

# Fighting Corruption in Latin America. Politics and Religion

"Jesus Is the Way, but We Are There to Collect the Toll..." An interview with Brazilian Dominican Frei Betto: Part 2

By [Frei Betto](#) and [Dr. T. P. Wilkinson](#)  
Global Research, January 27, 2019

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)  
Theme: [History](#)

Here is the first part of this interview:



[Brazil and the Illusion of the Rich: An Island of Prosperity Surrounded by Misery and Suffering](#)

By [Frei Betto](#) and [Dr. T. P. Wilkinson](#), January 13, 2019

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Part II

Fighting Corruption in Latin America. Politics and Religion

*In the wake of the Brazilian presidential election where reserve army captain Jair Bolsonaro was inaugurated in January to lead the largest country in South America back to the far right, returning it to the narrower US imperial orbit while strengthening ties to the global bullies in Washington and Tel Aviv.*

Frei Betto (Carlos Alberto Libânio Christo) served for a short period as an advisor to the PT government. He resigned his office because he could not accept responsibility for some of the decisions taken where he was engaged.[i] It is often said in Brazil that the PT lost the elections by their own actions—grossly disappointing their supporters—and turning the election this year into a protest vote, which the party governing since 2002 was bound to lose. Of course elections themselves do not change the power structures of a state. And the manipulation of elections even to the point of usurping the lawfully elected candidates (e.g. Honduras) has a long tradition in the “backyard” of the United States. Nevertheless the demand for integrity and fairness in government is not restricted to those “white glove” regimes of the North.

Frei Betto discussed the issues made central to the election hysteria: corruption and religion.

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Dr Wilkinson: One explanation given for corruption is the presence of dishonest people in

the institution.

The other explanation is that there is incoherence between the institution's structures and procedures and the needs of those working with the institution.

The Reformation that began nearly 500 years ago was partly motivated by the corruption of the Church. Some argued that it was sufficient to purge the dishonest clergy while others argued that the rule of the Church itself was corrupt. They wanted another church or to completely reorganise the existing one.

The last elections have focused attention on corruption. The most publicised response was to put former president Lula in jail. What kind of corruption does Brazil have and what options are there for remedying it? Does Church history offer any lessons?

Frei Betto: Corruption has always existed in human history, including in the group of Jesus (Judas). To combat it, good intentions do not suffice nor the encouragement of the practice of virtues. It is necessary to create a political institution that inhibits and severely punishes corruption. This is the case in Cuba. The construction company Odebrecht<sup>[ii]</sup>, responsible for corruption in almost all the Latin American countries in which it maintained works, confessed to corruption in all of them, except Cuba. Does that mean there are no corrupt people in Cuba? Is there no corruption? There is, and I was invited to give a lecture at an important event of the General Comptroller of Cuba in May 2018. However, Cuban officials have to think long before accepting corruption. And in the work of the Port of Mariel, Odebrecht could not corrupt anyone.

Without this institutional mechanism that inhibits and punishes corruption, it tends to spread.

TW: Fidel and religion:

Not only did Castro give you the opportunity to explain the relationship between him, the Cuban revolution and religion (especially Catholicism). The book also shows your own relationship. At least this is what I saw after reading your prison memoir.

The presidents of the largest countries in the Western hemisphere, the US and Brazil, both claim their policies have a religious foundation. Does that make the present conflict in Brazil (and the US) a religious conflict too? If yes, what are the religious issues? And how might they be resolved? If no, what does the religious rhetoric mean—for those who are religious and those who are not?

FB: Religion, like politics, serves to liberate or to oppress. That of Jesus was liberating; that of the Pharisees and Sadducees, oppressing. In the medieval period religion was used to expand the power of the Church. Dictators like Franco, in Spain; Salazar, in Portugal; and Pinochet, in Chile, used religion to justify the atrocities they practiced.<sup>[iii]</sup>

Today, oligarchic governments, such as those of Trump, and neo-fascists, such as Bolsonaro's, use religion to manipulate the conscience of the people.<sup>[iv]</sup> This is the "opium of the people" religion denounced by Marx. The religion of the gospel, liberating, is that of Pope Francisco, that of Saint Oscar Romero<sup>[v]</sup>, that of Dom Pedro Casaldáliga.

However, the state must be secular. Confessional politics is to yield to religious

fundamentalism. As most people in the West are religious, many opportunists take advantage of this to distort the purpose of religion and make money. They announce that “Jesus is the Way” but they are there to collect the toll...

TW: The Catholic Church in the Middle Ages was probably the great “mass media” of that epoch. Today the Mass Media—mainly owned by private corporations—plays an important role in shaping the perceptions of reality and at the same time creating reality when people act according to their perceptions.

An outside observer, following Brazilian history, cannot avoid seeing that there has always been a complaint about corruption in Brazil, in political and economic life. Yet for the past several years now the PT has been portrayed as the “most corrupt” political party in all Brazilian history. Much of the PT support seems to have been lost because people believe the PT was completely corrupt.

