



The uncertain dawn of the Republic: the provisional government and the indirect election of Marshal Deodoro da Fonseca (1891)

Felipe Azevedo e Souza
Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA)



The first presidential election in Brazil was held 15 months after November 15th, 1889. Between the last emperor and the first president of the Republic, the country went through troubled times under a provisional government led by Marshal Deodoro da Fonseca and a ministry formed by a coalition that brought together notable representatives of the main trends of Brazilian republicanism. These included Quintino Bocaiúva and Aristides Lobo, who were signatories of the 1870 manifesto; and Campos Salles, who represented republicanism in the state of São Paulo and the São Paulo Republican Party (PRP); Demétrio Ribeiro was one of the positivist thinkers from the state of Rio Grande do Sul; while Benjamin Constant was the name of the republican officialdom in the Army, and Eduardo Wandenkolk, from the Navy. Finally, it included Rui Barbosa, who was seen as symbolizing those who had signed up to republicanism at the last minute. Rui Barbosa also represented liberalism in a milieu full of positivists. This mixed group had the enormous challenge of leading the re-founding of the Brazilian State under new principles and consolidating the newly inaugurated regime.

In the midst of the project to establish republican institutions, the presidential election was of decisive importance, but in order to hold it, it was necessary to rebuild the entire political structure that had been dismantled after the military coup of 1889. In December of that year, the provisional government appointed a commission to draft the Republican Constitution, showing that the new regime sought to establish a legal basis for itself.





As eleições.

Correrão serenamente, nas diferentes secções, as eleições realisa- das hoje n'esta cidade para deputa- dos e senadores ao primeiro con- gresso nacional.

A balburdia introduzida pelas juntas alistadoras privou infelizi- mente a grande numero de eleito- res antigos de exercer o direito do voto.

Via-se de secção em secção elei- toral grande numero d'elles pro- curando saber onde tinha de vo- tar, porque o quartiereiro que os seus titulos trazia, não era o mes- mo em que as juntas os haviam contemplado.

Por occasião de ser publicado o alistamento, como era natural, es- ses electores procurariam conhecer apenas si tinham ou não sido in- cluidos n'elle, sem ligar importan- cia ao numero do quartiereiro em que o seu nome era descripto.

Este pouco caso originava-se do facto de estar mencionado o qua- rteiro no titulo antigo.

Acontece que uma quantidade enorme d'esses electores dos quaes muitos não se mudaram de casa des- de que se alistaram ha annos atraz, foi transferida no alistamento para differente quartiereiro.

Hoje, quando querião esses elei- tores votar na secção corresponden- te ao quartiereiro do seu titulo, di- zia-se-lhes que não estavam n'essa secção, mandando-se-os para ou- tra.

N'essa outra também não estavam e ia-lhe os electores para mais ou- tras, onde estavam contemplados, mas ja haviam sido classados e ti- nhão que esperar a hora das re- clamações, ou onde ja não chega- vão a tempo para poder votar nem mesmo como reclamantes.

D'estarte muitos cidadãos vi- rão-se embaraçados no exercicio do direito do voto e grande numero d'elles ficou d'isso privado, por esse manejo que recusamos quali- ficar, cometido pela juntas.

Será bom que para o anno seja corrigido o abuso praticado no processo de alistamento realiado em abril ultimo.

On September 15th, 1890, elections were announced for the National Constituent Assembly. The rules for this poll were the provisions of the Alvim Regulation, a decree that defined central aspects of electoral citizenship and gave the members of the Constituent Assembly the responsibility of electing the first president of the Republic.

Under the guise of ensuring the continuity of the republican project, preventing regressive monarchists from threatening the regime through the vote, the Alvim Regulation established indirect elections for president. But this was not the only exceptional measure the decree put in place for that legislative election. A previous provision that made police chiefs, Army commanders and other military officials who led forces on land or at sea ineligible as candidates was suspended only during this election to the Constituent Assembly. It led to a large influx of candidates in military uniform. Many of them ended up being elected, 55 to be precise, mainly due to the government's efforts to control the results of the election.

