

# Country Profile: Brazil



Religious Literacy Project Harvard  
Divinity School

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"Festival do Divino," Danielle Pereira  
(2008), from Flickr Creative Commons.

## Overview

Brazil is the fifth most populous country and the largest Roman Catholic nation in the world. While Catholicism remains the dominant faith at 65% of the population, other religious movements are gaining in popularity.<sup>1</sup>

One in four Brazilians are Pentecostal, a form of charismatic Protestantism that has exploded across Latin America, and African-derived religions represent a minority at fewer than 5%, though a rising number of Brazilians identify as followers of these traditions.<sup>2</sup> Each—Catholicism, Pentecostalism, and African-derived religion—has a unique trajectory shaped by access to power *and* resistance to power in Brazil, and is interwoven with themes of marginalization, poverty, gender, race, and social justice. Finally, it's worth noting that more Brazilians than ever before are not affiliated with a religion—roughly 8% in 2010.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary Brazilian history spans the rise of the Old Republic—dominated by coffee and rubber oligarchs—to the economic liberalization in the 1960s, the military dictatorships of the 1970s, the restoration of democratic governance in the 1980s, and since 2002, the dominance of the leftist Workers' Party. Since the early founding of the Republic and through today, Brazil's integration into the global economy and later economic transformations—most notably economic liberalization—enriched an elite minority while most lived in poverty. Social justice movements, including the labor movement and the anti-racism movement throughout the century, have brought together a wide variety of actors,<sup>4</sup> from European migrant labor organizers to Catholic priests, Afro-Brazilian practitioners of Umbanda and Candomblé fighting against racism,<sup>5</sup> and Pentecostals influencing the political sphere as a voting bloc.<sup>6</sup>



## Contents

Overview	2
Historical Legacies	5
The Colonial Era	6
Modern Political Rule	8
Economic Policies & Ideologies	10
Religion, Political & Legal Structures	12
Relationship with Other Nation States	14
Women and Religion	17

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<sup>1</sup> "Brazil's Changing Religious Landscape," *Pew Research Center*, July 18, 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/07/18/brazils-changing-religious-landscape/>, accessed April 15, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, "Brazilian Believers Of Hidden Religion Step Out Of Shadows," *NPR*, September 16, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2013/09/16/216890587/brazilian-believers-of-hidden-religion-step-out-of-shadows>, accessed April 15, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "Brazil's Changing Religious Landscape," *Pew Research Center*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Though an economic powerhouse in Latin America, Brazil suffers from rampant corruption, poverty, and deep structural inequality that typically manifest along racial and socioeconomic class lines. As of 2011, an official census revealed that just over half of Brazilians now identify as either as “black” or “mixed-race,” yet less than 18% of the wealthiest segment of Brazilian society identifies as such.<sup>7</sup> However, it’s important to point out that racial categories are complex, and can mean different things depending on context.

While the Catholic Church is the predominant religious institution in Brazil, Brazilian Catholics are quite diverse in their theological views. For example, many priests and lay members were inspired by the social justice focus of liberation theology and mobilized resistance to military dictatorships in the 1970s. At the same time, many bishops supported and legitimized the military junta.<sup>5</sup> While much of the Catholic clergy have been closely involved with labor movements and leftist politics, Catholicism also remains the faith of the Brazilian economic elite. As such, Catholic perspectives span a broad social, economic, and political range.



Candomblé ceremony in Sao Paulo, André Mellagi (2012), Flickr Creative Commons.

Candomblé and Umbanda are the two most popular African-derived religions, primarily among Afro-Brazilians in coastal regions but among some white Brazilians as well. African-derived religions are inseparable from the experiences of slavery and represent the renewal of social, cultural, and spiritual meaning in the wake of intense racial trauma and ongoing economic and social marginalization. They provide spaces for Afro-Brazilians to express themselves in resistance to the identities forced upon them by those with power in colonial and post-colonial society, and in some areas are closely tied to anti-racism movements.<sup>8</sup> The rising number of white

Brazilians embracing African-derived religions, and especially Umbanda, has created controversy over the meaning of these traditions.<sup>9</sup>

Protestant Christian Pentecostalism spread rapidly across Brazil in the 1950s fueled by the movement of rural migrants into new urban communities.<sup>10</sup> It is estimated that more Protestants than Catholics now attend church services, with surveys indicating that eight in ten Protestants identify as Pentecostals.<sup>11</sup> While Pentecostals tend to lean conservative—especially on social issues—organizations such as the

<sup>7</sup> Tom Phillips, “Brazil census shows African-Brazilians in the majority for the first time,” *The Guardian*, November 17, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/17/brazil-census-african-brazilians-majority>, accessed April 14, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Tina Gudrun Jensen, “Discourses on Afro-Brazilian Religion: From De-Africanization to Re-Africanization,” *Latin American Religion in Motion*, eds. Christian Smith and Joshua Prokopy (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 265–283, p. 280.

<sup>10</sup> Rowan Ireland, *Kingdoms Come: Religion and Politics in Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> [Historical Overview of Pentecostalism in Brazil.](#) *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, October 5, 2006.

