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Afro-Brazilian Religious Groups Organize Under Banner of Religious Freedom

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When Pope Francis visited Brazil for World Youth Day in July 2013, he met with business, cultural, and religious leaders from across the country (NotiSur, May 3, 2013). Of particular note, he received Ivanir dos Santos, a babalawo, or Afro-Brazilian priest. It was a first-time encounter of major symbolic proportions given the history of animosity between the Catholic Church and syncretic religions like candomblé and umbanda, which blend African and Catholic traditions.

"For society, [this encounter] signifies that, regardless of sect, we are all brothers and sisters," says dos Santos. "It was a valuable moment for the entire world and a moment of pride for religions with African roots." This sentiment reflects a recent surge in political activism and advocacy for religious freedom on the part of the Afro-Brazilian religious community, which until recently has largely remained hidden from mainstream society.

The roots of candomblé, the best known and most widely practiced of Brazil’s African-descended religions, dates back at least as far as the mid-16th century with the arrival of the first enslaved Africans on Brazilian shores. It evolved largely in secret under the guise of Catholicism, with particular African deities corresponding to particular Catholic saints. Following the abolition of slavery in 1888, candomblé priests reconnected with practitioners in West Africa, helping the religious tradition evolve. Umbanda, the second-most-common Afro-Brazilian religion, emerged in Rio de Janeiro in the early 20th century as an offshoot of candomblé traditions.

The religious community’s recent organized activity includes openly practicing elected officials, a new political party based on freedom of expression, and an annual march against religious intolerance. In addition to providing a safe space for the practice of Afro-Brazilian religions, these efforts also have an implicit goal of countering the powerful politics of the evangelical community, which does not look favorably upon Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. Its congressional caucus, the evangelical bloc, would be the third largest if it were an actual political party. In the 2010 census, there were 42 million self-identified evangelicals in Brazil, comprising 22.2% of the population, but only 3.8 million self-identified Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners, about 2% of the population.

Religious intolerance serves as rallying cry

The increasing influence of the evangelical community in Brazil, especially on social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, criminalization of homosexuality, and euthanasia, has also affected the Afro-Brazilian religious community (NotiSur, Oct. 22, 2010). As dos Santos explained in a veiled reference to evangelicals, "There are people with political positions who want to make their religious beliefs the rule for everyone." When pressed for specific examples of discrimination against practitioners of his faith, he said, "We suffer in a variety of ways. In schools, for example, the children of candomblé and umbanda, when they aren’t prohibited from wearing ritual clothing, are simply persecuted."
In response to such concerns, he formed the Comissão de Combate à Intolerância Religiosa (CCIR),
which since 2008 has organized the annual Walk to Defend Religious Freedom along Copacabana
Beach in Rio de Janeiro. What began as an effort by umbanda and candomblé religious leaders
now regularly draws 200,000 with participation from the Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Spiritist, and
Protestant communities. By framing the issue as one of religious freedom, the leaders of these
formerly marginalized religions are thus able to appeal across the spectrum of Brazilian society in
favor of a constitutional right. As dos Santos emphasizes, "Brazil is a secular state." The repeated
emphasis of this point affirms the Afro-Brazilian religious position as unlike the more theocratic
aims of the evangelical community.

Hebe Mattos, professor of history at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF) and coordinator of
the Memory of Slavery Oral History Project, explains, "The Afro-Brazilian religious community has
been politically organized since at least the 1930s, albeit not as a political party." But, she continues,
"Agitating for religious tolerance is a newer phenomenon in response to evangelical pressure in a
political form."

To that extent, activists have formed a new political party, the Partido Popular de Liberdade de
Expressão (PPLE). Members of the Afro-Brazilian religious community founded the proposed party
on Feb. 10, 2013, and are actively seeking the 500,000 signatures from registered voters required to
officially register and elect candidates. A July 2013 press release said the PPLE will specifically seek
these signatures from within the Afro-Brazilian religious community and claims to be on track to
meet the requirement this year.

