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SUBJECT

INFO : AmConsul BELEM, BELO HORIZONTE, CURITIBA, RECIFE, PORTO ALEGRE, SALVADOR, SAO PAULO

AmEmbassy Office BRASILIA

October 31, 1967

Congressional Committees on Constitutional Reform
Established

Brasilia A-80, October 27, 1967

1. The Executive Board of the National Congress, headed by Vice President Pedro ALEIXO, on October 25 appointed four 22-member joint congressional committees, composed of Senators and Federal Deputies from both parties, to study four draft constitutional amendments proposed by the opposition MDB. The proposals have to do with (1) the direct election of the President and Vice President of the Republic; (2) the direct election of all mayors, vice-mayors and city councilmen on the same date as general elections; (3) the retirement of civil servants after 30 years of service; and (4) the sharing by the states and municipalities in the proceeds of the lubricants tax. According to the schedule set up by the Executive Board, each committee was to elect officers on October 26, to prepare guidance reports on November 3 and to direct a general substantive discussion before a joint session of Congress on November 6.

2. MDB leaders considered the establishment of committees to be the result of their campaign to obstruct the passage of administration-sponsored legislation which was begun on October 17 (WEEKA 43, Item 5). MDB Chamber leader Mario COVAS expressed pleasure with the Executive Board action, and the MDB withdrew its obstruction of two important measures, bills increasing the administration's emergency reserve fund and ratifying the Latin American Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, both of which were subsequently approved.

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The MDB's initial elation soon wore off, as little interest in the draft amendments was exhibited by the administration's party, ARENA. The October 26 election of officers for the committee to study direct elections did not occur, due to lack of a quorum, and MDB Secretary General Martins RODRIGUES later denounced ARENA's lack of sincerity in nominally accepting the opposition proposals for study. He also criticized the dates set for committee organization and congressional discussion, noting that the first was to take place on the Friday after two congressional holidays, when few deputies would be in Brasilia, and the second on the Monday thereafter. In response to what it considered to be cavalier treatment by ARENA, the MDB again threatened to re-institute legislative obstruction, this time on a selective basis.

4. Comment. The formation of committees to study prospective constitutional amendments is significant as the first initiative taken by Congress to examine important aspects of the new Constitution in detail. The MDB criticism, which is apparently well founded, points out, however, that there is little present hope for a full congressional debate on constitutional reform and even less for the eventual passage of amendments, unless and until the administration supports such reform through ARENA. Most MDB leaders feel that the committees will not even begin to function until the 1968 congressional session.

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