4-15-2011

Brazil's Catholic Church Slams Lula's Agrarian-Reform Record

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Recommended Citation
Brazil's Catholic Church released a sharply critical evaluation of the agrarian-reform program during the eight-year "Era Lula," the two terms of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2002-2010), that also taints President Dilma Rousseff, who served on Lula's Cabinet for seven years. Although the bishops' analysis was dated Jan. 4, 2011, just three days after Rousseff took office, it took on greater significance when the new administration announced severe austerity measures that will reduce the 2011 federal budget by almost US$30 billion.

Although the president said on March 2 that, despite the cuts, there will be a nearly 20% increase in resources earmarked for certain social programs—especially Bolsa Família, a package of aid and subsidies received by 13 million of the nation’s poorest families—most analysts and much of the governing Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) believe that reducing public spending threatens two of Rousseff’s principal campaign promises: eradicating extreme poverty and strengthening the agrarian-reform program.

"2010 worst of last eight years"

The Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) of the Comissão Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB) called 2010—the last year of the Era Lula—"the worst of the last eight years for agrarian reform." The number of families benefitting from the agrarian-reform program was reduced by 44%, and the number of hectares destined for settlement by poor campesino families fell by 72%. "It is not an exaggeration to say that 2010 produced a profound stagnation in the agrarian-reform process. The reality is that President Lula’s promise was not fulfilled," said the CPT.

The bishops, who define agrarian reform as "a set of strategic measures to confront land-ownership concentration and promote sustainable and egalitarian development," said that the process "has become a precarious program of settlements." They added that "alternative, democratic, and sustainable development is not possible" without drastically modifying the system of land tenure.

The CPT harshly criticized the former president, saying, "It is unfortunate that in these eight years Lula has relegated his proposals to the periphery of public policies and has consummated a surprising preferential option for agribusiness and the latifúndio [system of large landed estates]."

The CPT ends the first part of its analysis saying that, in strategic decisions, Rousseff will have the mission "to carry out the agrarian reform that was never done in the country."

In the document, titled "The Comissão Pastoral da Terra analyzes the political situation and evaluates the advances, challenges, and obstacles of the agrarian reform in 2010, the last year of the Era Lula," the bishops venture into a controversy that Brazilians have faced since the 1930s, when the first actions supporting agrarian reform took place in the semi-arid northeast.

"The long-standing dispute between two responses to the land issue is being tipped in favor of the powerful, as usual. On one side, agroexport groups, destroyers of the planet, are favored with
abundant public resources; on the other, family and campesino agriculture, which the Censo Agropecuário 2006 says is responsible for producing food, supplying the internal market, and employing more than 85% of rural workers, is in practice relegated to a lower plane," reads the CPT document.

The CPT, which in the eight years of the Lula administration had never criticized the former president so strongly, denounced the risks stemming from the unswerving official support for the sugar-alcohol sector—which involved clearing natural forests and converting huge tracts of land to sugarcane fields for ethanol production—and said that "current economic policy is allied with transnational businesses, mines, and agribusiness and thus increasingly condemns family and campesino agriculture."

**Quilombos, sertão, foreignization**

In analyzing the agrarian issue, the Brazilian Catholic Church's pastoral land commission addresses three central issues in which, in its view, Lula did not comply with either the foundational axioms of the PT or his campaign promises. First, the problem of the quilombos, settlements created in rural areas by Afro-Brazilian communities beginning in the second half of the 19th century. Second, the situation in the sertão, an extensive semi-arid region in the northeast that includes parts of the states of Alagoas, Bahia, Pernambuco, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, Ceará, and Piauí. And third, official inaction in response to the persistent problems of the foreignization of land—large expanses of land bought to develop projects tied to agribusiness, ethanol production, or intensive mining. The bishops are especially critical of Lula's response to these three issues.

Regarding the quilombos, the CPT says there was no political will to demarcate their boundaries, nor were technical personnel or an adequate budget from the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA) assigned to regularize the settlers' situation by giving them titles to their lands. This is, says the Catholic Church, "a long-standing debt with the people of the quilombos, which have existed since the long-suffering years of odious slavery."

The bishops said that, in the Lula administration's last year, it gave out 11 titles despite petitions from more than 3,000 communities. "In this matter, agribusiness lobbied for documents proving land ownership to not be turned over, and, unfortunately, the government was more sensitive to those pressures and those interests than to its greater duty to provide justice for the quilombos."

The document also reports that new legislation—prepared by political sectors tied to agribusiness and accepted by Lula—ignores the communities' identity rights and violates International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 regarding protection of native peoples.

The CPT report says that, in the sertão, "the perverse effects of abandoning public-policy priorities are visible." Thanks to the federal and state governments' support, mining and agribusiness have grown significantly. This is happening in the northeast and involves "projects that include intensive use of pesticides that degrade the soil and the atmosphere and are carried out thanks to irrigation funded with public resources" that benefit only large businesses.

The bishops point out that the projects into which the state has poured massive resources do not produce jobs, favor only a small group of powerful people, and are detrimental to human health and the environment, in addition to further concentrating income and land, with serious effects on traditional populations and families who are expelled from parcels of land that they have lived on for generations.
The report says that the Lula administration ignored the issue of land foreignization and that, by continuing the neoliberal policies of former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994-2002), "it lost the control that existed between 1971 and 1994." The report adds that the sale of lands to foreigners or foreign-controlled Brazilian businesses intensified and that Lula left a bill under consideration that puts very generous limits on the amount of land that can held by foreigners ("up to 25% of a municipality's area").

Given the seriousness of the situation, the bishops give certain legitimacy to this bill because it at least sets a limit on foreign ownership, which currently does not exist. But they point out that the proposed law would recognize all prior purchases, "creating an extremely serious situation that threatens national sovereignty by leaving under foreign ownership areas close to national borders and the strategic Amazon region."

Despite the new president's role in the two Lula administrations, and before she had announced her austerity policies, the bishops gave Rousseff a temporary pass, demanding in return that she take "a firm position, with concrete actions" on strategic issues regarding land tenure. These issues include: having the political will to carry out agrarian reform and defend family agriculture; proposing a model that prioritizes food sovereignty, based on campesinos production; limiting the size of rural properties; supporting legislation allowing the confiscation of lands where workers live in slavery-like conditions.

The church's position is that "there will not be an alternative, democratic, and sustainable development without a profound and far-reaching agrarian reform." Thus, it calls on Rousseff to distance herself from the policies "with which Lula benefitted the latifúndio" and demands that she do nothing less than "carry out the agrarian reform that was never done in Brazil."

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