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Media clash in Brazil: A distant mirror

After a quarter-century of intensive grassroots organizing and a victorious presidential campaign a year ago, Brazilian social movements are in a strong position as they push the left-wing Workers Party government to fulfill its promises. The contrast to Washington's current political climate is as diametrical as the opposite seasons of the two countries. Yet Brazilian activists are now giving heightened priority to the same concern that preoccupies an increasing number of people in the United States — the imperative of challenging the corporate media.

On the night of Nov. 10, at the headquarters of the Brazilian Press Association here in Rio, more than 100 activists gathered to help kick off the nationwide Campaign for Media Democratization. In spite of progress for social justice, Brazil's mass media remain firmly in the hands of nine wealthy families intent on serving the interests of conservative economic elites. The contradictions between an ascendant democratic movement and a timeworn media oligarchy are extreme.

The government of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva — known to all as simply "Lula" — represents hope for a vast population of impoverished people suffering from the country's shameful economic inequality. One of the key goals is agrarian reform — an issue that has come to great prominence in recent years largely due to the pathbreaking work of Brazil's diverse and well-organized landless workers movement, the MST.

Brazil's constitution stipulates that ownership of land not being put to social use can be transferred to dispossessed citizens. Fed up with the government's longstanding failure to implement that provision, the MST has organized many land takeovers in recent years. Violent physical attacks on landless workers by police and goon squads have run parallel to the media attacks in the nation's largest news outlets.

MST activists are being slandered and trashed by major media in Brazil. They say the media establishment is seeking to "criminalize the 2 social movements." That's why the MST has joined forces with many other groups to launch the Campaign for Media Democratization.

At several gatherings in November — including the first Brazilian Social Forum, which

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drew 25,000 activists to the city of Belo Horizonte — I heard many people compare the struggles for land and for media space. One speaker called for "agrarian reform of the airwaves."

Among the first components of the Campaign for Media Democratization is a nationwide boycott of *Veja*, the country's biggest weekly newsmagazine. Activists call the slick magazine "a symbol of manipulation." A recent example of *Veja*'s spin was an extensive one-sided article about genetically modified crops — a fiercely contested issue in Brazil, where the U.S.-based agribusiness giant Monsanto is eager to gain high-tech control over the nation's large soybean industry. "*Veja*" means "look" in Portuguese. So, new stickers promoting the boycott say "*Veja! Que Mentira!*" Translation: "Look! What a lie!"

During the year since voters chose Lula in a landslide, mainstream Brazilian media outlets have often warned against progressive initiatives while encouraging him to abandon key elements of the Workers Party program. "In this way," a National Student Union leader commented days ago, "the media struggle becomes more important."

Lula's newly conciliatory approach toward the International Monetary Fund early this month is a victory for Brazil's media monopoly and the interests it represents. But he appears to be moving ahead with some aspects of a social-justice agenda that could put him on a collision course with media titans. While laying the groundwork for directly confronting anti-democratic concentrations of media power, Brazilian social movements are also proceeding to further develop independent means of communication. Grassroots groups are making effective use of unlicensed radio transmitters that inform shantytowns and other neighborhoods in ways that are impossible via capitalist media. An impressive weekly broadsheet newspaper that circulates nationally, *Brasil de Fato*, is nearing its first anniversary. Numerous other non-corporate media outlets are already functioning, and many others are in the works.

Such outlets provide a markedly different working environment than Brazil's corporate media do. Many mainstream journalists complain that they're under pressure to constrain news coverage — whether the restrictions involve not reporting on strikes or not mentioning that a governor was booed at a public event.

After a few days of going to meetings and listening to speeches in three Brazilian cities, I felt right at home. Movements for democracy are learning how to organize for democratization of media. In Brazil and the United States, or anywhere else, a free flow of information and opinion is not only worth fighting for — it's essential. ■

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