Assembly of God and the Universal Kingdom of God engage across race and class, and were instrumental in the recruitment of voters for former leftist president, Lula de Silva, in 2002.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most significant recent developments in Brazil includes the spread of the Zika virus throughout the country and across South America. The virus, which is transmitted via mosquito bite, has since been connected to the sharp increase in reports of microcephaly, a birth defect which affects the development of a child's skull, and can lead to severe learning difficulties. The increasing prevalence of the Zika virus, and so also microcephaly, has given rise to discourse on abortion. Abortion is illegal in Brazil unless the pregnancy is a result of rape, or if the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother. Given the prohibition of abortion by Roman Catholic doctrine and the supremacy of this faith tradition in Brazil, the law seems unlikely to change soon, despite the steadfast campaigning efforts of individuals such as lawyer Debora Deniz, who published an article in *The New York Times* on the subject.<sup>13</sup> Advocates for the broader legalization of abortion such as Deniz have emphasized the vulnerability of impoverished women of color to Zika.

Since the Zika virus has been found to be transmitted sexually, contraception has also continued to be a hotly-debated topic in the context of religion and health in Brazil. Unlike abortion, which is widely opposed in Brazil, approximately 70% of people approve the use of contraception, with regional bishops also recommending use of contraception in health crises.<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis has also gone on record saying that contraception may be the "lesser evil" in preventing the spread of the Zika virus.<sup>15</sup> In the same statement, the Pope also condemned abortion outright as "an absolute evil."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> R. Andrew Chestnut, "Brazil," *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Politics* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2007), pp. 74–77.

<sup>13</sup> Debora Deniz, "The Zika Virus and Brazilian Women's Right to Choose," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2016, <http://www.nyti.ms/1UXuXzF>, accessed March 5, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Travis Knoll, "Could the Zika virus move Catholics to reconsider birth control?" Religion News Service, February 11, 2016, <http://www.religionnews.com/2016/02/11/zika-virus-move-catholics-reconsider-birth-control-commentary/>, March 5, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Harriet Sherwood, "Pope suggests contraception can be condoned in Zika crisis," *The Guardian*, February 18, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/18/pope-suggests-contraception-can-be-condoned-in-zika-crisis>, accessed March 5, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Sherwood, "Pope suggests contraception can be condoned in Zika crisis."

## Historical Legacies

The transatlantic slave trade had a massive impact on Brazil. For decades, Brazilian social theorists promoted the work of sociologist Gilberto Freyre, who in the 1930s popularized the notion of “racial democracy” positing that Brazilian race relations and slavery were more benign than in other countries. As evidence, they pointed to Brazil’s wide ranging racial categories and the normalcy of miscegenation; whereas in the United States races were categorized as either “white” or “black,” in Brazil, race falls along a spectrum that officially includes *branco* [white], *pardo* [brown], *preto* [black], *amarelo* [yellow]—but unofficially includes dozens of other terms that have arisen to describe skin color, the most popular being *moreno* [tan]. From the 1930s through the 1970s, the Brazilian government promoted the idea that Brazil was “de-racialized,” and legally restricted public discussions of race and poverty, effectively silencing Brazilians with African roots.<sup>17</sup>



Elizabethete Gonçalves Soares shows her works near the Community Center of Pirajá, in the suburbs of Salvador, Bahia. Mariana Cerrati, World Bank Photo Collection (2012), Flickr Creative Commons.

A return to democracy in the 1980s and growing criticism of Freyre’s ideas dismantled the myth of racial democracy, resulting in an acknowledgement by many of the devastating history of violence enacted upon Africans, Afro-Brazilians, and indigenous peoples. This dismantling has also entailed recognition of the existence and persistence of long-denied racism in Brazil, which leaves the majority of dark-skinned Brazilians in the social and economic margins. Whereas before the “spectrum” of colors was used as proof of harmony, many now point to the socioeconomic weight of various labels and the tendency to interpret skin color according to class, summed up by the saying “money whitens.”<sup>18</sup> Racial intermingling has been celebrated—though less so

among the elite—in large part because it denies the possibility of ethnic individualism, and masks the real disparities that mark ethnicity in Brazil.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Robert M. Levine, *The History of Brazil* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 114; Peggy A. Lovell, “Gender, Race, and the Struggle for Social Justice in Brazil,” *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (2000), pp. 85–102.

