



The elections of 1926: a succession of rigged elections

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The turbulent government of Arthur Bernardes: dissidence, the Lieutenants' Movement and repression

In his last presidential message to the Chamber of Deputies at the start of November 1926, Arthur Bernardes gave an account of the acts carried out during the period of the state of siege in the country, which had been continuously renewed since the middle of July 1924. The decree, which initially affected the Federal District and the states of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, was, over time, extended to cover the whole country.

The suspension of constitutional guarantees and the concentration of power at the top of the Federal Executive Branch allowed Bernardes to impose tough repressive measures, such as press censorship, the threat of suspension of civil liberties, detention of political enemies, summary judgments of lieutenants and civilians involved in revolts, exile of prisoners in remote parts of the national territory, and prohibition of political associations.





The Three Wise Men... Years. *O Malho* magazine of 1.6.1923, Rio de Janeiro, year 22, edition 1,060, page 1. Cartoon alluding to the problems of the administration of Arthur Bernardes. There is a mention of the *Greek* presents represented in the figures of the wise men: the first is the state of siege bringing with him the press law; the second is the Political king, bringing the cases of the states of Rio Grande (do Sul) and Rio de Janeiro; and the last one is the Financial king with more taxes and the Issuing Bank (an allusion to the Banco da República do Brasil, which in 1923 obtained from the Tesouro Nacional the right to issue currency and gold reserves). Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

This serious set of authoritarian measures shows how much the Arthur Bernardes administration was plagued by instability and the difficulty of building a consensus. Even his inauguration, in November 1922, was marked by the effects of the military revolt in the Copacabana Fort, which broke out on July 5th, leading the then President Epitácio Pessoa to decree a state of emergency and to censor the press, which lasted until December 31st. In 1923, the newly sworn-in incumbent faced a serious civil war in the state of Rio Grande do Sul; in 1924, a revolt by lieutenants which broke out in the state of São Paulo, leading to the bombardment of the city of São Paulo itself; in 1925, opposition soldiers who aimed to bring down the government organized a march that criss-crossed the interior of the country and only ended in the period of a new government, in 1927.



Photograph published in the magazine *Fon-Fon* of 12.22.1923, page 63, showing the heads of the revolution and the candidate Assis Brasil (furtherst right) seeking to solve the conflict in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



As became clear, not even the whole apparatus of repression could silence the new social actors who were demanding reforms and leading roles in the political arena. The urban middle classes and Army officers continued to demonstrate, leading to an atmosphere of conspiracy and agitation in the barracks and in state capitals throughout the country.



Picture of General Setembrino, responsible for the negotiations between those who supported Borges de Medeiros and the supporters of the Freedom Alliance, which culminated in the Peace Agreement of Pedras Altas, signed on 12.14.1923. Illustration from the publication *Pelotense*, year 5, No. 21, page 1. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

Bernardes took office with full powers granted by the state of emergency and, thus, he treated the members of the *Republican Reaction* as sworn enemies, which proved an obstacle to alliances and the building of consensus. He carried out a federal intervention in the state of Rio de Janeiro, calling new state elections—from which the government candidate emerged victorious, defeating his original adversary, Nilo Peçanha. In the election for the presidency of the state of Rio Grande do Sul in 1923, Bernardes supported the candidacy of Assis Brasil against the long-time state president, Borges de Medeiros, which was not accepted by the opposition, leading to a bloody conflict that lasted throughout that year. In the final agreement, Borges de Medeiros managed to remain in power on condition that the constitutional guarantee of his re-election was suspended. With that, Bernardes won the support in Rio Grande do Sul that was vital for fighting and defeating the rebellious lieutenants during the São Paulo Revolution of 1924, with those

military officers fleeing the state capital in the direction of the state of Paraná.

At the end of his mandate in the Catete Palace in Rio, Bernardes managed to secure the support of the opposition oligarchies, who abandoned their alliances to support the government in the face of an even greater danger, represented by the

possibility of military rebellion, in the form of the march of the so-called Prestes Column, which seemed as if it might compromise order in their oligarchic domains.

