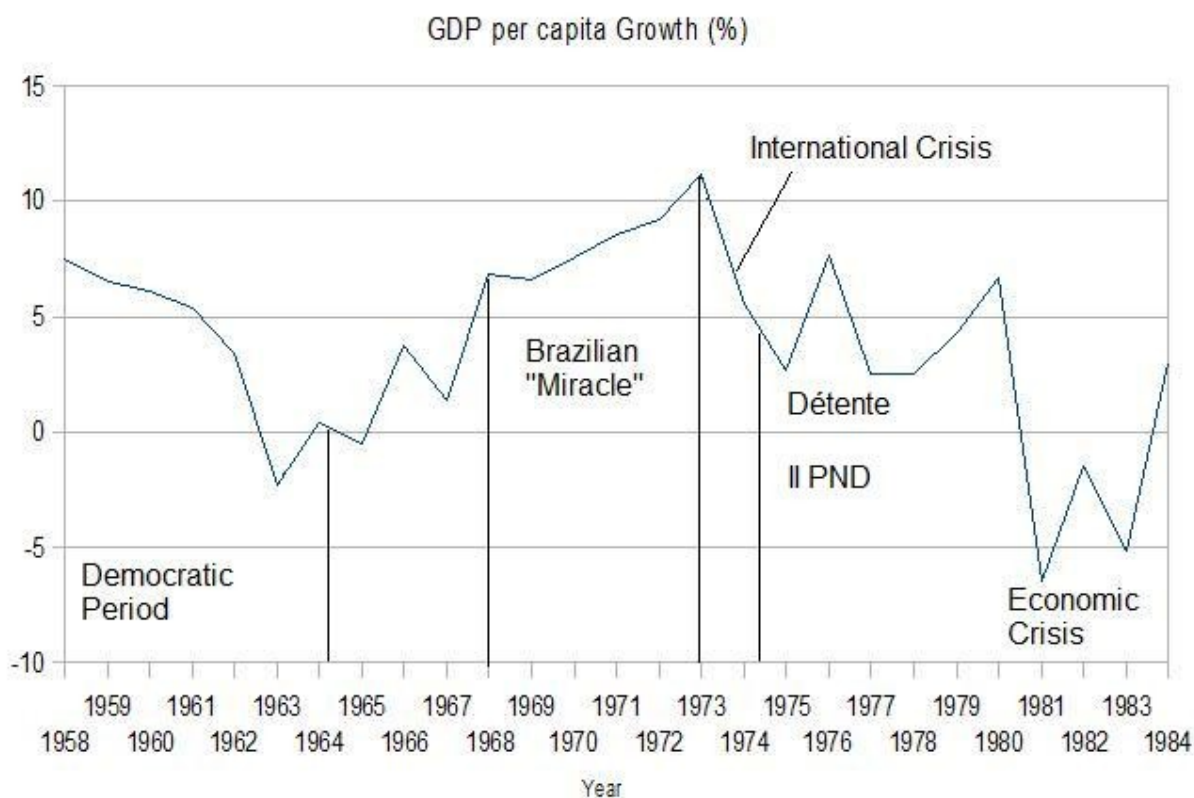
1 Explicit vocabulary used by the regime after 1973.

2 For a review of this literature see Gandhi (2010) and Haber (2006).

“depoliticize” the society, control “communist threats”, to censorship the media (Carvalho, 2005) also characterize the period. Increasing numbers of political prisoners and repression of manifestations besides arbitrary persecutions, torture and killings contrast with the other periods of the military dictatorship in Brazil, which is considered to have been “softer” in comparison to the ones in Argentina and Chile.