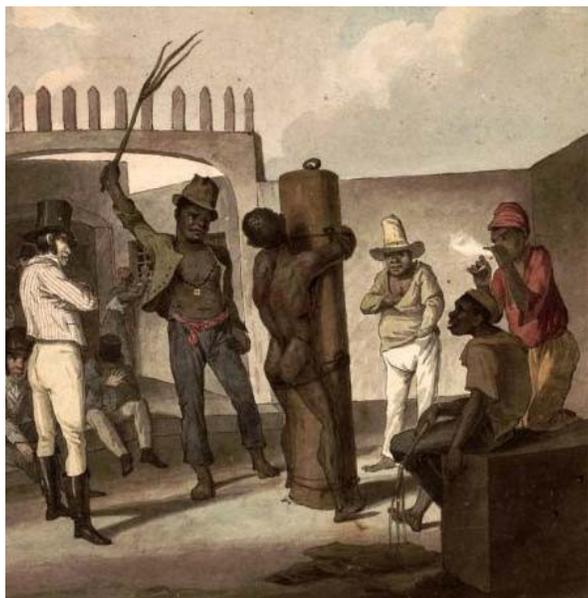
<sup>18</sup> Robin E. Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality: Color, Race, and Racism in Urban Brazil* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 5; Livio Sansone, *Blackness Without Ethnicity: Constructing Race in Brazil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Sansone, *Blackness Without Ethnicity: Constructing Race in Brazil*, p. 159.

These articulations of racial identity are profoundly interconnected with religious expression, whether in the rituals of African-derived religions as authentic spaces of personal liberation, in the social justice activism of the Catholic Church, or in the breaking down of boundaries and an emphasis on upward social mobility among many Pentecostals.

## The Colonial Era

Portuguese explorers “discovered” Brazil in the year 1500, soon thereafter exporting Brazilwood to Europe, a valuable raw material used for making bows for string instruments and the source of a dye used for luxury fabrics. Little attention was paid to developing the colony until competition from other



“Punishing negros at Cathabouco”, in Rio de Janeiro, 1822. Augustus Earle (1793-1838), Wikimedia Commons.

European nations pushed the Portuguese to expand and defend their settlements. In order to fuel the growing plantation economy, the Portuguese enslaved indigenous peoples. However, devastating European disease and the escape of indigenous peoples into the massive tropical interior made Brazil’s *índios* difficult to subdue.

Instead, over the course of 300 years the Portuguese brought an estimated 4.9 million West African slaves to fuel the sugar, cotton, tobacco, and eventually coffee industries—the largest African slave population in any country.<sup>20</sup> Most slaves died under the strain of plantation life.<sup>21</sup> On occasion, slaves did revolt, including the important January 1835 Malê Uprising of Yoruba, Hausa, and other Muslims, from the region we today call Nigeria. Strict conditions were imposed upon freed slaves, and large communities (*quilombos*) of runaway slaves and former

slaves grew deep in the forests. Though forcibly converted to Catholicism upon arriving in Brazil, many slaves continued to practice their traditions within the Catholic framework and the *quilombos* were important devotional centers.<sup>22</sup> Religion, especially Candomblé and other traditions with roots among the Yoruba, Fon, Ewe, and Kongo in West Africa, continues today to provide important spaces of self-expression for the descendants of Afro-Brazilian slaves.

<sup>20</sup> Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness*, p. 3; “Affirming a divide,” *The Economist*, January 28, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21543494>, accessed May 9, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), p. 42; Sansone, *Blackness Without Ethnicity: Constructing Race in Brazil*, p. 157.

Roman Catholicism, the majority religion of Brazil, was introduced and promoted by the Portuguese. However, Catholicism in Brazil tended to be popular, mystical, and outside of the control either of Rome or of the Brazilian Catholic hierarchy, which lacked the funds and capacity to oversee the huge Brazilian colony. Though the Vatican became more involved in Brazil after the 1930s, the popular Catholicism of the colonial period fostered religious syncretism instead of religious orthodoxy, except among the Brazilian elite.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the expression of Catholicism in Brazil has depended on the identity of the adherent and today contributes to the wide range of perspectives among Brazilian Catholics.

In 1808, the Portuguese royal family arrived in Brazil after fleeing the Napoleonic invasion of Portugal, leading to the rapid development of major Brazilian cities. After the return of Dom Joao VI to Portugal following Napoleon's defeat, his son, Pedro I, declared Brazil's independence in 1822. However, the economic and power structures of Brazilian society remained unchanged. It wasn't until 1888 that under Pedro's granddaughter Princess Isabel—due to intense international pressure—Brazil became the last of the European-oriented nations to abolish slavery.<sup>24</sup> The following year, powerful landowners allied with the military to bring down the monarchy and to establish the Brazilian Republic.

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Selka, *Religion and the Politics of Ethnic Identity in Bahia, Brazil* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Boris Fausto, *A Concise History of Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 110.

## Modern Political Rule

With the end of slavery in 1888 and racism widely pervasive, business owners imported labor from Germany, Poland, Italy, and Japan instead of hiring Afro-Brazilians.<sup>25</sup> However, European migrants were strongly influenced by radical leftist movements at home and refused to accept the harsh conditions that slaves had been subjected to, giving rise to the Brazilian labor movement. Labor activism accelerated following World War I but was brutally suppressed by an alliance of politicians, military officers, and the Catholic hierarchy, justified by the need to preserve economic growth and “social harmony.” Employers won out, largely due to the endless supply of impoverished Brazilians seeking work.<sup>26</sup>

The Catholic Church radically reoriented its position in the years after World War II. Priests, nuns, and many bishops were witness to the expanding poverty in the economically robust post-war years and became vocal critics of the political and capitalist economic status quo, strongly influenced by an