A candidacy without competitors

The turbulence of Bernardes' period in office meant that discussion of the succession issue was left practically to the last year of the government. During the revision of the constitution that started in 1925, the government tried to guide the debates in the National Congress so that measures would be approved that aimed to concentrate more powers in the Federal Executive Branch. Thus, the new text of the constitution was promulgated only in the following year, delaying the start of negotiations over the presidential succession. Many of the issues put up for debate in the revision included controversies: introduction of a partial veto of acts of the legislature; the question of the limitation of the use of the legal institution of habeas corpus; limitation on the principle of equality of foreigners compared with Brazilians; prohibition on state governors being able to seek re-election; broadening of conditions for the decreeing of a state of emergency and situations that allowed federal intervention in the states.

At the beginning of the agreements for his succession, Arthur Bernardes actually put forward the name of an ex-senator from São Paulo, Álvaro de Carvalho, but the nomination was rejected by the leadership of the São Paulo Republican Party (PRP). They still had very recent memories of Carvalho's involvement with the Republican Coalition, a dissident faction that emerged in the PRP in 1924 and was supported by leaders of the coffee



Reproduction of the Italian weekly *Il Moscone* published in Brazil. The title of the cartoon is What never changes. The article published as a political news item says that Messrs. Washington Luis and Mello Vianna have been chosen as president and vice-president of Brazil, respectively. Below the cartoon, the voice of the people expresses itself thus: Governments change; men change... But the magnificence of Paraventi coffee never changes... *Il Moscone* of 1925, year 1, No. 32, page 5. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil



growers united by resentment and opposition to the government of Washington Luís. Washington, the then president of São Paulo, was accused of acting arrogantly and excessively personally in leading the party and the business of the state.

Although he was a native of the municipality of Macaé, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Washington Luís was known as *Paulista de Macaé* (*paulista*, someone from the state of São Paulo). He was born in 1869 and studied at the Pedro II High School, in Rio de Janeiro, the headquarters of what was then the imperial court. He completed a Law degree at the Faculdade de Direito de São Paulo in the Largo de São Francisco, at the very start of the Republic. In 1893, he began his professional life in Batatais, a coffee-growing district in the interior of São Paulo. He was elected a city councilor in 1897, chaired the municipal Chamber and held the post of municipal mayor (1898-1900). His political career was further advanced by his closeness to the influential political boss, Joaquim da Cunha Diniz Junqueira, known as *colonel Quinzinho*, from the city of Ribeirão Preto in the north of São Paulo state, who brought him into the ranks of the PRP. Washington Luís was elected a state deputy for the three-year period of 1904-1906, but he did not complete his term, as he was chosen for the position of secretary of Justice and Public Security in the state government of Jorge Tibiriçá. He was once again part of the next government, of Albuquerque Lins (1908-1912). In 1914, he was appointed mayor of São Paulo city and elected for a second term, which lasted until 1919.



Image: collection of the Biblioteca da Presidência da República.

Washington Luís Pereira de Sousa

Washington Luís Pereira de Sousa was born in Macaé (RJ) on October 26th, 1869, the son of Lieutenant-Colonel Joaquim Luís Pereira de Sousa and of Florinda Sá Pinto Pereira de

Sousa. He completed a Law degree in 1891 and worked as an attorney until 1897, when he was elected councilor to the Municipal Chamber of Batatais. In 1904, he was elected state deputy for the São Paulo Republican Party (PRP). Between 1906 and 1912, he was secretary of Justice in São Paulo. In 1913, he chosen as mayor of São Paulo city and, in 1920, he was elected state governor. In 1925, he was elected senator and, soon afterwards, president of the Republic. Exiled after the Revolution of 1930, he lived in France until 1947. After returning to Brazil, he did not participate in politics. He died in São Paulo on August 4th, 1957. Source: Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil of Fundação Getulio Vargas/RJ (CPDOC) /entry: Washington Luís.

At that time, Washington Luís had established close contact with the network of the São Paulo elite, and was admired by some of the members of the PRP's powerful Executive Committee. He was regarded as competent in administrative management, efficient in handling the bureaucratic apparatus and known for his party loyalty.