Even though Congress was reopened in 1970, it remained with a very limited role in formulation, discussion and decisions on public policies (Carvalho, 2005:121). Without Congress, decisions in the field of economic policies were taken in a tainted technocratic way. The government established “bureaucratic rings”³ which provided an arena of mediation (flows of information and pressure) with the higher levels of the private sector, allowing them a privileged position. The period between 1968 and 1973 is considered the period of the Brazilian economic “miracle” in which the economy was able to achieve the higher averages of growth in the 20th century. Figure 1 (below) shows the performance of per capita economic growth over the period. Industries involved in producing durable consumer goods oriented towards the high and middle classes and the increase of foreign direct investment are the symbols of this growth. Brazilian industrialists and international capital were the biggest beneficiaries and were crucial players in the base of support of government, forming the *trio* responsible for the decisions of allocation and production.

Figure 1 – Real GDP per Capita Growth (1958-1984)



Source: own elaboration with data from IPEAdata (2009).

Another feature of the period were the high levels of suppression of labor movements and the reduction of salaries⁴. This has caused an increase in the already high levels of income inequality - the share of total income owned by the poorest 40% declined from 16% in 1960 to 13%

³ The term was developed by Cardoso (apud Fox, 1980:79-80) to describe the proximity between industrialists and bureaucrats at that time.

⁴ For the controls of salaries, see figure 5 below.

in 1970 (Fislow, 1972). By the end of the period, Brazil was the 8th biggest economy of the world, what helped the symbolic legitimization of the military under the slogan “Ninguém segura esse país” (“No one can stop this country”). Over this period between 1968 and 1973, the government obtained a tight control of society and was able to remain in power under the combination of high economic growth and high degrees of repression. To a certain extent, this means that Presidents Costa e Silva (1967-1969) Medici (1969-1974) and relied more on performance and less on procedure.

The growing division among generals (specially on whether to continue with high levels of coercion, i.e. maintaining the AI-5), and the threat posed by the increasing power of the repressive apparatus to the control of the armed forces are among the determinants for the election of Geisel as the new president in 1973. He was conceived to be a member of the “soft-liners” who had participated in the first years of the regime and soon announced his intentions of *détente*. The following sentences describe main views of the architect of the political liberalization, Golbery (also known as “the Wizard”) in 1972 (apud Carvalho, 2005:125), who was latter appointed Minister Chief of Staff under Geisel and has played a crucial role during his government.

“[...] the centralization of the political power in the hands of the Executive, the existing restrictions to the political activity and the excessive control of the state over the economy are all calculated risks, accepted consciously in order to allow the take off of the country. [...] Furthermore, the excessive coercion generates much more risks and tensions [...]. Frequently, as in this case, there is a certain level of incompatibility between among the various goals of the whole. This incompatibility can only be contoured by a strategic maneuver to be planned and executed in a succession of stages.”

3. Political Institutionalization

During his inaugural speech, Geisel had called for an improvement of the regime and its pertinent structures”, embracing full dissemination of the results of progress, reaching all income levels and all regions; social transformation to modernize our institutions” (Sanders, 1981:172). The logic of political institutionalization was to guarantee the the continuity of the regime, the order and the cohesion and position of the armed forces. President Geisel himself announced the pace of liberalization: “slow, gradual and safe”. Having this intentions in mind, the government recurred to a stronger institutionalization of the regime and to a reduction in the levels of repression. Among crucial steps of such strategy were the revitalization and the strengthening of mechanisms of representation such as elections, political parties and legislature. That does not mean that the institutionalization was implemented immediately neither that it was a linear process. In the words of Geisel, the instruments of exception would continue “until they are supersede by the creative imagination, capable of instituting, when opportune, efficient safeguards under the constitutional context”⁵.

Despite the threat of economic crisis, Mainwaring argues that “[t]he regime opted to liberalize not because of its weaknesses, but because of its strength” (1986:152). The liberalization process did not originate from substantive changes in the correlation of forces among the political actors and was, according to Martins (1986: 82) to a large extent “a strategy to correct imbalances in the internal economy”, which he defines as “building up of a decision-making structure, ideological coherence and rules of succession”. Nevertheless, there were risks for the strategy of “controlled” liberalization, because it was neither favored by hard-liners (particularly strong inside the armed forces) nor by sectors which demanded true democratization.

