heritage

Photo caption: Brazilian riot police push back a woman in the northern town of Coroa Vermelha during an April 22 protest against celebrations commemorating the first landing by Portuguese colonizers 500 years ago. Photo Courtesy: AP Photo/Douglas Engle

Blacks Protest Brazil's 500th Anniversary

On Saturday April 22, Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso and his Portuguese counterpart, Jorge Sampaio, celebrated the 500th anniversary of Brazil's "discovery" by Portuguese explorer Pedro Alvaro Cabral. In the palm-lined beach town of Porto Seguro in the northeastern state of Bahia, the heads of state signed a cooperation agreement, planted a Pau Brazil tree, a native tree after which Brazil is named, and welcomed a regatta of nearly 60 vessels that had left Portugal the previous week, retracing Cabral's long voyage across the Atlantic.

The festivities were met by protests by Afro-Brazilians and indigenous Indians who staged a "counter-commemoration" of the anniversary, reminding the world of the slavery and bloodshed that accompanied Brazil's "discovery," and demanding that the Cardoso government redress the appalling socioeconomic conditions of black and indigenous Brazilians. Riot police fired rubber bullets, tear gas and stun grenades at some 15,000 demonstrators, arresting 140 protesters and injuring 8 Indian leaders clad in feathers and traditional costumes, who were rushed to nearby hospitals. Critics were quick to denounce the crackdown, saying the government will come to regret its excessive show of force -- 1,000 army troopers, 5,000 policemen, two helicopters, and two warships were deployed to contain the protests. Brazil's Federal Prosecutor has already launched an investigation into the police tactics.

The group of demonstrators included more than 2,000 black activists who demanded that the Cardoso government officially recognize the land ownership rights of Afro-Brazilians occupying communities originally founded by runaway slaves. About 3,000 such communities, maroon

villages historically known as "quilombos," currently exist in Brazil, with most inhabitants living in desperate poverty and isolation.

"These people represent a segment of the Brazilian population that is determined to resist," Gilberto Leal, spokesman for the National Coordinating Committee of Black Movement, was quoted in Agence France Presse. "The state must guarantee their right to the land."

The recent unrest has reopened debates about race and racism in Brazil, a country where successive governments have proudly boasted of Brazil's peaceful racial harmony. Modern Brazil has had little history of racial strife, which makes the recent rumblings all the more notable.

"There is no national black movement in Brazil, no open racial conflict, no apparent racial tension," says Jan Rocha, a journalist who has lived in Brazil for 30 years. "Black Americans who live in Salvador say they feel much more at ease there than in the racially divided USA." According to Rocha, Brazil's history of relative racial accord stems from the specific ways in which racial identity is defined in Brazil. "One of the reasons for this huge difference between the USA and Brazil is that while in America race is defined by your ancestors – one drop of black blood makes you black – in Brazil what counts is appearance," she says. "If you look white, or whitish, then you are white. For black Brazilians it is this very blurring of racial lines that makes it so difficult to fight racism."

Brazil's 1974 census asked citizens to describe themselves, leading to a spectrum of 134 different racial categories, ranging from "bem-branca" (very white) to "bailano" (ebony); with so many variations to choose from, "black" was not considered a meaningful label to the majority of Brazilians until very recently, and partly as a result, a black consciousness movement has been slow to develop.

While this subtle, complex system of racial distinctions may seem to indicate a happy multi-hued cultural rainbow, it masks Brazil's deep-seated ambivalence about its racial heritage. In the late 1800s the country's discomfort surrounding its African heritage prompted authorities to encourage European immigration, in the hope that an influx of whites and increased intermarriage would gradually "whiten" the gene pool. "The process of whitening was invented by an injured national pride assaulted by doubts and insecurities with respect to its industrial, economic, and civilizational make-up," writes scholar Antonio Guimaraes in *Racism and Anti-Racism in Brazil* (1999). "It was, above all, a way to rationalize the feelings of racial and cultural inferiority instilled by scientific racism and geographical determinism of the 19th century."

In *The Position Of Blacks In Brazil* (1971), Brown University professor Anani Dzidzienyo describes the long-prevalent attitude: "Whiteness is better than blackness, therefore the closer to whiteness the better. The force of this opinion upon Brazilian society is completely pervasive and impacts the totality of stereotypes, social roles, employment opportunities, life styles, and what is most important, serves as the touch stone for the strict 'etiquette' of race relations in Brazil."