The regulatory arrangement to neutralize any opposition force went further. The Alvim Regulation transferred the responsibility for holding and supervising elections to the members of the municipal administrations, whose appointment was a prerogative of the interventors of each state. These, in turn, were chosen by the provisional government—it should also be noted that most of these interventors were appointed based on their affinity with

A report on election day in the state of Maranhão published by the *A Pacotilha* newspaper on 9.15.1890, page 4. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

members of the Executive Branch, many of them were military personnel with no previous experience in public administration, and some were even Deodoro's relatives. In the end, the central government created a structure that made it practically impossible for opponents of the new regime to win.

On September 15th, 1890, around 2% of the population went to the polls to elect 63 senators and 205 deputies. The number of voters was not very significant, but compared to the average number of voters in the last decade of the imperial era, there was a significant increase, mainly because a republican decree abolished the requirement for a census to register. Even so, the rules excluded illiterate people and women, and only Brazilians over the age of 21 who had civil and political rights, as well as foreigners who met the same qualifications and had been residing in Brazil since November 15th, 1889, could register.

The seats in the Constituent Assembly were practically all occupied by allies of the government and supporters of republicanism. With all the ministers of the provisional government elected except Benjamin Constant, who had not stood as a candidate, this was certainly the most triumphant moment of Deodoro's administration since, from the very first months, internal crises and continuous clashes between ministers revealed instability as a distinctive feature of that government.

Revista Illustrada magazine of 1890, year 15, No. 601, page. 5. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.





It is worth recalling that the republican movement, though it had existed for more than two decades and had been very important in the public debate, never achieved significant positive electoral results during the imperial period. It should also be stressed that, under the banner of republicanism, there were heterogeneous ideological tendencies and competing interest groups. Factions with different social cleavages (e.g., São Paulo landowners, young cadets from the Escola Militar da Praia Vermelha, journalists from the Rio de Janeiro press) diverged on a wide variety of issues regarding the extent of the central government's power, the autonomy of the states, the possibility of a positivist dictatorship, the adoption of universal suffrage—in short, a myriad of possibilities and tendencies were at stake.

The provisional government was set up in a precarious structure, which combined the administrative inexperience of its members, the difficulty in creating consensus, and the absence of political routines under an institutional vacuum. These circumstances set the erratic tone of the first year of republican politics. There was a high degree of uncertainty, but many republicans initially hoped to see this instability overcome by electing as the first President of the Republic Marshal Deodoro da Fonseca, the natural candidate. He, however, proved unable to fulfill this expectation.

In January 1890, Demétrio Ribeiro, then minister of Agriculture, resigned because he disagreed with the new financial policy (which would later lead to the disastrous *Encilhamento*), announced by the minister of Finance, Rui Barbosa.

This first ministerial crisis, effusively covered by the press, was followed by others for the most varied reasons. A week after Demétrio Ribeiro, the minister



Cidade do Rio newspaper of 12.17.1890, page 1.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

of the Interior, Aristides Lobo, also left office because Deodoro had not accepted some of his appointments to the civil service. Shortly afterward, it was Quintino Bocaiúva, minister of Foreign Affairs, who submitted his resignation letter, opposing the deportation of the famous practitioner of *capoeira* (an Afro-Brazilian sport that mixes martial arts, dance and music, developed by descendants of African slaves and repressed by the police until the middle of the 20th century), Jucá Reis, because the then-minister had personal ties to the criminal's family.

Marshal Deodoro's disputes with Benjamin Constant, the minister of Public Instruction, Post and Telegraphs, were frequent. They almost came to blows. At a ministerial meeting, the two had to be restrained by other authorities present. Deodoro even proposed a duel to settle his differences with Constant but was finally dissuaded. When Deodoro tried to grant the rights to build and operate the Port of Torres to a friend but his ministers unanimously rejected the project, the weakness of the government's institutional relations became even more evident. These and other cases exposed the government's incompetence, especially its leader, in dealing with disagreements within its central core, but none of these crises had an impact comparable to the attempted silencing of the newspaper *A Tribuna*.