Part of the strategy was to increase the role of the two political parties which had been

5 Geisel's first cabinet meeting. (Carvalho, 2005:129)

created in 1965 - the ARENA (government) and the MDB (opposition). Despite the fact that, in the municipal elections of 1970, null/blank vote, endorsed by the opposition- which accounted for 30% of the total and of the on-going international economic crisis, the government decided to keep the elections for Congress, Senate and state assemblies in 1974. Even though the MDB increased substantially its representation (the percentage of seats owned by ARENA declined from 72% to 54% in the lower house and the MDB elected 18 out of 22 chairs disputed for Senate), the government accepted the results. As a result, the MDB, achieved the role as a legitimate voice of opposition, becoming increasingly autonomous and independent after 1974 (Mainwaring, 1986). Such negative results were not expected by government and were largely due to a shift in the expectations (and consequently, of behavior) posed by the perspectives of *détente*. The opposition, strengthened by the possibility of campaigning on a freer media, denounced the denationalization of the economy, the abuse of human rights, and the increasing inequalities, achieved positive results particularly in the more industrialized areas of the country (Carvalho, 2005). Even armed groups of the left started to believe that it was possible to end the dictatorship from the inside of the institutional setting (Martins, 1986). In addition, a main motivation for the “controlled” opposition to cooperate in the political game created by the dictatorship was to avoid an authoritarian reactivation. In line with what is proposed by Haber (2006), the higher degree of institutionalization in the political arena (elections, Congress, parties) raised the costs of collective action for both hardliners and political actors in favor of immediate democratization.

Election competition was used to give evidences on the relative power of rulers *vis à vis* the opposition and as a way of capturing the view of society concerning the presence of military as central actors of the political process (Arturi, 2001). By having a legitimate opposition, the role of Congress was consolidated as a place for negotiation between the regime and its opponents. O'Donnell (apud Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007:1281) describes this as a strategy for “encapsulating” the potential opposition. According to Gandhi and Przeworski (2007:1282), legislatures are a very well-suited institution for controlling the flow of information, for building the basis of support for the regime and for co-opting either through distributing spoils or by making policy concessions. The reinforcement of ARENA, besides limiting the power of the armed forces, served as a tool for helping to solve intra-regime conflicts (e.g. conflicts among factions in the military), facilitating consensus-building and helping in the coordination of policies put in place throughout the country⁶. All of this mechanisms seem to have been in place in Brazil during the government of General Geisel.

As stated, the process cannot be understood as if it was a linear political institutionalization towards democracy. In 1976 and 1977, the government introduced some pragmatic reforms in order to guarantee majority in Congress and explicitly strengthen its ability to control the process of *détente* according to its objectives. In 1976, the Congress approved *Lei Falcão*, which prohibited open political propaganda. The strongest turnover in liberalization was when government temporarily closed Congress in 1977, fearing that the following elections would threaten the regime, and announced *Pacote de Abril*: (1) one third of the senators would be directly appointed by the government, (2) state governors would again be chosen by an indirect election, (3) changed the distributional criteria for the chamber of deputies, diminishing the political weight of the industrialized regions (Carvalho, 2005; Martins, 1986). These two events demonstrate the government's use of “safeguards” to maintain command and to obstruct the prospects of the opposition. It is also a clear illustration of the fact that authoritarian governments routinely manipulate the rules according to their objectives but are unable to “eliminate or reduce them to a mere *façade*” (Levitsky and Way, 2002 :53). The higher degree of continuity in local elections seems to be the clearest example of the need to keep institutions resembling democratic systems because of its implications on the coherence in bases of support throughout the country.