Despite this, Washington Luís certainly had ambitions for a more prominent position and, in fact, he achieved it due to the close friendship he had maintained with the president of the state of São Paulo, Altino Arantes, since his time in Batatais. Both of them began their careers simultaneously and stood out as promising young members of the PRP, a challenge to a party whose elite members were growing old and which found it difficult to transfer power to the younger generations.



Photograph showing the arrival of the new president at the Government Palace, after his swearing in at the Congress of the state of São Paulo. Published in *A vida moderna* of 5.6.1920, page 20. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

As his successor, Altino Arantes officially nominated the mayor of São Paulo city, and despite opposition to Washington Luís's name, Arantes imposed his will, benefiting from the security provided by the candidate's administrative experience and by the support of the heads of the party's regional directorates. In November 1920, soon after his swearing in as president of São Paulo, Washington Luís began to form his own group of supporters, appointing a secretariat that was totally independent of party nominations. This attitude provoked indignant reactions from Altino Arantes and the heirs of the late councilor Rodrigues Alves. Washington Luís was not deterred: he put together an alliance with the state of Minas Gerais to elect Arthur Bernardes as president of the Republic, and obtained in exchange a guarantee that the federal government would maintain the subsidy in order to implement a third program of raising the price of coffee.

It was precisely Carlos de Campos who decided to launch and lead a campaign in favor of Washington Luís as candidate for the Presidency of the Republic at the start of 1925. In principle, there was no great difficulty in promoting him. His behind-the-scenes efforts among the internal party leadership created the desired effect. Rodolfo Miranda, the powerful political boss and experienced negotiator, sent a telegram to Washington Luís when the latter was in Paris, in February 1925, in which he confirmed that the PRP would support his candidacy.

What remained was to gain the political support of Minas Gerais and of the Catete Palace—the headquarters of the federal government—for the nomination. As the campaign progressed, Arthur Bernardes sent the Minas Gerais deputy, Antônio Carlos, to São Paulo as his special envoy in order to confirm Minas's support for Washington Luís's candidacy *in a preliminary and secret agreement*. In order to prevent the rise of a dissident movement or an opposition candidate, Washington Luís suggested as a strategy that the accord between São Paulo and Minas regarding the presidential succession should be publicized in the press, prior to the subsequent presentation of the candidate to be carried out by various states.

The choice of Washington Luís ended up occurring as had that of Arthur Bernardes, without prior consultation with the political leaders and the new social actors. The difference from the previous period was the political quiescence achieved by continuous acts of repression; and the strengthening of the Federal Executive Branch at the expense of the autonomy of the oligarchies had created favorable conditions for the coming to power of the winning candidate without any major ruptures. Bernardes even assured Washington that, in the manner that he was being put forward, his candidacy would not face any competition. He had even chosen a vice-presidential candidate to appear on the slate, Miguel Calmon from the state of Bahia.

This combination, which had begun to be sketched out only a little more than a year before polling day, developed slowly, giving the impression that Bernardes had still not chosen his successor, when he was acting so as to disguise his true intentions, negotiating the necessary support for the slate to be viable.



No competitors. *O Malho* magazine of 2.27.1926, Rio de Janeiro, year 25, edition 1,224, page 1. Artist: J. Carlos (José Carlos de Brito e Cunha – 1884/1950). Cartoon referring to the manufactured candidacy *without competitors*, in which the inside of the ballot box, which symbolizes the presidential election, reflects only one image: that of Washington Luís, the official successor. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

[...] they did not emerge from any arbitrary agreement of the moment. On the contrary. their choice is truly in the public consciousness and is virtually or explicitly manifested by the vote of the municipalities, which made us the rulers.