In the final days of November 1890, soldiers raided the newspaper's headquarters, destroyed its printing equipment, and beat up its employees. The attack on *A Tribuna* newspaper, carried out by uniformed officers, was an authoritarian excess by military men who saw disrespect for the regime and the institution in publications with a monarchist tendency that criticized the government



in articles often punctuated with personal attacks on its members. A few days later, a humble employee of the editorial staff, proofreader João Romariz, died as a result of the violence inflicted by agents of the State.

Public opinion closed ranks against the government, and the Rio de Janeiro newspapers held a lockout in protest, suspending their publications for a few days. This situation was crucial for the collective resignation of the Ministry, accepted in mid-January 1891. Just a few months before the presidential election, this was the scenario: growing civilian distrust of the military, fear that the latest events were symptoms of the emergence of a dictatorial order, and deepening internal divisions within the government and the Armed Forces themselves.



Cartoon by Pereira Neto, published by the *Revista Ilustrada* magazine of March 1891, No. 615, shows the elected president and vice-president jumping out of the ballot boxes over the Constitution, surrounded by their electors, the congressmen, and in front of their muses, who represented the entities of the Federation. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

As the presidential election would be held indirectly through the Congress, there was no electoral campaign or debate on issues between the candidates. Behind the scenes there was deal-making and a widening atmosphere of conspiracy. The old marshal, a decorated veteran of the Paraguayan War no longer inspired confidence in broad civilian sectors that supported republicanism. So leaders of the São Paulo Republican Party (PRP) sought to build an alternative slate headed by Prudente de Moraes, a famous representative of the coffee oligarchy and president of the Constituent Assembly, who, at the time, ended up becoming Deodoro's strongest opponent.

The Constitution was promulgated on the eve of the election. That day, Congress voted on a motion to give Benjamin Constant, who had died the previous month, the title of *Founder of the Brazilian Republic*. By making such a tribute to someone who had been on bad terms with Marshal Deodoro, the act seemed like a strategy to diminish and sideline Deodoro's role in the political process, not least because some of his supporters had already been openly expressing their opposition to the candidacy of the head of the provisional government from the rostrum of the Assembly. But Deodoro's supporters (*known as deodoristas in Portuguese*) also fed the climate of tension. That week, rumors circulated that in the event of the marshal's defeat, Congress would be dissolved and a dictatorship would be established through an armed offensive by sectors of the Army.

The following day, amidst fears that the constitutional order might be overthrown at its outset, congressmen voted for president and vice-president in a system of separate votes. Marshal Deodoro da Fonseca was elected president of the Republic with 129 votes, followed by Prudente de Moraes, who received 97, and Floriano Peixoto and Saldanha Marinho with three votes each.



In his painting of 1891, *Constitutional Commitment*, the painter Aurélio Figueiredo shows Deodoro da Fonseca making his inauguration speech, swearing to uphold the Constitution, oaths that would be broken a few months later. Most of the politicians appear indifferent to the ceremony.

Image: Museu da República/Instituto Brasileiro de Museus (IBRAM)/Ministério da Cidadania No. 13/2019.

The biggest surprise was the election of the vice-president. The candidate on Deodoro's ticket, Navy minister Eduardo Wandenkolk, suffered a landslide defeat, winning only 57 votes, while Floriano Peixoto, the vice-president of the Republic on Prudente de Moraes's ticket, was elected by the votes of 153 parliamentarians. Although the election of Deodoro signaled a somewhat cautious choice to maintain order, Floriano's election was an unmistakable sign of the strength of the opposition, which wanted to create mechanisms to moderate the president's dictatorial impulses.