The progressive restoration of civil and political rights was subdued to the “institutionalization of the authoritarian controls in order to constrain the exercise of such rights within the limits imposed by the executive authority” (Martins, 1986: 84). The practices and laws

6 For more details on the existence of parties in authoritarian regimes, see Geddes (2005).

used assured the restriction of popular participation and prevented any subtle shift in power. Political dissent was still very controlled (e.g. strikes only started to happen in 1979) and government extended or narrowed the political process depending on the intensity of the demands, in a strategy that allowed it to maintain both the initiative and the control of the process. In 1978, it was approved the end of the AI-5, which explicitly allowed the government to change the rules of the game, and had provided the legal base for the *Pacote de Abril*.

The initiative in the shift towards controlled political liberalization implemented by the Brazilian government does not underestimate the role played by opposing forces. The strengthening of political parties, elections, less censorship of the media and the increased by the commitment to the “rules of the game” allowed the military to to extend the political and social base of support of the regime, what was fundamental for the its ability to shape and to conduct the process. Institutions exist for systematic reasons because they affect the chances of survival of the regime and when there is a need to co-opt larger segments of population the creation of institutions is more likely (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006; Escriba Folch, 2000). In order to be successful, the government had to be consistently committed to such cooptation which went further than the institutionalization process described. This strategy included a series of policy concessions and a particular economic strategy.

4. Economic Development and Policy Concessions

Institutions allow governments to consolidate support because it facilitates the fine tuning of policy concessions. The prospects of the “controlled” political liberalization depended on the circumstances in other dimensions than the existence of elections and the strengthening of political parties. The necessity of maintainability of high levels of economic growth is a clear example. Reforms in many areas were necessary for the government to change from a restricted number of allies - basically the military, supportive politicians, and a targeted elite which had been the largest beneficiary of the economic miracle – to incorporate broader sectors of society under the logic of the military to maintain the control over the political process. The changes also suggest the role of policy concessions.

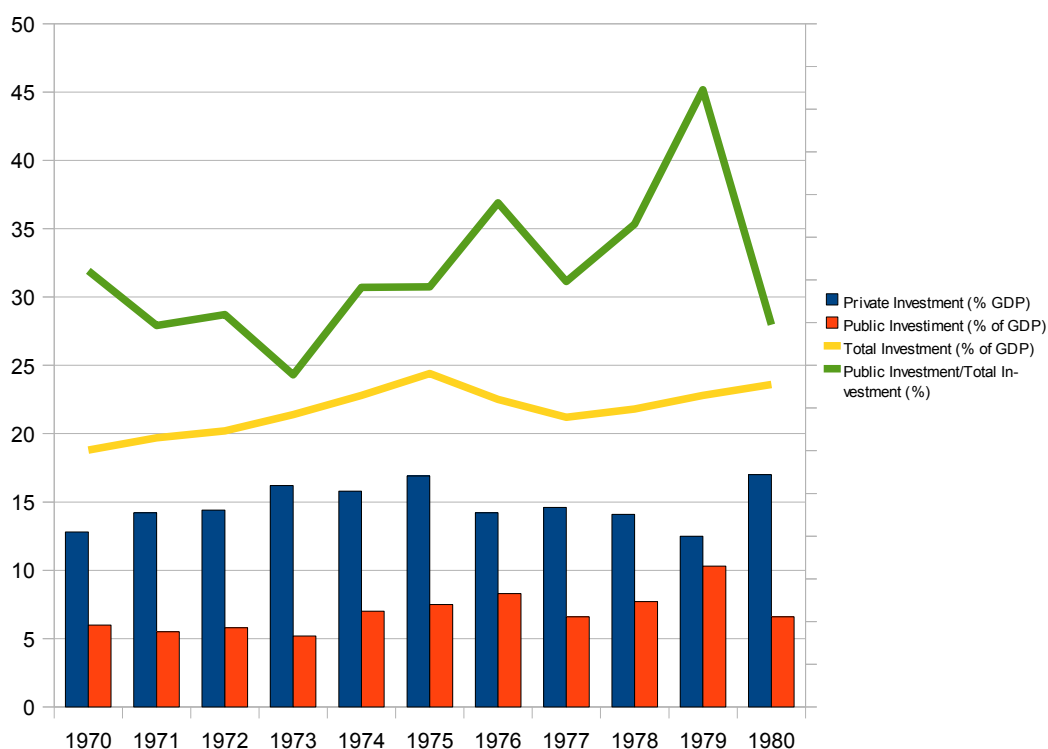
The military regime needed a strong economic performance for the continuation of the *détente* and to reduce the incentives for democratization or a *coup d'état* (Galetovic and Sanhuesa, 2000). The Brazilian economy was operating at full capacity when the oil prices went up in 1973. Oil was the main source of energy for the country, the price increase imposed a threat to the maintenance of its balance of payments (oil accounted for 40% of the total of the country imports in 1973 – Furtado, 1981). The diminishing capacity to import was perceived as a peril for the continuity of the import substitution industrialization strategy. Two possible solutions seemed viable to counteract the effects of the increase in oil prices. One was to commit to restrictive economic policies, diminishing the pace of the economy in order to adjust the country balance of payments. The other was to with the an increase of international debt to commit to expansionary policies which would allow to the economy to keep its pace. In spite of that, the Brazilian government decided to implement a four year development plan (II PND) addressing clear objectives and tools to achieve drastic economic transformations, what allowed the economy to surpass this scenario of two possible solutions (Castro and Souza, 1985).