However, when his envoy Antônio Carlos returned to Minas Gerais to seal the agreement made with Carlos de Campos, he was confronted with the situation created by Fernando de Mello Vianna, the governor of Minas nominated by Bernardes, who, in an interview given to the newspaper *Correio da Manhã*, openly criticized the habit of the Catete Palace—in other words, the federal Presidency—of appointing a candidate for the succession under the guidance of Minas Gerais and São Paulo without consulting the other members of the federation. Mello Vianna deceived himself with the possibility that he might be nominated for the succession, an ambition that created serious trouble with Bernardes, given the likelihood of creating a split in the unity of the Minas Gerais Republican Party (PRM) and leaving the candidacy of Washington Luís dangerously exposed—that candidacy had not yet been made official.

The formula used by Bernardes to resolve the issue was to offer Mello Vianna the position of vice-president on the slate, an opportunity that was immediately accepted, since he could see that it was not worth falling out with the federal *status quo*. Once this final obstacle had been overcome, the National Convention was held in the federal capital, on September 12th, 1925, to officially launch the ticket of Washington Luís and Mello Vianna. This merely ceremonial event masked the political wheeling and dealing. The convention's *Information Bulletin* gave its stamp of approval to the candidacy.



O Malho magazine of 1.9.1926, Rio de Janeiro, year 25, edition 1,217, page 1. Cover image of Washington Luís holding an egg with the word opposition written on it; below, with the candidate saying: *We're going to make a success! In the intervals, you come in and do a few somersaults, for those who like the circus.* Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

In order to put forward *worthy names against the mediocre ones of the national comedy* (*O Estado de S. Paulo* newspaper, 10.13.1925), the opposition founded the Youth Party (*Partido da Mocidade* in Portuguese), whose main idea was secret voting and, in its manifesto, it denounced the undermining of democracy, the arbitrary power of the Sole Executive Branch, the breach of individual rights, the Legislature's subservience, the evil oligarchies and the suspension of freedom of opinion. It launched a slate composed of Assis Brasil (president) and Alexandre José Barbosa Lima (vice-president), which innocently sought to run against the official ticket.

Despite its transient existence, the program of this party would later be incorporated by the Democratic Party, a grouping founded in February of the following year, at the home of Councilor Antônio Prado, in the city of São Paulo. This party would stand out for its strong internal cohesion; it would manage to take on the *status quo*, electing representatives in the states and in the National Congress, giving a foretaste of the movement that would become the Liberal Alliance in the presidential elections of 1930.



The election of March 1st, 1926

At a banquet held at the Automóvel Clube do Brasil on December 28th, 1925, the candidate for the Presidency of the Republic proceeded to read out his platform for government. The points of his program were somewhat well-known, since he had revealed them in an interview granted shortly beforehand to the American Agency: pacification; amnesty; economy and finances; exchange rate; circulation and currency; constitutional revision.



Fon-Fon magazine of 1.2.1926, edition 1, page. 43. Traditional banquet launching the official candidacies of the candidates Washington Luís and Mello Vianna, where the former read out his platform for the four-year period 1926 to 1930. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

The candidate Washington Luís sought to set out his opinions in quite a careful way, avoiding committing himself too much on matters that related to the administration he was concluding. On the one hand, he avoided making commitments on thorny issues, such as that of an amnesty for military men involved in rebellions and, on the other hand, he sought to show that the agreements signed for his candidacy did not mean total continuity with the financial policy adopted by Bernardes.

As he announced the theme of *pacification* of the nation, he made clear that this would be achieved by the strengthening of the Executive Branch, which was in charge of keeping order. On this comment, Washington acknowledged the problem of rebellion among the military, but he gave advance notice that the procedure he would adopt to resolve it would not involve accepting the demands of that sector. He even disparaged the soldiers involved in the Prestes Column, calling them *a thousand crazy people, rebels without ideals who, moving from act of pillage to act of pillage, from fires to robberies, not finding support anywhere, but rather being rejected by all parties, are wandering sinisterly through the interior of the country.* (Debes, 2002, page 58).



