



The Oligarchy Crisis of 1922: the Republican Reaction as a threat to official casuistry

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Brazil's political and cultural scene in 1922 was marked by a series of events that shook the country, including Modern Art Week, the creation of the Brazilian Communist Party, the Lieutenants' Movement, and the celebration of the Centenary of Independence. These and other episodes gave a picture of profound transformations in society. Likewise, the events manifested a crisis in the oligarchic system of representation, with a demand for greater participation by urban sectors and dissatisfaction from the military. The sum of these factors was a threat to the patterns so far established in the First Republic.

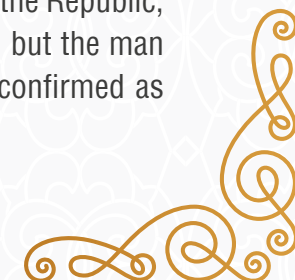
In the political sphere, the government of Epitácio Pessoa, a native of the state of Paraíba, was coming to an end, marked by fragility and dependence on other states since, unusually, Epitácio did not come from a strong state that could provide the basis for his government. This encouraged the interference of other oligarchic states during his administration, especially in the process of choosing the future candidate of the ruling party.

In fact, the main power base of Epitácio's government was Minas Gerais, the state responsible for his election and for guaranteeing him conditions of governability. The presence of Minas Gerais in the government can be seen in the figures of Pandiá Calógeras and Raul Soares, ministers of War and the Navy respectively. The presence of two civilians at the head of departments that were so important to the military displeased the Armed Forces. Moreover, it showed the strong influence of politicians from Minas Gerais, occupying key positions in Epitácio's administration and guiding the government's future steps.

This condition gave credibility to the nomination of Arthur Bernardes, president of Minas Gerais, as the government's official candidate. The names of Washington Luiz, president of São Paulo, and the former president of the Republic, Hermes da Fonseca, were put forward against Bernardes' candidacy, but the man from Minas Gerais prevailed as the oligarchs' favorite, and he was confirmed as the official candidate.



O Malho magazine, the arrival of 1922, of 12.31.1921, page 26.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.





Careta magazine of 1.6.1923. Centenary Exhibition.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



O Imparcial newspaper of 12.18.1921, edition 1,453,
page 1. Headline about electoral race.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



A Gazeta newspaper of 2.16.1922, page 5.
Announcement of Modern Art Week with Villa Lobos.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



Careta magazine of 11.12.1921, page 23. Elegance and futurism.
Artist: J. Carlos (José Carlos de Brito e Cunha – 1884/1950).
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



O Malho magazine of 5.6.1922, page 1. The dish of the day.
Artist: J. Carlos (José Carlos de Brito e Cunha – 1884/1950). Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



A native of the most influential state in the First Republic, Arthur Bernardes had been involved in the political contests in the interior of Minas Gerais since the beginning of his career, when he was elected councilor in the town of Viçosa in 1904. A prominent presence in the National Congress since 1909 as a representative of the Zona da Mata region of Minas Gerais, he was one of the politicians responsible for overcoming the *Hegemony of South Minas*, the political grouping led by Wenceslau Brás which dominated the intra-state contests from 1898 to 1918. Bernardes not only won the fierce internal disputes, being elected as president of Minas Gerais in 1918, but he also managed to pacify the state.

In 1922, in addition to support from Minas Gerais, Bernardes' presidential candidacy also had support from São Paulo and the Catete. In order to put this alliance into effect, the representatives from Minas Gerais granted President Epitácio Pessoa the right to nominate the candidate for vice-president, who would complete the ruling party's slate. The name chosen by Epitácio Pessoa was that of Urbano

dos Santos, from Maranhão, who would die in May 1922 and would be replaced by Estácio Coimbra, a choice which displeased the states of Bahia and Pernambuco, which were seeking the position with the names of J. J. Seabra and Andrade Bezerra, respectively. This disagreement complicated the formation of a unanimous slate which, according to the political culture of the Republic, would lead to a smooth election. Otherwise, the formation of an opposition slate, composed of dissatisfied states, would make the coming election extremely unpredictable.