Protestors in Natal (2013), Isaac Ribeiro, Flickr Creative Commons

emerging doctrine that emphasized social change known as liberation theology. The Brazilian Conference of Bishops, founded in 1952, became the representative voice of the church and shaped its identity as the most radical of the Latin American Catholic churches, supporting causes such as the labor movement, agrarian reform, and indigenous peoples’ rights. Though this radical streak was moderated by a return of conservatism in the 1980s, it remains an important legacy that is alive among many contemporary Catholics, where progressive priests are increasingly sympathetic on issues such as gay rights and access to birth control.<sup>27</sup>

Anti-racism movements and organizations have their roots in the 1930s and blossomed in the 1960s. Like other forms of political activism, anti-racist black activists were brutally suppressed by the military regime, during which period public discourse on racism was officially censored. Inspired by the American Civil Rights Movement, activism was revived in 1970s with the spread of the Marxist *Movimento Negro Unificado*. Though encompassing a broad spectrum of political orientations, these movements were and continue to be expressed through religious practice. In particular, having played an important role in the formation of a cohesive Afro-Brazilian identity, Candomblé and Umbanda were

<sup>25</sup> Fausto, *A Concise History of Brazil*, p.118–119.

<sup>26</sup> Levine, *The History of Brazil*, p.85.

<sup>27</sup> Paulo Prada, “Catholic church excommunicates Brazil priest for liberal views,” *Reuters*, April 30, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-church-excommunication-idUSBRE93T12920130430>, accessed May 9, 2014.

embraced within the anti-racism community.<sup>28</sup> Some of its members have actually worked to purge Candomblé of its references to Catholicism, instead emphasizing its African roots. Additionally, many activists are critical of what they perceive as Pentecostalism's failure to denounce the racial status quo and occasional conflict breaks out between anti-racists and Pentecostals.<sup>29</sup>

Brazil's history of leftist and religious social justice activism is marked in the political sphere. Decades of economic liberalization, privatization, and free trade, and the immense disparities that they have generated, are at the root of Brazil's socioeconomic problems, and the dominant focus of the Workers' Party since 2002. The Presidency of Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, a lifelong labor organizer and Catholic, was made possible not only by the widespread discontent over Brazil's economy, but specifically by the support he garnered from progressive Catholics and Pentecostal communities.<sup>30</sup>

President Lula da Silva was succeeded in 2010 by Workers' Party candidate Dilma Rousseff, a Catholic and a former Marxist activist who, like Lula da Silva, is known today for a more centrist stance. During the elections, Rousseff was strongly criticized by both Catholics and Pentecostals, forcing her to take conservative positions on abortion, gay marriage, and other social issues. This suggests that, while political progressivism still carries weight in Brazil, conservative voices also play an important role in shaping political discourse.<sup>31</sup> One of Rousseff's greatest legacies includes the passing of a radical affirmative action law, which necessitates that public universities enroll students who represent the racial makeup of each of Brazil's 26 states and Brasília, the capital.<sup>32</sup> In 2014 Rousseff entered her second term and, given the rising numbers of Evangelicals in the Brazil, her backing by Evangelical churches was instrumental in her success.

In 2016, Rousseff's predecessor Lula da Silva was investigated for his participation in a corruption scandal, whereby the government allegedly used a company called Petrobras to hide its misuse of government funds. Since Lula da Silva is widely credited with Brazil's economic growth his arrest, along with the entirety of the Petrobras scandal, is a blow to the already-fragile government image. Thousands of people have been protesting the scandal since its exposure in 2015. As of 2016, current President Rousseff awaits impeachment charges for exploiting billions of government funds during her 2014 election.

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<sup>28</sup> Selka, *Religion and the Politics of Ethnic Identity in Bahia, Brazil*, p. 21, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Sansone, *Blackness Without Ethnicity: Constructing Race in Brazil*, p. 65; Robin E. Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality: Color, Race, and Racism in Urban Brazil* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 191.

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth P. Serbin, "The Catholic Church, Religious Pluralism, and Democracy in Brazil," *Democratic Brazil: Actors, Institutions, and Processes*, eds. Peter R. Kingstone and Timothy Joseph Power (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), pp. 144–166.

<sup>31</sup> "The Reciprocal Instrumentalization of Religion and Politics in Brazil," *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. Patrick Michel and Enzo Pace (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 245–266.

<sup>32</sup> Simon Romero, "Brazil Enacts Affirmative Action Law for Universities," *The New York Times*, August 30, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/31/world/americas/brazil-enacts-affirmative-action-law-for-universities.html>, accessed March 5, 2016.