DE QUENOS ECHOS

Na eleição que se procedeu para presidente e vice-presidente da republica brasileira, obtiveram votos para

<i>Presidente</i>	
Marechal Manoel Deodoro da Fonseca	(eleito) 129
Dr. Prudente José de Moraes e Barros	97
Marechal Floriano Peixoto	3
Dr. Saldanha Marinho	2
Dr. José Hygino	1
Em branco duas cédulas.	
<i>Vice-presidente</i>	
Marechal Floriano Peixoto (eleito) ..	153
Almirante Eduardo Wandenkolk ..	57
Dr. Prudente de Moraes	12

By telegram, newspapers all over Brazil received the election results. In the photo, a detail from the 1891 edition of *Revista Illustrada* magazine, year 16, no. 615, page 3. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



He was born in Anadia, a small town in the then province of Alagoas, on August 5th, 1827. He was the son of Lieutenant Colonel Manoel Mendes da Fonseca and Dona Rosa Maria Paulina da Fonseca.

Collection of the Biblioteca da Presidência da República.

Deodoro da Fonseca

He played a central role in the political crisis between the military and the government at the end of the Empire. He was part of the group of leaders (among them Benjamin Constant, Quintino Bocaiúva, Rui Barbosa, Francisco Glicério, a representative of the São Paulo Republicans, and some officers, even from the Navy) who organized for the establishment of the Republic in the country. He presided over the provisional government and was elected Brazil's first president by Congress. He dissolved Parliament on November 3rd, 1891, but was unable to form a new government and was replaced by the Vice-President Floriano Peixoto. Sick and disabled, Deodoro da Fonseca died on August 23th, 1892, in Rio de Janeiro.

Floriano Vieira Peixoto

He was brought up by his uncle, Colonel José Vieira de Araújo Peixoto, a plantation owner and influential provincial politician, who was comfortably off. Floriano had a military career, taking part in the Paraguayan War. He did not participate directly in the movement that led to the creation of the Republic. However, on the morning of November 15th, as the troops led by General Deodoro da Fonseca and Lieutenant-Colonel Benjamin Constant surrounded the leading members of the government, he refused to lead the imperial resistance. He replaced Deodoro as president of the Republic from 1891 until 1894, when Prudente de Moraes succeeded him. He died on June 29th, 1895.



He was born at the Riacho Grande mill in Ipioca, a district of Maceió, capital of the province of Alagoas, on April 30th, 1839. He was the son of Manuel Vieira de Araújo Peixoto and Ana Joaquina de Albuquerque Peixoto.

Collection of the Biblioteca da Presidência da República.



The institutionalization of the Republic had made objective progress in those February days, but the atmosphere of uncertainty continued to prevail. The coalitions failed, and the founders of the Republic were unable to provide stability to the regime in those first 15 months of provisional government. The symbolic handing over of the new Constitution to the country was supposed to take shape in the presidential inauguration ceremony. The event, however, was completely dull and lacked the typical republican ceremonial grandeur. *Few people; more on the podium than in the hall, and in the hall more chairs than people*, wrote the Brazilian author Machado de Assis in a chronicle published years later, adding that Floriano's entry into the São Cristóvão Palace (the presidential Palace) was greeted by *warm and numerous* applause, unlike the reception for Deodoro, which was more subdued.

The parliamentarians' distrust of the chief executive and vice versa only increased in the following months. After an unsuccessful coup attempt, with Congress dissolved and a state of emergency decreed, Deodoro resigned his position in November 1891. Floriano, the vice-president, took over, continuing a situation of political instability and disrespect for constitutional provisions.

Recommended further reading

BELLO, José Maria. *História da República (1889-1954)*. São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1964.

FLORES, Elio Chaves. A consolidação da República: rebeliões de ordem e progresso. *In: FERREIRA, Jorge; DELGADO, Lucila de A. Neves (org.). O Brasil republicano: o tempo do liberalismo excludente: da Proclamação da República à Revolução de 1930*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2006.

LESSA, Renato. *A invenção republicana: Campos Sales, as bases e a decadência da Primeira República brasileira*. 3. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks, 2002.

MAGALHÃES JUNIOR, R. *Deodoro: a espada contra o Império*. São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1957, v. 2.