Artur da Silva Bernardes

Arthur da Silva Bernardes was born in Viçosa (Minas Gerais) on August 8th, 1875. In 1900, he graduated in Legal and Social Sciences from the

Escola de Direito de São Paulo. He was elected councilor in Viçosa (1904), state deputy (1907) and federal deputy (1909 and 1915). He was elected governor of Minas Gerais in 1918 and, successively, president of the Republic (1922-1926). During his administration, the only proposal to amend the Constitution of 1891 was adopted. After leaving the Presidency, he was elected senator in 1927. Following the Revolution of 1930, Bernardes became involved with politicians from the state of São Paulo in the Constitutionalist Revolution, whose defeat led him to seek exile abroad. He managed to be elected federal deputy in 1934. During the Estado Novo, he remained active in the opposition, signing the Manifesto dos Mineiros in 1943. In 1945, he was elected a constituent deputy for the Republican Party. He was elected once again in 1954, but died on March 23th, 1955.

Once the states of Pernambuco, Bahia, Rio Grande do Sul and Rio de Janeiro had declared their dissatisfaction, this was exactly what happened. The dissident states converged around the name of Nilo Peçanha and transformed the 1922 election into one of the most closely-fought in the First Republic. Peçanha's name was launched together with J. J. Seabra as candidate for vice-president, ensuring the unity of the dissident states.

The launch of the opposition slate, on June 24th, 1921, also represented the creation of the *Republican Reaction*, a movement of *dissident* states that made the electoral contest tighter. The dissident strategy was to make public complaints and allegations about the political organization of the old oligarchies, as well as combating the mechanisms of fraud. The main demands of the manifesto were to revise the process of choosing the presidential candidate, to demand greater autonomy for the legislature from the executive and to defend the armed forces. In this way, the Republican Reaction sought to denounce the Republic's main political vices, stirring up the urban population against that model. The scenario was one of a new closely-fought electoral race within the national oligarchies, as had occurred in 1910.



Arthur Bernardes in the magazine *Fon-Fon* of 8.27.1921, page 16. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



The Dissident Manifesto and the launching of the Nilo-Seabra slate. *Fon-Fon* magazine of 7.2.1921, page 16. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

The choice of Nilo Peçanha as the head of the opposition slate is explained by the fact that he was, for almost two decades, the main leader of the oligarchies in Rio de Janeiro, as well as having strong popular appeal in his favor. Throughout his career, Nilo sought to ally himself with the owners of the most influential newspapers in the Rio de Janeiro press at the time, *Correio da Manhã* and *O Imparcial*, and he adopted as a political strategy the construction of a positive image for himself. Particularly important was his closeness to the journalists Edmundo Bittencourt and José Eduardo de Macedo Soares, who helped to forge a combative, democratic and original image for Nilo Peçanha, while denouncing the personalism and anti-democratic character of Bernardes and other figures in *status quo* politics.



Correio da Manhã newspaper of 11.6.1921, page 1. Apotheosis and Demonstrations. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



The civic campaign of Mr. Nilo Peçanha. *O Imparcial* newspaper of 11.2.1921, page 1. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

In this way, the *Republican Reaction* event played an important role in mobilizing the urban electorate, since by adopting massive electoral propaganda as a strategy, something unusual at the time, the founders of the movement were seeking to encourage broader political discussion, dialoguing with new and different sectors. With his campaign, Nilo Peçanha managed to break into the urban electoral area, especially in the Federal District, by meeting the desires of urban groups left aside by the state oligarchies. The candidate also scored a major success by choosing military sectors as his partners in dialogue—they had long been dissatisfied with Epitácio's government and were extremely mistrustful of the official candidate, Arthur Bernardes. Nilo Peçanha's strategy consisted of approaching the urban population and the dissatisfied military, calling on the two segments to support his candidacy.