## Economic Policies & Ideologies

Brazil is often touted for having one of the fastest growing economies in the world and is praised for embracing economic liberalization and free markets. However, this prosperity has benefited a small elite while widening the gap between rich and poor; half of Brazil's income goes to 10% of its population.<sup>33</sup> Poverty is pervasive, particularly among rural sharecropping families and in the large urban slums known as *favelas*. Roughly 35% of the country lives on less than \$2 per day, with just over half of rural Brazilians living in poverty.<sup>34</sup>

Contrary to the hopes and expectations of many, the transition from military dictatorship to civilian democracy failed to bring about economic justice. In 1994, restructuring guided by the International Monetary Fund caused a recession, a soaring national debt, and cutbacks to social services. Since then, not only has wealth continued to be unequally distributed, but agrarian reform has stagnated, access to quality health care and education is weighted against the poor, and taxation promotes the needs of the wealthy over the economically marginalized.<sup>35</sup> These inequalities manifest socioeconomically, but also racially; white Brazilians report an income more than twice as high as *pardos* or *pretos*.<sup>36</sup>

The Workers' Party has been celebrated by many for reducing the overall poverty rate and giving greater attention to social programming—for example, its *bolsa familia* program gives cash payments to about 14 million impoverished families in return for keeping their children in school and vaccinated and the *Brasil Sem Miséria* program gives direct cash payments to 22 million impoverished Brazilians.<sup>37</sup> While wealthy Brazilians have criticized the Workers' Party for fostering a "welfare" state—an assumption unsupported by research findings—leftists believe the party has become too accommodating in its failure to address the underlying economic conditions that fuel economic growth but which promote poverty.

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<sup>33</sup> Brazil: Key facts and figures," *BBC News*, September 28, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5379016.stm>, accessed May 13, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> "Rural poverty in Brazil," *Rural Poverty Portal*, International Fund for Agricultural Development (2010), <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/brazil>, accessed May 9, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Levine, *The History of Brazil*, p.151.

<sup>36</sup> "Affirming a divide," *The Economist*, January 28, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> "The end of poverty?" *The Economist*, February 28, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21578665-nearly-1-billion-people-have-been-taken-out-extreme-poverty-20-years-world-should-aim>, accessed May 13, 2014.; Howard Schneider, "Want to end poverty? Brazil's answer: Give people money," *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/01/31/want-to-end-poverty-brazils-answer-give-people-money/>, accessed May 9, 2014.



"Aldeia Tenondé Porã," Sarah Fernandes (2012), Flickr Creative Commons.

Pope Francis visited Brazil in the summer of 2013, decrying socioeconomic inequality during a visit to Rio de Janeiro's largest *favela*.<sup>38</sup> The Argentine Pope has revived the Catholic conversation on poverty and social injustice, which has been embraced by many Catholics, although there has yet to emerge a comparable widespread focus on social justice to that of the liberation theology era. Pentecostal churches have been criticized by leftists and progressive Catholics for ignoring the conditions that encourage poverty and instead promoting a Prosperity Gospel that promises "health and wealth" to religious devotees. However, Pentecostalism represents a diverse array of churches and varying perspectives among congregants, many of whom are directly engaged in poverty-related activism. Pentecostals have, for example, supported the leftist Peasants League in Northern Brazil and the Homeless Workers Movement.<sup>39</sup>

When Brazil hosted the World Cup in 2014, it did so in the name of boosting infrastructure, tourism, and the economy. It appears that the reverse has occurred since the country has been plunged deep into a recession, which may be its worst since 1901.<sup>40</sup> These

serious economic problems threaten the Rio Olympics of 2016, which is expected to exceed its \$13 billion budget. The economy shrank by 3.8% in 2015, and continues to contract.<sup>41</sup> While the government has struggled to undertake these huge projects, its health care is in crisis, with hospitals unable to admit patients due to insufficient funding. The dire Brazilian economy is a major factor in President Rousseff's decline in popularity—she has a meager approval rating of about 10%.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Juan Foreno, "Pope Francis visits richest and poorest on first full day in Rio," *The Washington Post*, July 25, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/pope-visits-slum-says-rich-need-to-help/2013/07/25/2fb56e3a-f548-11e2-81fa-8e83b3864c36\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/pope-visits-slum-says-rich-need-to-help/2013/07/25/2fb56e3a-f548-11e2-81fa-8e83b3864c36_story.html), accessed May 9, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Hunt, "Evaluating Prophetic Radicalism," *Pentecostal Power: Expressions, Impact and Faith of Latin American Pentecostalism*, ed. Calvin Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 157–180.

<sup>40</sup> David Biller, "Brazil Heads for Worst Recession Since 1901," *Bloomberg*, January 4, 2016, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-01-04/brazil-analysts-ring-in-new-year-with-deeper-recession-forecast>, accessed March 5, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> "Brazil's economy shrank 3.8% in 2015," *BBC*, March 3, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-35715317>, accessed March 5, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Rapoza, "Brazil's Economy Hasn't Been This Bad Since 1930," *Forbes*, January 14, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2016/01/14/brazils-economy-hasnt-been-this-bad-since-1930/2/#4e257d73722e>, accessed March 5, 2016.

