

# Brazil

## *National Affairs*

### DEMOGRAPHY

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), Brazil had about 185,000,000 inhabitants at the end of 2006. The last official census, completed in 2000, registered a population of approximately 169,000,000. Multiethnic and multicultural, Brazil counted the largest populations of African and Japanese *descent* of any country in the world. According to the 2000 census, which relied on self-identification for racial categorization, Brazil's was 53.7 percent "white," 38.5 percent "mixed-race," 6.2 percent "black," 0.5 percent "Asian," and 0.4 percent "Amerindian." Many of the Brazilians classified as "white" were of European and Middle Eastern background. In recent years the country had attracted significant numbers of Koreans, Chinese, and Palestinians.

Although about 75 percent of the population defined itself as Roman Catholic, the common description of Brazil as the world's largest Catholic country was somewhat misleading, as many self-identified Catholics (more than five million) also practiced syncretistic Afro-Catholic religions, and sometimes other religions as well. The rapidly growing Protestant population had passed the 25-million mark and represented about 15 percent of the population. The overwhelming majority of these were evangelicals, many of them Pentecostal. Some major cities contained more non-Catholic Christians than Catholics. The growing political presence of evangelicals, who strongly supported Israel and Zionism, had the effect of bringing discussions of Jewish-related issues out of the parochial Jewish sphere and into the larger public square. Other religions represented in significant numbers were Islam (the census counted only 28,000, but the actual number was undoubtedly somewhere between one and three million), Spiritism (mainly Kardecists), with two million adherents and representing more than 1 percent of the population, Buddhism, and the so-called New Japanese Religions.

Brazil was one of the most unequal societies in the world, whether measured by income, health, land ownership, or education, and therefore faced difficult policy dilemmas. President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva,

elected in 2002, continued the country's now decade-long commitment to open markets, an export/import-based economy, and a relatively free-floating currency. 2006 was a year of modest inflation, slightly over 3 percent, while the economy enjoyed the ninth largest GDP in the world with a growth rate of slightly over 2 percent. Predictions for 2007 were a growth rate of about 3.5 percent and an inflation rate of over 4 percent.

To address the large gap between social classes, President Lula had instituted the Bolsa Família (family grant) plan, which provided funds to poor families on condition that children attend school and undergo vaccination. Even so, about 20 percent of the population—more than 40 million people—still lived below the poverty line, and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers' Movement, or MST) continued to challenge the government, charging that Lula and his party had not followed through on their commitment to institute land reform. The 1988 Brazilian constitution had strengthened earlier provisions stating that unutilized lands could be taken over by the government and distributed to landless people, but few of the latter had the financial resources to take advantage of the opportunity and farm the land.

Some MST leaders sought to link their plight to that of the Palestinians. In July 2006 the MST officially declared: "WE DEMAND AN IMMEDIATE HALT TO ISRAEL'S AGRESSION AGAINST THE ARAB PEOPLE," and linked the Israel-Hezbollah war to international free-trade agreements and the issue of land reform in Brazil.

The Brazilian constitution allowed the president to serve two four-year terms, and thus President Lula, the candidate of the Workers' Party (PT), ran for a second term in the national elections held in October. The other major candidates were Geraldo Alckmin representing the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), and Senator Heloísa Helena, who founded the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL) following her expulsion from the Workers' Party for refusing to go along with its neoliberal economic policies. Four minor candidates were also in the race.

The main divide that ran through the campaign might be characterized as scandal vs. poverty reduction. Throughout 2006 Brazilians were transfixed by what came to be known as the *Mensalão* (monthly payment) affair, an apparent votes-for-cash scheme. Accusations first surfaced in 2005, when a member of Congress told reporters that the Workers' Party had paid a number of his colleagues more than US\$10,000 per month to vote for certain legislation.

As a result of the scandal many key advisers to President Lula, as well

Since the Workers' Party won control of the government in 2002, there had been increasing public acceptance of the fact that racism was a problem in Brazil. Movimento Negro (Black Movement), a broad coalition of Afro-Brazilian groups, was particularly active in consciousness-raising, and many states, cities, and large organizations now had offices that combated racism. A public debate over quotas and affirmative action developed during 2006, and the federal and some state governments began instituting such policies. Some universities, especially those located in areas with large populations of Brazilians of African descent, also instituted affirmative-action programs. The universities had previously been traditional strongholds of "white" Brazilian privilege.

There was virtually no open anti-Semitism. While radical groups occasionally linked Israel to domestic issues (see above, p. 000), even the Anti-Defamation League was able to report only one actual anti-Semitic incident for all of 2006: during the war in Lebanon, rocks were thrown at a synagogue in Campinas (a city of about one million about an hour and a half from São Paulo), and the perpetrators wrote, "Lebanon, the true Holocaust," on the sidewalk.