Nevertheless, communications director Antonio Garrido says, "The PPLE is not a religious party."
Rather, he explains, "It unites descendants of Afro-Brazilian traditions who are willing to contribute
voluntarily and collaboratively to establish racial equality as one of the pillars of just and sustainable
development for democracy in Brazil." He points out that the Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica
Aplicada (Ipea), based on census data, has said that 97 million Brazilians self-identify as negro (both
black and mixed-race) versus 91 million who self-identify as white, a numerical advantage of 6.5%.

Given such a demographic reality, the emerging party claims to be the home of Afrodescendants,
not only religious practitioners, as the voice of the "new left" in Brazil in an attempt to draw voters
from more established left-wing parties. Mattos explains that traditionally such groups have
been allied with those parties: "In some municipalities of the Fluminense lowlands [outside Rio
de Janeiro], for example, the black movement within the Catholic left and the more politicized
candomblé work together much of the time, generally affiliated with leftist parties (like the PT
[Partido dos Trabalhadores] and PSOL [Partido Socialismo e Liberdade])."

Historically, the black movement established nuclei within the major political parties where it
achieved footholds. The PPLE’s organizers believe, however, that issues of particular concern to
Afro-Brazilians have evolved beyond the capacity of a single party secretary and thus necessitate
an entirely new political party. Moreover, black candidates are routinely passed over in party
nominating processes. Following the last congressional election in 2012, only 43 of 513 members
of Congress, or less than 10%, are black or mixed-race. In the senate, there are only two black
or mixed-race representatives among the 81 seats. However, in Oct. 2013, the congressional
Constitution and Justice Committee approved a proportional quota, based on a figure of two-thirds
of the percentage of black and mixed-race Brazilians in the most recent census. In practice, that
means 102 seats will be reserved for black and mixed-race candidates in the next election.
Range of issues, nationally and locally, for Afro-Brazilians in politics

The scope of issues relevant to Afro-Brazilians in general, and the Afro-Brazilian religious community in particular, varies widely in the national and local political scenes. At the national level, the PPLE, according to Garrido, "must form an adequate bloc to confront the conservatism and authoritarianism of this interest group [the evangelical bloc]." He cites the need to enforce the Racial Equality Statute and to pass Law 7447, which establishes directives and objectives for public policies on sustainable development for traditional communities and peoples, which for the last four years has been gridlocked in Congress. Such communities would include quilombos, the descendants of runaway slaves (NotiSur, April 15, 2011) who have been constitutionally recognized since 1988, and are a potential support base of the PPLE.

In Rio de Janeiro, an umbanda practitioner on the city council, Jorge Babu (PT), was instrumental in establishing Dia de São Jorge as a public holiday in 2001. Later, as a state representative, he passed a similar law for the state of Rio de Janeiro in 2008. While St. George is considered the Catholic patron saint of Portugal and England, he is also identified with the African deity Ogum, as both are considered warriors in their respective tradition.

Silvio Humberto (PSB) is an openly candomblé practitioner serving as city councilor in Salvador, considered the capital of Afro-Brazilian culture. One of his signature initiatives during the recently concluded legislative session was to delay the reassessment of candomblé houses of worship for property tax purposes, and to promote regularization of their land-tenure status so that they may benefit from property-tax exemptions for religious institutions.

On March 17, dos Santos, who is also an aspiring congressional delegate, met with the Rio state secretary of the environment to discuss the establishment of a "sacred space" within the Alto da Boa Vista neighborhood of Rio, which borders the Tijuca National Forest. The forest is considered sacred to candomblé practitioners, who frequently leave offerings along the roadside. Although the current secretary, Índio da Costa, expressed concerns about the budget for such a project, it was first proposed last year to then secretary Carlos Minc, former minister of the environment under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2002-2010), who was in favor.

Dos Santos continues to walk the fine line between religious tolerance generally and promoting Afro-Brazilian religion specifically. "Currently, lots of people are defending Afro religions. This is a good thing, because it creates visibility and suppresses, in a way, prejudice," he says. "Not to stop it, but to make it such that any person who tries to be intolerant thinks twice before acting in a way that restrains another's dogma. I continue to believe in working together: all united so that nobody oppresses anyone's sect."

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