The II PND, announced by Geisel in September 1973, intended to give a new path to Brazilian development by shifting the focus of industry from the production of durable consumer goods to the production of capital goods and intermediate products. It promoted a serious commitment by the government to public investment, which was particularly large in the areas of infra-structure and energy. After an year when the participation of investment in the GDP achieved 24%, anti-cyclical public investment countered the declining expectations. Its increase was

fundamental for allowing the transformation of the economy and to keep high growth levels⁷. It allowed Brazil to reduce its dependence on oil by investing on hydroelectric, nuclear and ethanol sources of energy⁸.

Besides turning into the center locus of economic decision-making power, there was an expansion of the state in both production and allocation. There was also an increasing role for state owned enterprises (an important arena for cooptation of both political elites – e.g. through appointments of directors - and middle classes – e. g. employment), which represented 20% of the manufacturing sector and a much higher percentage of the investment in industries related to the production of capital and intermediate goods (Fox, 1980:77). The growing statization of the economy led business elites to criticize governmental economic policies for the first time since the starting of the authoritarian regime (Serra, 1982). Because there were functional formal institutions government relied less on the “bureaucratic rings” of previous periods. Malan and Bonelli (1976) criticized the II PND defending that the adjustment was inevitable because of the structural disequilibria in the balance of payments caused by the continued imbalances in import substitution.

Figure 2 – Private and Public Investment (1970-1980)



Source: Own elaboration with data from: Everhart and Sumlinsky (2003)

Despite many criticisms, the strategy pursued by the state after the II PND contained the declining pressures affecting the international economy and avoid severe consequences for the Brazilian economy. In 1976, the GDP grew by 6% and the industrial sector at a 12% rate. Castro and Souza (1985) describe the economic rationale of such strategy and shows the positive impacts it has had on the balance of payments (particularly the role of the increased exports of manufactured products and the declining dependence on oil imports) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Some authors describe the plan as only “politically determined” (Aguirre and Saddi, 1997) while others emphasize the compatibility between the political and economic *raisons d'être* (Fonseca and Monteiro, 2007).