Several factors kept anti-Semitism to a minimum. First, there was limited contact between the relatively small community of Jews, on the one hand, and the mass of Brazil's impoverished urban and rural people, on the other. Also, Brazil's strong rhetorical commitment to ethnic, cultural, and racial tolerance was backed up by law, making public anti-Semitism a crime. Finally, the wide publicity given to the involvement of some Jewish community leaders in popular movements to combat hunger, poverty, and discrimination gave Brazil's Jews a reputation for social and economic progressivism.

Politicians both at the national level and in major cities considered the Brazilian Jewish vote important enough to warrant politicking in synagogues and Jewish community centers. President Lula was particularly outspoken in condemning anti-Semitism, supporting a World Jewish Congress petition to the UN denouncing anti-Semitism, and repeatedly rejecting all manifestations of Holocaust denial.

Outright anti-Semitic movements in Brazil attracted very few participants. One moribund old group, the Integralists, had its origins in the Ação Integralista Brasileira of the 1930s, which, at its height, had close to one million members. Banned, along with all other political parties, in 1937, it was reconstituted with the return to democracy in 1988, and operated largely in the interior of the state of São Paulo. Two groups, in fact, now competed for the Integralist mantle, the Frente Integralista Brasileira (Brazilian Integralist Front) and the Movimento Integralista e Linearista

Brasileira (Brazilian Integralist and Linearist Movement). Both combined had no more than a few hundred adherents.

There was also a neo-Nazi political party, the Brazilian National Revolutionary Party (PNRB), which had about 200 sympathizers nationwide, plus a number of even smaller groups made up largely of skinheads. While their discourse was at times anti-Semitic, they were committed to generic bigotry and thuggery and did not especially target Jews. Based in the industrial suburbs surrounding Brazil's largest cities, they tended to victimize migrants from the impoverished northeastern states of the country, those of African descent, and homosexuals.

### *Holocaust-Related Issues*

In 2006 President Lula and his cabinet visited the Congregação Israelita Paulista, Latin America's largest synagogue, on Holocaust Memorial Day.

Brazil's best-known Holocaust denier was Siegfried Ellwanger Castan, an elderly, wealthy industrialist who lived in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Castan's publishing company, Editôra Revisão (Revision Publishing House), had for many years distributed large quantities of books with titles like *Holocaust: Jewish or German?* and *The Lie of the Century*. Distribution of such publications was illegal under Brazil's antiracism laws, and Castan's earlier conviction by the Rio Grande do Sul State Court was confirmed in 2006 by the Supreme Court. He received a prison sentence of 15 months, which could be served through community service. The Supreme Court conviction raised concerns on the part of some advocates of free speech.

A Brazilian of Lebanese descent was awarded second prize by the Iranian Ministry of Culture in its contest for editorial cartoons about the Holocaust. This particular cartoon linked the plight of Palestinians to that of Jews during the Holocaust. Since it did not constitute Holocaust denial and was not, strictly speaking, anti-Semitic, it was not illegal under Brazilian law.

## JEWISH COMMUNITY

### *Demography*

The contemporary Brazilian Jewish community, which originated largely after 1920, was ethnically diverse, encompassing Ashkenazim

(primarily of Polish and German descent) and Sephardim (a plurality among them of Egyptian descent). Information collected from the 2000 census showed a Jewish population of 86,825, almost all of whom lived in urban areas. Some Brazilian Jewish organizations believed this to be an undercount and placed the number between 120,000 and 140,000. Probably the most reliable estimate came from Israeli demographer Sergio DellaPergola, who estimated the size of the Jewish population at 96,500 in 2006, a decline from the 1980 figure of 100,000. This made Brazilian Jewry the tenth largest Jewish community in the world. Break-out numbers from the census suggested considerable intermarriage with non-Jews.

The largest Jewish community was in São Paulo, Brazil's most populous city. The Albert Einstein Jewish Hospital sponsored a study of the Jewish community of São Paulo in 2002, which showed a Jewish population of 60,000 out of a total of 10.4 million, significantly higher than the official census figure of 44,000. The findings of this study must be used with caution, however, since DellaPergola, a consultant on the project, publicly cast doubt on the methodologies used. According to the Einstein data, some 60 percent of Jews in São Paulo attended synagogue only on High Holy Days or for social activities, about 14 percent attended weekly, some 13 percent never attended, and 3 percent—representing a small but growing Orthodox community—went every day. The study also showed a low number of students in Jewish day schools.

The second largest Jewish community was in Rio de Janeiro (25,000–30,000 Jews out of a population of 5.85 million), and the third largest in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul (10,000–12,000 Jews in a population of about 1.36 million). Other significant communities were in Belo Horizonte, Curitiba, Santos, and Recife.

### *Communal Affairs*

The central umbrella body representing all the Jewish federations and communities in Brazil was the Confederação Israelita do Brasil (CONIB), founded in 1951. It included 200 organizations engaged in promoting Jewish and Zionist activities, education, culture, and charity. The Jewish Federation of São Paulo had a standing commission dedicated to fighting racism, and the São Paulo-based Latin American Jewish Committee Section for Interreligious Affairs actively combated racial hatred, with support from the Brazilian National Commission for Catholic-Jewish

Dialogue, an affiliate of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops. Representatives of local Jewish federations participated on the advisory boards of the special police units that operated in each of the states to investigate racial crimes. All the major international Zionist organizations and youth movements were active in Brazil.