The Washington interview. *O Malho* magazine of 10.10.1925, Rio de Janeiro, year 24, edition 1,204, page 1. Artist: J. Carlos (José Carlos de Brito e Cunha – 1884/1950). After his interview with the American Agency, there is still doubt about the possibility of Washington Luís granting an amnesty if he is elected. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

What Washington Luís failed to consider was the fact that the march, which had started back in April 1925, numbering 3,500 rebels from São Paulo and contingents of the Army of Rio Grande do Sul led by Luís Carlos Prestes, had been criss-crossing the interior of the country (7 states and 25 thousand kilometers) resisting and making trouble for federal troops, state militias, groups of paramilitary fighters, ordinary laborers in the interior, and the former leaders of hired criminal robber gangs, thus exposing the deficiencies of the government. He underestimated the weight and political significance of the Lieutenants' Movement, given that many of its most prominent members would later be involved in the conspiracy to bring down his government, in October 1930.

The question became caught up in the thorny issue of an amnesty, owing to the considerable number of political prisoners who had been detained during the state of exception in the Bernardes administration, precisely when there was discussion of limiting the right to *habeas corpus*. Washington Luís merely stated that, as it was a constitutional guarantee, it would have to be approved by the National Congress.



O Malho magazine of 7.4.1927, page 32. Photograph showing some officers of the Prestes Column, in the state of Bahia. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



In the economic and financial area, Washington Luís emphasized the country's progress and growth, without mentioning the gap between the surging urban-industrial sector of São Paulo and the rest of the nation. He did not touch on the point of disagreement between the allies, since the Bernardes government had started to question the costs of maintaining the policy of supporting the coffee price, which restricted the entry of foreign capital and was generating bigger and bigger exchange deficits. In 1924, Bernardes almost broke off the agreement signed with Washington Luís, when he replaced the people from São Paulo who were in control of the national economy. Next, he ended the federal government's steering of the coffee market and transferred to the producing states the responsibility for taking out foreign loans that were necessary to carry out the intended policy of constantly defending the product.

This change led to discontent among the São Paulo coffee growers, who began to criticize the measures taken by Washington Luís and by his successor Carlos de Campos (1924-1927). They complained about the government's refusal to maintain the subsidy for immigration and about the consequences of the measures within the competence of the Instituto Paulista de Defesa Permanente do Café, an agency of the government of the



O Paiz newspaper of 6.11.1926, Rio de Janeiro, year 42, No. 15,209, page 1, announces in a headline the official recognition by the National Congress of Washington Luís as president of the Republic. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

state of São Paulo created to support the production and export of coffee, which they regarded as damaging for the sector. They felt that the 10 million pounds sterling loan arranged with bankers in London, to start the operation in 1926, had ended up benefiting the importers and speculators, who were manipulating the stocks to achieve enormous profits, damaging the producers. There were huge internal divisions in the world of coffee and between the coffee-growing states.

Incorporating these issues into his platform in his own way, Washington Luís announced the need to sort out the exchange rate in order to contain the depreciation of the currency, caused by the issuance of unbacked money, which was generating inflation and an increasing cost of living. The suggested solution was the adoption of the gold standard via the creation of an exclusive issuing bank, which was implemented in December 1926 through the creation of the Stabilization Fund (Caixa de Estabilização in Portuguese), which fixed the value of the pound at 40 thousand réis. This measure stimulated coffee-producing activities, compensating, due to the depreciation of the currency, for the small fall in the external prices of the product. Despite this, the sector's dilemmas were much more complex and were far from being resolved.



Meanwhile, the *O Estado de S. Paulo* newspaper reported prominently, in its edition of March 2nd, 1926, the holding of the election for president of the Republic with the two slates: that of the *status quo* and that of the Youth Party. The process of finally verifying the elections only took place on June 8th. In the count, Washington Luís won 688,528 votes; and Mello Vianna, 685,754, being elected respectively president and vice-president of the Republic. For their part, the opposition candidates, Assis Brasil and Barbosa Lima, won only 1,116 and 1,112 votes respectively.

The result of the poll powerfully confirmed the strength of the alliance between the states of Minas Gerais and São Paulo, without any serious challenge from the opposition or from the states excluded from the succession process. The federal Presidency in the Catete Palace had seized more and more powers in an authoritarian manner, severely repressing and censoring the urban and military sectors.