The most credible reason why Brazilian military dictatorship did favor economic growth

7. See figures 1 and 2.

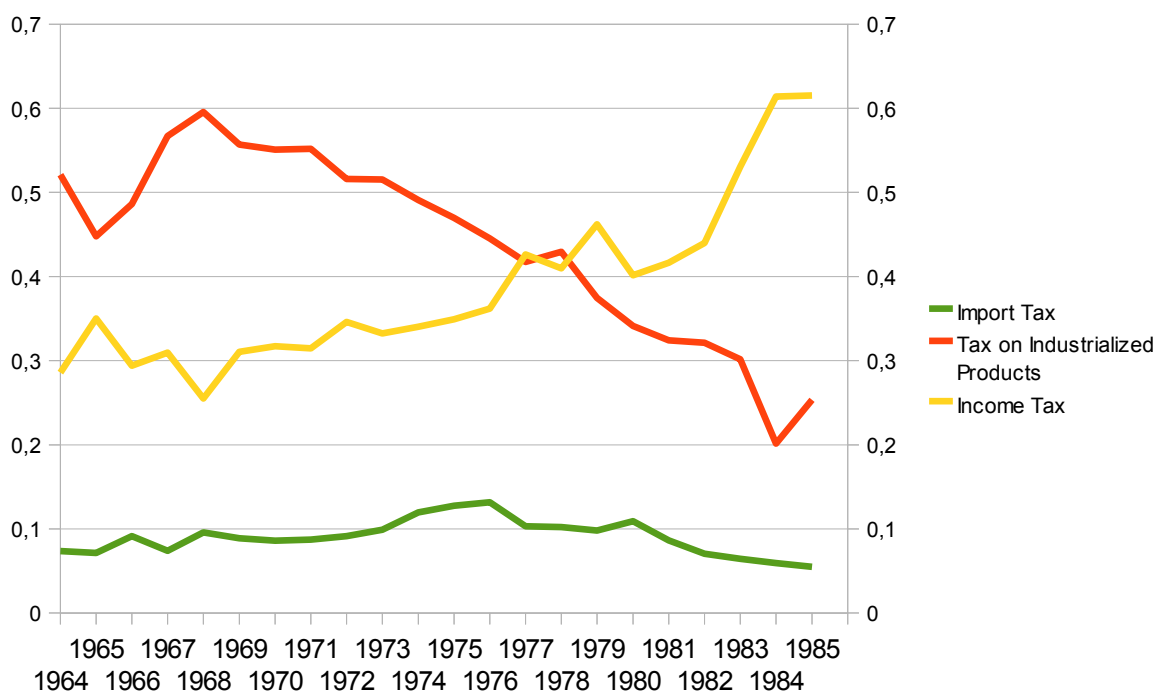
8. The pro-ethanol program was created in 1975.

even at high costs (the international debt increased significantly) seems not to be because it was isolated from societal demands but because it depended on the continuity of accelerated development path for its survival, credibility and the functioning of its strategy of controlled political liberalization.

Depending on the need for cooperation and on the strength of the opposition dictators use different combinations of policy concessions and sharing of rents (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006). The alternative for rents was implemented to a large extent on the shift towards the increase role of state enterprises and by the strategies concerning federalism. The II PND promoted a series of investments in infrastructure, energy and industries which were not located in the more industrialized states. The combination between such investments and the *Pacote de Abril*, which enhanced the political representation of less developed states (particularly in the North and Northeast of the country), was an effective way of guaranteeing support from the political elites of those regions (Saddi, 2003). Political liberalization went hand in hand with a higher level of decentralization and with a policy of regional development which enhanced the role of state and local governments, reversing the trend from previous periods.

The coherence of the strategy of change in the social basis of political support is also apparent while analyzing the changes in the structure of the tax base and in the patterns of social spending. During the period, there was a systematic change in the sources of government revenue towards income taxes, instead of relying on taxes over the consumption over the domestic goods. Figure 3 demonstrates that these changes were substantial. This clearly indicates that the government intended to extend its base of support because of the regressive character of taxes on domestic goods in a country where the levels of income inequality are extreme. Escribà-Folch (2009) points out the channels through which dictatorial institutions affect the revenue composition. His findings seem coherent with what happened in Brazil, where a more institutionalized political system was able to shift to a complex system of income tax, what certainly required a significant amount of economic cooperation and government capacity. Both of these channels (the distributive consequences and the ability of government to tax) seem to have been active for the transformation in the sources of tax revenues during the 1970s.