As for his economic platform, Nilo Peçanha argued for diversification of production and financial orthodoxy. He saw the need to support domestic agriculture, weighing up diversifying production, even though he recognized the dominance of coffee and did not oppose the policy of trying to raise the coffee price implemented by politicians from the states of São Paulo and Minas Gerais. On the financial front, the candidate adopted the orthodoxy of the oligarchies' commitments, and his economic plan was little different from the official manifesto.

In an atmosphere of intense political agitation, the presidential elections were held on March 1st. The electoral results gave the victory to Arthur Bernardes, who obtained 466 thousand votes, while Nilo Peçanha achieved 317 thousand. However, the *Republican Reaction* did not recognize the defeat and, in addition to demanding an investigation into the electoral process, launched a campaign of popular mobilization and intensified military dissatisfaction. Throughout the first half of 1922, the pro-Nilo Peçanha press took a combative attitude, denouncing fraud in the electoral process. This stance by *the Republican Reaction* caused great social commotion and gave the federal government the excuse to respond with the use of force, particularly punishing the most exalted military sectors.



Fon-Fon magazine of 11.11.1922, page 26. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



O Malho magazine of 11.25.1922, page 22.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



The arrival of the future president. *O Malho* magazine of 10.22.1921, page 34.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

Conflicts between the military and the federal government had been growing, especially since Epitácio Pessoa took office, and the appointment of civilians to military departments, plus the well-known episode of the false letters—when correspondence that was disrespectful of the Armed Forces, supposedly written by Arthur Bernardes, was published in the Rio de Janeiro press—opened the way for military dissatisfaction, transforming these facts into an important destabilizing element in the post-electoral period.



O Malho magazine. The *Republican Reaction*, Shipwreck 1922, page 1.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.

With a serious scenario, a long-awaited military rebellion broke out in July 1922 with the participation of soldiers from Campo Grande, Niterói, and the Federal District. The rebellion became known as the *Rising of the 18 of Copacabana Fort* and is regarded as part of the nascent Lieutenants' Movement. On July 5th, 17 soldiers marched to Copacabana beach, joined by a civilian. The National Army attacked the group, and only two lieutenants survived. Faced with this situation, Epitácio Pessoa decreed a state of siege in order to ensure that the swearing in of the new president went ahead.



Comedy of the Recognition. *Correio da Manhã* newspaper of 5.19.1922, page 1.



O Imparcial newspaper of 5.23.1922, page 1. State of siege. The presidential succession of 1922 was marked by political tension, both before and after the election, and culminated in the decreeing of a state of siege in July of that year.
Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.



Months after the first rising was put down, in November 1922, Arthur Bernardes took over the government of a country that was still embroiled in conflicts. Federal troops had to repress riots during the presidential successions in the states of Rio de Janeiro, Rio Grande do Sul and Bahia. Aiming to ensure the stability of his government, the president decreed a state of siege and his mandate was marked by strong repressive measures.

Finally, the presidential succession of 1922 had peculiar characteristics for the period. For the first time, the confrontation between the large states and the intermediate states was clearly part of a contest for the succession, revealing tensions between the regional oligarchies. Various factors contributed to the scenario of instability: first of all, the political crisis in the choice of vice-president on the official slate; secondly, the economic measures that continued to pay more attention to coffee as opposed to diversifying agricultural production; thirdly, the rise of a *proto-populism* seen in the attention that Nilo Peçanha paid to the urban masses. But the decisive factor in understanding the *Republican Reaction* was the struggle between the principal oligarchies and the intermediate ones. In this way, the *Republican Reaction* signified a rupture with the oligarchic model, showing the building of an alternative axis of power which sought to increase the participation of secondary oligarchies. The crisis within the oligarchies culminated in the end of the regime.

Recommended further reading

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The arrival of the future president of the Republic. *O Malho* magazine of 10.22.1921, page 34. Collection of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional – Brazil.