## Religion, Political & Legal Structures

Brazil became a secular nation in 1891 when the Republican constitution declared the separation between the Catholic Church and the state. The 1988 constitution protects freedom of religion and criminalizes religious intolerance, which includes the publication and distribution of literature deemed to demonize a religious group. However, when the constitution was originally created, Afro-Brazilian religions were considered “magic,” and denied protection by the constitution. While religious intolerance is low overall, the vast majority of cases target practitioners of these religions, particularly by Pentecostals who characterize them as “devil worship.”<sup>43</sup>



Getulio Vargas (1930), Governo do Brasil, Wikimedia Commons

Although the constitutional separation of church and state diminished the institutional position of the Catholic Church in Brazilian politics, the Church has nonetheless played an important political role at various points in Brazilian history. During the 1930s, President Getulio Vargas restored some of the rights lost by the Church in 1891 in return for its support, and the Church hierarchy stood by the government in its efforts to stifle social activism. In the post-World War II era, the Church took an oppositional stance against the government, in part due to independent funding for the Brazilian Catholic Church provided by European organizations. The Catholic Church remains independent and institutionally separate, but also takes a position on various social issues and—alongside prominent Pentecostal churches—shapes discourse around such topics as homosexuality, abortion, and access to birth control.<sup>44</sup> Still, while the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) officially frowns on priests and members of religious orders running for office, many do, primarily at the local level.<sup>45</sup>

Evangelical churches, though quiescent during the military dictatorship, have become politically active since the return of democracy. Many church pastors personally run for office; others endorse specific candidates, preaching sermons in their support, distributing voter guides, and helping members with the mechanics of voting. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (*Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, or IURD) has even established its own political party. While evangelical assembly members span the left-right spectrum, they typically cohere on issues of religious freedom, political corruption, and opposition

<sup>43</sup> Janet Tappin Coelho, “Brazil tries to combat religious intolerance of minority faiths,” *Religion News Service*, October 10, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/brazil-tries-to-combat-religious-intolerance-of-minority-faiths/2013/10/10/3a57b402-31e2-11e3-ad00-ec4c6b31cbed\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/brazil-tries-to-combat-religious-intolerance-of-minority-faiths/2013/10/10/3a57b402-31e2-11e3-ad00-ec4c6b31cbed_story.html), accessed May 9, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> “International Religious Freedom Report for 2012: Brazil,” *Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor* (2012), accessed May 9, 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Christine A. Gustafson, “Faith-State Relations in Brazil: What Does Religious Competition Mean for Democracy?” in *Religion and Politics in a Global Society*, eds. Paul Christopher Manuel, Alynna Lyon, and Clyde Wilcox (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), p.121–122.

to abortion and gay marriage. These activities have enhanced their members' political participation beyond mandatory voting, have better defined electoral policy debates, and have held politicians accountable. However, surveys indicate that while most Evangelicals reflect Brazilian norms on issues of religious freedom, church- state separation and democracy, Pentecostals are less committed to and demonstrate greater ambivalence toward these concepts.<sup>46</sup>

Public schools are required to offer optional courses in religious education to students, the curricula for which are determined by schools themselves in conversation with parent councils. In 2012, President Rousseff approved changes that would require teaching about the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and Judaism in Brazilian schools, in addition to previously taboo subjects including racism, religious intolerance and xenophobia.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> "International Religious Freedom Report for 2012: Brazil," *Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor* (2012), <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012religiousfreedom/#wrapper>, accessed May 9, 2014.

## Relationship with Other Nation States

**Argentina** and Brazil are historic rivals. Since the return of Brazilian democracy in the 1980s, Argentina and Brazil have worked cooperatively in areas including the economy, tourism, education, and others, although diplomatic relations are sometimes strained. Several factors are at play in this fraught relationship. Both Brazil's early ties with Europe, and its preference for continuing relationships with European nations over its Latin American neighbors, remain significant. Brazil's support for Paraguayan and Uruguayan independence from Argentina (both countries are home to significant minority populations of Portuguese descent), and regional nationalist rivalries (that manifest strongly between soccer fans) also inform today's efforts to foster positive bilateral relations.<sup>48</sup> Brazilians have celebrated the election of the first Latin American pontiff, Pope Francis, which has generated a sense of regional pride bound by a common Catholic heritage.<sup>49</sup>

Brazil and **Cuba** have developed close bilateral relations in recent years, with Brazil hiring some 4,500 Cuban doctors to meet the medical needs of impoverished Brazilians—a response to 2013 street protests demanding an improvement of social services. Closer relations have also positioned Brazil as a major trading partner with Cuba, a communist nation that is gradually becoming exposed to market forces.<sup>50</sup>



"Pope Francis," 2013, Catholic Church England, Flickr Creative Commons.

**Portugal** and Brazil have a lengthy history, beginning with the Portuguese claim to the territory of present-day Brazil in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Portuguese merchants and settlers created a profitable colony, transferring their social and cultural norms, including Roman Catholicism, to Brazil. Portuguese became, and remains, the *lingua franca* of Brazil, distinguishing it from most of its neighbors in South America.

After independence, Brazil's government focused on building ties to the era's great maritime and industrial powers, first Britain, and then, the United States.<sup>51</sup> The relationship with Portugal became one of nostalgic rather than strategic import. However, continued immigration from Portugal to Brazil maintained informal lines of communication between the two countries. In the post-war era, Brazilian leaders employed this

<sup>48</sup> Karina Lilia Pasquariello Mariano, "Two to Tango: An Analysis of Brazilian-Argentine Relations," *Brazilian Political Science Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2013), pp. 118–121.