Jewish aid agencies—most notably UNIBES (Jewish Brazilian Social Welfare Association, an umbrella group for a number of agencies) and the Congregação Israelita Paulista Children's Home—served Brazilians of all faiths, and were repeatedly awarded national recognition for their contributions to society. Brazilian Jews published a number of newspapers and journals in Portuguese. The cities with large Jewish populations had luxurious Jewish community centers that hosted a significant number of Jewish cultural and social activities.

### Culture

Books about Jews and Jewish issues in Brazil have tended to be hagiographic or memorializing, or to address the varying interpretations of Brazilian immigration policy during World War II. In recent years there was a rise in the number of published religious texts, both Christian and Jewish, in the country, signaling the commensurate growth of Protestant evangelicalism and strictly Orthodox Judaism.

Caio Hamburger's film debut, *O ano em que meus pais saíram em viagem de férias* (The Year My Parents Went on a Holiday Trip), which takes place in a traditional Jewish neighborhood in São Paulo, was a box-office success, and was among the Brazilian films chosen to represent the country at the Berlin Film Festival. A number of major cities held Jewish film festivals that presented a wide range of features and documentaries from around the world on Jewish themes. The Israeli film *Free Zone*, directed by Amos Gitai, did very well in Brazil, going into regular release in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Porto Alegre.

Brazilian Jewry, like many other Jewish communities in the Americas, continued its fascination with "Sephardism." In Brazil particularly, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews, as well as non-Jews, were drawn by the cultural myth that many of the Portuguese explorers of the country in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were secret Jews, a belief that had become widespread in elite and middle-class culture.

The growth in the number of M.A. and Ph.D. degrees awarded by major Brazilian universities on topics of Jewish interest signified the emergence of Jewish studies as an important field of research.

### *Personalia*

Perhaps the biggest news story about a “Jewish” personality in 2006 was the death of comedian Cláudio Besserman Vianna (known as Bussunda), who succumbed to a heart attack at the age of 43 while in Germany covering the World Cup. Bussunda was part of a comedy crew known for satirical television shows and films. His humor was not “Jewish” in any traditional sense, and few people knew that Bussunda was a Jew; unlike the case in the U.S., Brazilian Jewish cultural figures rarely identified publicly as Jews. In fact, Bussunda spent his childhood summers in Rio de Janeiro’s Kinderland, run by socially and politically progressive Jews, and belonged to a Zionist youth organization. His mother, the psychoanalyst Helena Besserman Vianna, was well-known in Brazil for her denunciation of psychiatrists and psychologists who participated in torture under Brazil’s military dictatorship from 1964 to 1984. At the request of his family, Bussunda was buried in a non-Jewish cemetery, and consequently many Brazilians were surprised, and some Jews angry, when Rio de Janeiro’s Jewish federation took out memorial advertisements for him.

An equally complicated situation was the reburial of Iara Iavelberg in the Jewish cemetery in Butantã, the ceremony conducted by Rabbi Henry Sobel of Congregação Israelita Paulista. Iavelberg, who had belonged to an antigovernment group that fought against the military dictatorship, was captured by the regime in 1971 at the age of 27 and then mysteriously died. At the time, the government insisted that she had committed suicide, and on that basis she was denied burial in the Jewish cemetery. But since the end of the dictatorship many so-called “suicides in prison” had been shown to be murders. The reburial marked the end of a long legal dispute between Iavelberg’s family, which sought the reburial, and the São Paulo *hevrah kadishah*, which was in charge of Jewish burials. Many national leaders as well as the head of the leftist MST (see above, p. 000) attended the ceremony.

The best-known Jews leader in Brazil was probably Rabbi Sobel, in large part because of his activities against discrimination and poverty, and his engagement in interreligious dialogue. Rabbi Nilton Bonder of Rio de Janeiro’s Congregação Judaica do Brasil, known as the “green rabbi,” wrote extensively, applying Jewish tradition and mysticism to spiritual matters as well as social issues such as the environment. Much of Bonder’s work appeared in newspapers that were popular among evangelicals. The Safras, former owners of Banco Safra, constituted one of the most

prominent Sephardi families in Brazil. The country's most popular television personality was Silvio Santos (born Senor Abravanel, of Greek Jewish parentage), who was increasingly asserting his Jewish identity.

Four Jews were members of the Academia Brasileira de Letras, Brazil's most prominent literary organization. They were Moacyr Scliar, whose works often dealt with Jewish topics; José Mindlin, now retired as director of Metaleve Industries, a large international producer of metal products such as pistons, bearings, and oil pumps, who did much to preserve rare Brazilian books; political scientist and former foreign minister Celso Lafer; and journalist and essayist Arnaldo Niskier.

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