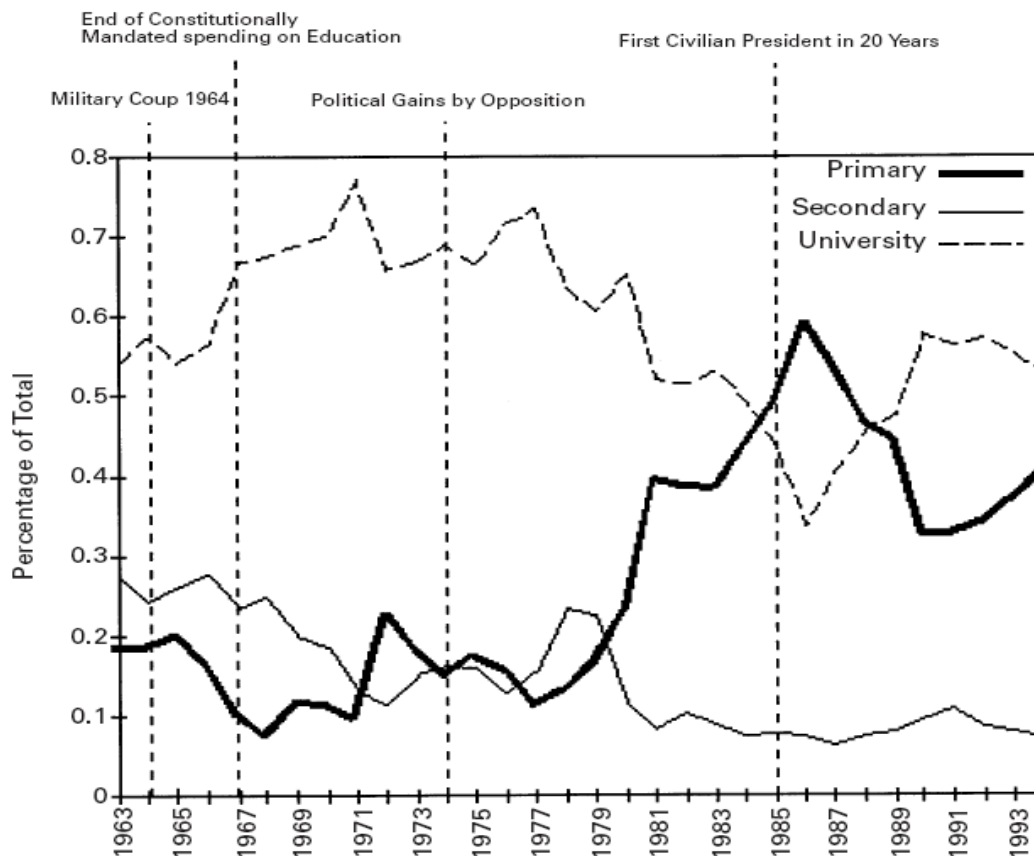
Figure 3 – Changes in the Source of Revenue of the Central Government
(proportion of total revenue)



Source: own elaboration with data from IPEAdata (2009).

Public spending on policies which explicitly benefit different social groups also show similar trends. Offering specific goods to particular groups as a way of buying their support is considered to be a viable and direct strategy of cooptation. Brown (2002) shows that expenditures in public education has changed as a result of electoral pressure after 1974. Contrasting with the negative experience of the regime in the area, in 1975, Geisel began to talk about social policies (Brown, 2002:126) The move from a educational policy which clearly benefited tertiary education (mainly federal universities), reaching a diminutive fraction of less than 10% of the representative age-cohort, towards increased spending first on secondary education and then, on the period starting from 1977, on primary education, shows the intentions of the regime to widen its electoral base and the role played by social policies (Figure 4). Such changes are, in the literature on democracy and public spending, generally expected when there is a fully-fledged democratization and understood in terms of a shift toward the preferences of the median voter, but not usually conceived in authoritarian contexts (Lake and Braun, 2001).