<sup>49</sup> Gary Duffy, "Wry Brazilian Welcome for Argentine Pope," *BBC*, March 13, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-21779590>, accessed May 9, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Simon Romero and Victoria Burnett, "Brazil Forging Economic Ties With Cuba, While Hiring Its Doctors," *The New York Times*, December 29, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/30/world/americas/brazil-forging-economic-ties-with-cuba-while-hiring-its-doctors.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/30/world/americas/brazil-forging-economic-ties-with-cuba-while-hiring-its-doctors.html?_r=0), accessed May 9, 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Nancy Elena Ferreira Gomes, "Portugal and Latin America beyond Historical and Cultural Ties," *Megatrend revija*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2013), pp. 227–244, p. 230.

nostalgia as the basis for a unified Luso-Brazilian foreign policy. Arguing that, "Portugal was an indivisible nation," consisting of both its European and overseas provinces, Brazil became a strong defender of Portuguese colonialism, even serving temporarily as Portugal's embassy in India.<sup>52</sup> In the 1960s, however, Brazil reversed its position as a result of a newfound sympathy for and identification with anti-colonial aspirations. Globalization and the democratic revival and economic liberalization in both countries reinvigorated their economic relationship. Between 1996 and 2002, foreign direct investment and trade between the two countries increased dramatically.<sup>53</sup> However, they have also become geopolitical rivals, competing for influence in Portuguese-speaking Africa. Brazil's economic growth provided a vibrant Portuguese-speaking job market after 2008, enticing many young professionals to emigrate from Portugal to Sao Paulo in search of employment.

**The United States** and Brazil have historically maintained close relations, punctuated by periods of distance mostly caused by economic policies. Consistent with its stance against communism elsewhere in Latin America, the United States government supported the 1964 military coup and immediately recognized the military regime. Official government policy was criticized by the American left and religious leaders (including the U. S. Catholic Conference and the National Council of Churches), who early on spoke out against support for the junta and spread news of its human rights abuses, receiving

information via the Brazilian Catholic Church.<sup>54</sup> Activism in support of Brazil would help shape the growing popular American response to American political and military interference in Latin America as a whole.<sup>55</sup>



A map of Portuguese-speaking African nations  
by User: Waldir, Wiki Media Commons.

Since the 1980s, American influence has been predominantly economic and exercised through organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which oversaw Brazil's economic liberalization and debt expansion. Former President Lula da Silva was openly critical of American economic policy and especially of the U.S.-led war in Iraq (comparing it to American interventions in Latin America), though overall he remained friendly to the United States throughout his presidency.<sup>56</sup>

Most recently, the United States and Brazil have found common ground on the issue of climate change, and together launched an initiative to increase their use of renewable energy.

<sup>52</sup> Ana Ribeiro, "Aspects in the Construction of Brazil's Transcontinental *Lusofonia*," *Journal of Critical Southern Studies* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 2014), p. 67.

<sup>53</sup> Gomes, "Portugal and Latin America beyond Historical and Cultural Ties," p. 232.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, *Flagging Patriotism: Crises of Narcissism and Anti-Americanism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 92.

<sup>55</sup> Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 60.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Smith, *Brazil and the United States: Convergence and Divergence* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), p. 192.

While new, the relationship between Brazil and **China** is significant. Brazil is China's most important economic partner in Latin America and, in 2009, China surpassed the United States as Brazil's top trading partner, a position the U.S. held for eighty years.<sup>57</sup> The following year, China became Brazil's largest foreign investor.<sup>58</sup> While the relationship provides a counterweight to Brazil's reliance on the United States, trade with China resembles historic colonial patterns in which Brazil sells natural resources and other commodities to China and imports China's higher value manufactured products. Indeed, much of China's investment in Brazil supports the extraction and transportation of natural resources.

The relationship with China is part of a larger network of emerging economic powerhouses known by the acronym **BRIC**, which stands for Brazil, Russia, India, and China. Originally, an informal term coined by a Wall Street analyst in 2001, BRIC took on a formal meaning in 2009 when the countries began meeting on an annual basis. In 2011 South Africa joined the group to form BRICS. Like the 2008 invitation to participate in an expanded G8, the BRICS relationship demonstrates Brazil's intent to increase its influence on global affairs.

Brazil is a member of the **Community of Portuguese Language Countries** (CPLP). Created in 1996, the organization seeks to expand political, economic and cultural cooperation amongst its member states. The other members include Portugal, East Timor, Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and São Tomé and Príncipe. A significant outcome of CPLP negotiations has been the agreement by the members (excepting Mozambique and Angola) to undertake implementation of the "orthographic accord," transcontinental standardization of the Portuguese language in education and administration, a highly debated priority of Brazil and Portugal since the 1930s.

Brazil serves as an emergent donor country for the *Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa* (PALOP), or African Countries of Portuguese Language. PALOP includes Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and São Tomé and Príncipe. Brazil's government initially opposed these countries' independence efforts. However, in the early 1960s, new leaders believed that the movements offered Brazil an opportunity to secure greater prominence in world affairs. They repositioned Brazil as an older brother to the emerging nations by promoting the country's history as a former colony, its common economic development aims, and its much vaunted model of "racial democracy."