Blacks in Brazil, who constitute about half of the population of 160 million, continue to suffer from discrimination, political exclusion, and material deprivation. "Blacks are almost totally absent from positions of power," the BBC recently reported, "from all levels of government, from congress, senate, the judiciary, the higher ranks of the civil service and the armed forces. Even in Salvador, the capital [of Bahia] and major slave port for

nearly 300 years, where blacks make up more than 80 percent of the population, very few are to be found in government." Similarly, only around five percent of university students are black, and higher education remains the preserve of the overwhelmingly white upper and middle classes.

A 1999 study by Minority Rights Group International found that "blacks and mixed race Brazilians still have higher infant mortality rates, fewer years of schooling, higher rates of unemployment, and earn less for the same work," and that "black men are more likely to be shot or arrested as crime suspects, and when found guilty, get longer sentences." Afro-Brazilians, who disproportionately inhabit the impoverished, crime-ridden *favelas* (slums) of Brazil's large urban centers, are also victims of shocking police brutality. In one notorious incident in August 1993, police raided a *favela* in Rio's Vigario Geral area and killed 21 people, apparently in revenge for the killing of four officers by drug dealers on the previous night.

Historically, black consciousness movements have emerged to confront racial discrimination and inequality in Brazil, but most have been short-lived. In the 1970s, for example, the militant Movimiento Negro Unificado (Unified Black Movement) appeared, partly inspired by the American civil rights struggle and Black Power movement, but soon fizzled out, unable to muster sufficient popular support. More recently, groups like Geledes, a black women's organization, have taken the lead in campaigning for greater recognition and equality for Brazil's black community.

Now, debates on race and identity have taken on a new prominence in Brazilian society, and the protests for racial equality have begun to yield results. A supermarket chain in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul recently agreed to hire blacks for five percent of jobs at all levels, a landmark case for affirmative action in Brazil. A famous samba school in Rio de Janeiro invited one hundred Angolan nationals to march down the *sambadrome* (a mile-long avenue used by marching samba bands during carnival competitions) with them during carnival as a protest against a police round-up of Angolans in Sao Paolo on suspicion of drug trafficking, later found to have been groundless. And black priests and bishops have braved church criticism to visit temples of the African-originated religion *candomble*, a fusion of Yoruba traditions and Catholicism, which has been practiced in Brazil since the 18th century.

"After 500 years, we believe that we, the colonized, have a right to speak, because we have a theology and philosophy, too," one black priest told the *New York Times*. While disapproving of priests who fraternize with *candomble* congregations, the Church has been more temperate on other issues. On April 26, for example, the Church apologized for historical "sins and errors" committed by Catholic clergy against Indians and blacks at a special Mass attended by Vatican officials.

In addition to the continuing growth of *candomble*, other expressions of black pride have become increasingly popular, especially among the youth. Many young people now sport T-shirts reading "100% Negro" (the word means "black" in Portuguese), and among the black youth of Salvador, the late Jamaican reggae singer Bob Marley enjoys an iconic stature as a symbol of black identity and pride. Another expression of black pride is the growing popularity of *capoeira*, a form of martial arts disguised as a ritual dance by Angolans brought to Brazil as slaves. And in an effort to address the under-representation of blacks in Brazilian universities, students have organized pre-university courses for black and poor students aimed at providing political education and preparation for university entrance exams. At present there are approximately 30,000 students studying at these schools, paying a minimal monthly fee. As Mofoane Odara, the only black

student at the University of Sao Paolo, said in a recent issue of the magazine *Caros Amigos*, "What we are all doing, with more or less structure, is forming critical citizens who, upon entering university, will carry themselves very differently from the majority of white middle class students."

"Race is not found, but made and used," says Anthony Marx, a professor of political science at Columbia University who has written on race relations in Brazil. "[After abolition] Brazil constituted an informal racial order that was highly discriminatory against blacks and browns...They were eager to submerge potential racial conflict under the myth of 'racial democracy.'"

Now, as increasing numbers of Brazilians embrace a sense of black consciousness, it has emerged as a powerful political concept unifying those of African descent regardless of skin color, hair texture, or facial features. And the growing movement is debunking Brazil's myth of "racial democracy" and calling for true racial equality. At Brazil's carnival this year, one popular song was dedicated to the role of blacks in Brazil's history and ended with the refrain, "Wake up, Giant. This is your time. Go forward." It is safe to say the Afro-Brazilian giant is indeed awake. And with this awakening comes the opportunity to forge new relationships with other black communities around the world.

"There are other Africans in the Americas," says George Davis, an African American who frequently travels to Brazil. "There are maybe two or three times as many people of African descent in Brazil as in the United States. They are part of our story.

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