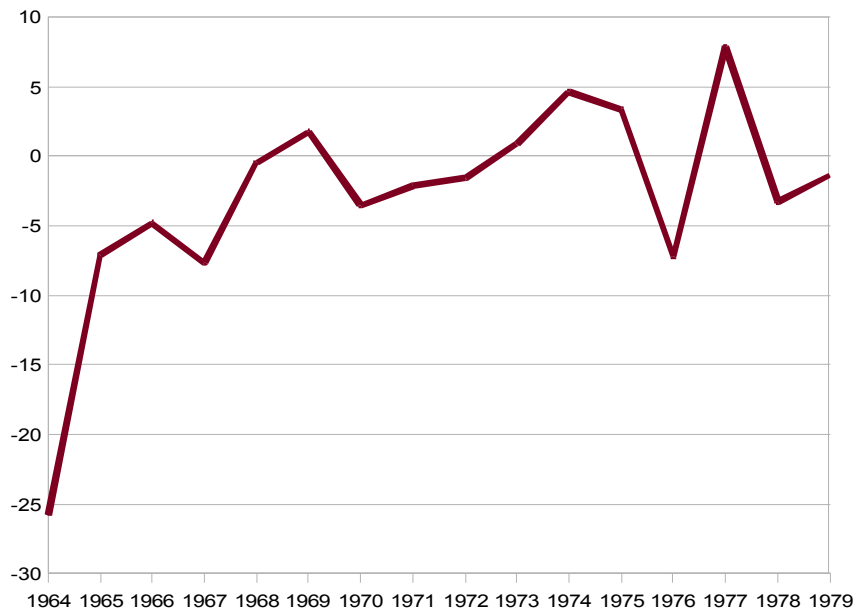
Figure 4 - Amount of Federal Resources Allocated to Primary, Secondary and University Education (Percentage of Total Federal Spending on Education)



Source: Brown, 2002.

Another important political decision concerning the welfare of the majority of the population in Brazil is the minimum wage. Przeworski et al. (2000) show the detrimental impacts authoritarian regimes have on labor and salaries. This is particularly true while analyzing the drastic reductions and containment of minimum wages in Brazil and comparing to the levels economic growth the country was able to achieve in the 1960s and 1970s. In the period between 1973 and 1975 (and also in 1977), workers in Brazil could finally recuperate some of the losses in salaries, as demonstrated in Figure 5. By allowing citizens to have access to higher salaries and better conditions of life, the government was trying to reshape its base of support.

Figure 5 – Real Minimum Wage Variation (%) (1964-1979)



Source: own elaboration based on IPEAdata (2009).

5. Conclusion

Besides its gradualism and long duration, Brazilian *détente* was characterized by high levels of institutionalization and by its compatibility with components of the cooptation strategy undertaken by government in other policy areas. In the period between 1974 and 1978, the federal government steadily abandoned preceding tactics of repression and coercion, and improved its apparatus of cooptation and political concessions. As shown, the economic policies adopted, particularly the II PND and the tax reform, made the *détente* viable and allowed the government to stretch its base of legitimation.

In line with the emerging literature on institutions in authoritarian regimes, the evidence demonstrates the consistency between institutional and political-economic decisions undertaken by authoritarian governments to guarantee their political survival. It also makes clear the importance of institutional, policy concessions and social spending when there is a need to shift and extend the base of support of such regimes.

The political institutionalization envisaged by Golbery and performed under President Geisel was fundamental not only for the ability of the Brazilian dictatorship to survive for at least a decade more, but was also a key determinant of its high capacity to shape political liberalization, the posterior process of democratization and to guarantee the interests of the armed forces throughout the period.

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