Is this a “perception” of corruption or a “reality”? Can you place the accusations of corruption in Brazil in historical context? The statements of many supporters of military government are based on the idea that the military is not corrupt. However the regime that the current president supported was also accused of corruption before 1986. Is it possible that the corruption that lost the PT the election is a corruption in the Mass Media, too?

FB: Corruption has always existed in Brazilian politics. The failure of the PT was not to react vigorously when some of its leaders got into corruption. And I must stress that there is no proof that Lula has been corrupted. He is an unjustly imprisoned political prisoner.[vi] But other PT leaders have become corrupt. A minority that greatly damaged the Party’s image in general. And this was well exploited by PT opponents in the election campaign.

The new Brazilian government, headed by Bolsonaro, has ministers accused of corruption and under investigation.[vii] The president’s own son, currently Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, will have to explain how one of his assistants, named Queiroz, handled so much money when Flávio served as a state deputy in Rio de Janeiro.

Operation *Lava Jato*,[viii] which investigates corruption in Brazil, is a very important initiative, but assumed a partisan character. It sends to jail the PT politicians accused of corruption and leaves in freedom politicians of other parties evidently involved in the corruption.

TW: When the CEBs began to proliferate in Brazil, one explanation given was that they filled the gaps left because the Catholic Church never had enough priests for the Brazilian masses.

The CEBs were both potentially democratic and potentially competition for the growing Protestant churches. For this reason even conservative clergy were willing to work with these new forms of church.

An analogy could be drawn in secular life. The size of Brazil has always been a problem for those who want to govern it. The country’s administration was concentrated in the coastal cities and the interior was left to the control of the private sector (latifundistas). This has also meant that even though Brazil is a rich country—with much natural and human potential—there has been great difficulty creating and implementing national policies that balance the great differences between the peoples and regions of Brazil.

In the 1950s and 1960s there were movements to develop the Brazil as a whole. In Europe there was a “redevelopment” after the destruction of WWII, which culminated in the European Union. Yet the difference between Germany and Portugal show that even the rich European countries are not able to balance the distribution of wealth between rich and poor regions. And now there are movements to break-up the EU. Do you think it is even realistic to make, let alone expect, successful and sustained socio-economic policies for the entirety of a country as big as Brazil—at a time when, at least in the rich parts of the West, large highly differentiated political entities appear incapable of such policies? Does this mean that all social-economic policy will be surrendered to the private sector?

FB: The economic policy of a country always derives from an ethical option. And in Brazil, except the two terms of President Lula and the first of President Dilma, economic policy was never aimed at reducing social inequality. The goal now, under the Bolsonaro administration, is to make the rich richer and preserve this huge inequality.

By 2018, Brazil was the 9th most unequal country in the world and the most unequal in Latin America. The richest 1% of the population appropriated more than 25% of the national income. And the sum of the wealth of the richest 5% was equal to the sum of the wealth of the remaining 95% of the population. 80% of the Brazilian population – 165 million people – survived with an income of less than two minimum wages per month (R \$1,908). And 0.1% of the richest portion concentrates in its hands 48% of all the national wealth. And the richest 10% get 74% of the national wealth. And 50% of the population –104 million Brazilians– share 3% of the country’s wealth.

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## Notes

[i] Frei Betto published his reflections on this period in *A Mosca Azul: Reflexão sobre o poder*, São Paulo 2006

[ii] Organização Odebrecht, is one of the largest engineering and construction companies in the Americas. It was founded in Salvador, Bahia, by Norberto Odebrecht in 1944. In 2016, the group admitted to illegal payments to politicians in such countries as the US, Switzerland and Brazil, settling in one of the largest consent decrees in the world.

[iii] For a discussion of this topic see Karlheinz Deschner, *God and the Fascists*, 2013.

[iv] For a detailed history of Rockefeller overt and covert promotion of right-wing “Pentecostal” religious groups throughout Latin America, esp. in Brazil, see Gerald Colby and Charlotte Dennett, *Thy Will Be Done*, 1995.

[v] Roman Catholic Monsignor Oscar Romero was murdered by a US-funded death squad, while saying mass in San Salvador on 24 March 1980. He was canonised in October 2018 under Pope Francis. Romero was probably the most notorious victim of the US “Phoenix” political warfare operations throughout Central America. His elevation to sainthood has been seen as at least partial vindication of liberation theology in Latin America—persecuted both politically and ecclesiastically during the previous papacies.

[vi] Lula was committed to prison prior to the presidential elections (thus disqualifying him) by a judge who flagrantly disregarded the law whereby an accused is entitled to exhaust the course of appeal before a sentence is enforced.

[vii] The *Folha de S. Paulo* reported in the third week January that the investigation of Flavio Bolsonaro was suspended last week due to his immunity as a deputy and his election to the Brazilian senate. However new accusations have been made.

[viii] “Operação Lava Jato”. This is a kind of designation for police investigations into suspicions of large-scale criminal activity, esp. corruption, common to Brazil and Portugal (e.g. *Operação Marquês*, ongoing). *Lava Jato* is a combination of investigations conducted by Brazil’s federal police into corruption, obstruction of justice, etc. that began in 2014.

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