While decades of military dictatorship and economic turmoil limited the resources available to promote this effort, today, Brazil rivals Portugal in the levels of its aid, technical cooperation, and influence. In part, this commitment is perceived as a repayment of the moral debt Brazil owes for its role in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its exploitation of African slaves. However, as a public symbol of Brazil's new economic strength, there is also visible pride in the transition from aid recipient to aid donor.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Daniel Cardoso, "China-Brazil Relations and the New Dimensions of South-South Cooperation," *Berliner China Hefte: Beiträge zur Gesellschaft und Geschichte Chinas*, Vol. 42 (2013), p. 93.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ana Ribeiro, "Aspects in the Construction of Brazil's Transcontinental *Lusofonia*," *Journal of Critical Southern Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 2014), p. 59.

## Women and Religion

Rapid economic changes and rising industrialization under the military regime in the 1960s transformed Brazil, shifting millions from rural to urban landscapes. While many benefited from growing wealth, many more were concentrated into impoverished urban neighborhoods and struggled with poor infrastructure, rising violence and crime, and lack of government services—conditions in which having many children was seen as an undesirable liability. At the same time, access to healthcare services expanded as roads were built connecting rural and urban areas. Family health services, including the



"Brazilian women near the Community Center of Pirajá," Mariana Ceratti, World Bank Photo Collection (2012), Flickr Creative Commons.

provision of birth control options, expanded with health care, despite resistance from the Catholic Church.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, the availability of multiple reliable methods of contraception has been remarkably low.

Tubal ligation, a surgical process in which women are rendered infertile, is the most popular form of birth control in Brazil, with between 25% and 40% of Brazilian women having undergone the procedure.<sup>61</sup> Sterilization became increasingly popular after the 1970s, primarily among wealthy women who had access to private clinics, and was often performed after a cesarean section, but sterilization soon spread across classes.<sup>62</sup> Brazilians

debated its legality in the 1990s, and sterilization was ultimately legalized in 1997 under Fernando Henrique Cardoso and determined to be the right of any woman over age twenty-five with at least two children.

Women seek sterilization as a reliable means of birth control, basing their choice on family size, socioeconomic status, and problems in their marriages. Religious belief does not appear to have an outsized impact on women's contraceptive choices; a 2014 poll indicated that over 90% of Catholic Brazilians reject the Church's teachings on birth control.<sup>63</sup> As a result of sterilization and use of hormonal birth control pills, Brazil's fertility rate has plummeted, averaging 1.8 births per woman in 2012.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Cynthia Gorney, "Brazil's Girl Power," *National Geographic*, September 2011, <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/09/girl-power/gorney-text>, accessed July 8, 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Ernesto F. L. Amaral and Joseph E. Potter, "Determinants of female sterilization in Brazil, 2001–2007," (2014), Rand Corporation.

<sup>62</sup> Anne Line Dalsgaard, *Matters of Life and Longing: Female Sterilisation in Northeast Brazil* (Gylling: Narayana Press, 2004), p. 28.

<sup>63</sup> Sam Frizell, "Poll: Catholic Beliefs at Odds With Vatican Doctrine," *TIME*, February 9, 2014, <http://time.com/6048/poll-catholic-beliefs-at-odds-with-vatican-doctrine>, accessed July 8, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> "Fertility rate, total (births per woman)," *The World Bank* (2014), <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN>, accessed July 8, 2014.

Though popular, sterilization is controversial. It is currently most popular in Brazil's impoverished northeastern region, where it is heavily promoted among poor, predominantly black women. While women seek out tubal ligations, it has also been encouraged by physicians, some of whom stand to gain financially by performing the surgery, and by politicians. The connection between sterilization and politics is especially problematic; politicians offer free sterilizations in return for votes, election years tend to see greater numbers of sterilizations, and campaign posters at times make offers of sterilization.<sup>65</sup> Politicians receive support from sterilized women, but can also make claims to be addressing poverty through population control. Perhaps the most vocal opponents of sterilization have been Afro-Brazilian anti-racism activists and feminist organizations, not religious organizations. These groups point to the prevalence of sterilization—including what they claim to be forced sterilizations—among poor black women, Brazil's longstanding experience of racism, the unclear motivations of international agencies, and the lack of birth control alternatives and education to poor women.<sup>66</sup> Anti-poverty activists note that sterilization hasn't effectively addressed women's socioeconomic conditions; poor women stay poor. Instead, they consider sterilization a distraction from educational and employment programming.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Andre J. Caetano and Joseph E. Potter, "Politics and Female Sterilization in Northeast Brazil," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2004); Jon Jeter, "Infertile Ground is Sown in Brazil," *The Washington Post*, June 11, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A32622-2004Jun10.html>, accessed July 8, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Kia Lilly Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 156.

<sup>67</sup> Jeter, "Infertile Ground is Sown in Brazil," *The Washington Post*.