On June 10th, the minority leader in the Chamber of Deputies, Plínio Casado, gave the vote of the opposition in favor of recognizing the election, but accompanied by a statement criticizing the newly elected president for being a continuation of the Bernardes government: *Also, they make a point of declaring, firmly, explicitly and emphatically, that this vote achieves nothing nor removes the unbreakable determination to continue the fight, without pause, against the wicked official policy, whoever the holders of that power are* (Debes, 2002, page 89).

In the cartoon entitled *The twilight hour*, published on the front page of the magazine *O Malho*, the irony about the return to the state of São Paulo at the end of the mandate of the then President Washington Luís is explained by the slogan by which the latter was known during his government of São Paulo: governing is building highways.



The Twilight Hour. O Malho of 2.6.1926, year 25, No. 1,221, cover. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



Formation of the new government: from continuity to the rupture of the alliance

In assembling his cabinet, Washington Luís resorted to procedures that had also been used by his predecessor: choosing leading names that did not threaten his authoritarian exercise of individual power. For the post of Interior and Justice, Viana do Castelo, the Agriculture secretary of Minas Gerais; for the post of Agriculture, deputy Germiniano Lira e Castro, the leader of the representation from the state of Pará in the Chamber of Deputies; for Transportation and Public Works, deputy Vitor Konder, from Santa Catarina; for the Navy, he reappointed Admiral Arnaldo Pinto da Luz; for the Ministry of War, general Nestor Sezefredo de Passos; for Foreign Affairs, Otávio Mangabeira, the leader of the representation from the state of Bahia in the Chamber of Deputies; and for Finance, Getulio Vargas.

Vargas' appointment was not in keeping with the others, because he was the only unchallengeable leading figure from the state of Rio Grande do Sul with great potential to project himself on the national stage. Washington's reasons were perhaps part of the indirect Bernardes strategy of suppressing Borges de Medeiros' power in Rio Grande do Sul. After implementing the monetary and exchange rate reform proposed by the government, Vargas left the cabinet to run as candidate for the Presidency of Rio Grande do Sul. Presenting himself as a conciliator, he won support from the PRR and the Liberation Party, being elected in December 1927. The end of the rule of Borges de Medeiros did not, however, mean total adherence to the federal government's policies. Vargas began to support certain items from the agenda of the opposition movement, but sought to maintain a good relationship with Washington Luís in exchange for federal funds.



Change of government. *O Imparcial* newspaper of 11.16.1926, Rio de Janeiro, year 15, No. 5,728, page 1. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



At the beginning of his government, Washington Luís began to partially suspend the state of exception and, with the gradual reduction in the atmosphere of instability, freed political prisoners. There was even popular celebration. The president of the Republic, however, remained resistant to the idea of granting an amnesty to the military rebels, because he was under pressure from leading figures in the Army and, at the same time, was afraid of the conspiratorial movements of the members of the Prestes Column, who had sought exile in Bolivia.

In August 1927, the *Celerada* Law (a set of strongly repressive measures) was approved; press censorship was re-established; the Communist Party was outlawed; lieutenants were forbidden from electing their leaders; and the right to demonstrate was limited, targeting the workers' movement, which had been growing stronger.

This authoritarian impulse strengthened the theory that the government of Washington Luís would be merely a continuation of the previous one, even though the alliance of the states of Minas Gerais and São Paulo was starting to crumble. Renewal in the ranks of Minas's political leaders, represented by the election of Antônio Carlos for the State Presidency, made the focus of the debate the criticism of the control exercised over the federal government by the coffee-growers from São Paulo, disturbing the equilibrium that Bernardes had created during his term. In its place came an unsustainable economic policy that privileged the coffee sector at the expense of the rest of the national economy. Discontent in Minas Gerais ended up leading that state to become closer to Rio Grande do Sul, led by the ambitious Getúlio Vargas, an agreement that would lead to an even more turbulent succession than that of Arthur Bernardes, and one that had unpredictable consequences.

Recommended further reading

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