

The Upheaval of the Masses: An experience of political activity in Brazil

Luigi Muraro SJ

Morros (Maranhão state), where I was the parish priest for approximately 19 years, is one of the smallest of Brazil's 5560 municipalities. Nonetheless, the news of the mayor's inauguration on 1 January 2009 was reported by the national press, albeit in a modest number of words. This was certainly not because of the two and an half hour mass that preceded the public inauguration ceremony but because of the long story that today I am in a position to tell.

It all began in 1984, on my birthday, when I received a present – a book by Br. Clodovis Boff, *Feet-On-The-Ground Theology: A Brazilian Journey (Pê no chão, Vozes, 1984)*. The author, a theology professor at the Jesuit-managed Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, used to dedicate the first academic semester to teaching, and during the second he would visit the grassroots communities (Comunidades de base, CdB) in the forest Acre state, in north-western Brazil on foot. This was more or less the same sort of work that I undertook in Maranhão except that I did it on horseback. I read the book with pleasure and empathy. To tell the truth, I read it more than once, underlining the most significant parts in red. Not only did Br Clodovis keep a diary of his exhausting and engaging trips; during his breaks, he wrote profound reflections on the kingdom of God, so easily alluded to yet so difficult to identify in this unjust human society. In my parish injustice and exploitation were a chronic affliction, the source of perpetual misery and suffering. A doctor friend of mine said to me that Brazil was the Third World, Maranhão the Fourth, and Morros the Fifth! A situation that has persisted since 1908 when the most eminent family in the country became all powerful, removing, with a good sawed-off shotgun, the only person in a position to obstruct its plans.

The Capuchin Sisters, the 70 grassroots communities (CdB) and I were quite busy: giving interviews to the press and radio, exposing the abuse of power by this family, promoting street demonstrations, organising countless meetings to debate community problems, offering so many prayers to the Lord. Nothing changed: the local oligarchy laughed at our beautiful words and prayers and continued to steal without limits. Now, Clodovis's book clearly said that if we had not penetrated government structures, the world would have continued to be the same, a very long way from becoming the "Kingdom of God". The author explained that too often we imagine our adversaries are invincible, while in reality we can count on the support of many people of good will whose work remains unknown simply because nobody publicises their

efforts. It was exactly like this in Morros: the town lacked an opposition party! There was only the party of the old “cunning” politicians.

After having read and pondered over these pages and the various thoughts that they aroused, I decided towards the end of April of the following year to convey my conclusions to the Capuchin Sisters who worked with me in the parish. Almost going directly to the point, I told Sisters Rita, Lourdes and Piedade: “We have to establish a political party and seize power!” It was not easy. The idea appeared so strange to them and so far from their way of thinking that they resisted for a couple of months. But I didn’t give up, and, in the end, they agreed. “Easier said than done”, as the saying goes. At this point, I was unable to go any further for a number of sound reasons. It was up to the sisters to take the initiative forward: they were all Brazilians, fighters, really involved in sharing the lot of the poor.

I knew they would not be afraid of the obstacles ahead of them. Then the opportunity arrived. On 20 August, the feast of the town’s patron saint, Bernard, people from the area normally came to Morros in large numbers. Among them were the leaders of our grassroots communities (CdB) and this is what happened this time. While I was celebrating the solemn liturgy in the old small church bursting at the seams, the sisters, enclosed in the parish house with our most trusted men, founded the opposition party, the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (the PMDB in Portuguese), the only one that was possible in those days. There was a lot to do filling in the party registration forms (the judge forced us to re-do them three times, because of certain inaccuracies); however, in the end we were registered to participate in the electoral campaign just before the deadline expired. Despite not having flyers, posters, loudspeakers or contact with the press, the old political class were left astonished when, in the election of 3 October, we managed to get to win the majority of the seats in the municipal town council: all farmers! As we lacked an appropriate candidate, we did not present anybody for the position of mayor. Unfortunately, we quickly realised that our success counted for not very much. In the administration of the municipality, councillors are just symbolic figures, little more. All the power (and the money) is concentrated in the hands of the mayor. This disappointment was followed by ridicule: the mayor also bought the vote of one of the councillors elected on our party list.

We waited for the next elections and this time we presented a candidate for the role of mayor: a farmer who had been the president of a rural trade union. This time the victory was absolute! But, unfortunately, our new mayor was poorly prepared for the role that he had taken on. And to make the situation worse, his relatives from the nearby city of São Luís were real rogues. We expected change but... nothing! Everything continued as before. An air of impatience and dissatisfaction permeated our grassroots communities (CdB). At the end of the year, a parish assembly of almost 400 people was organised

and the mayor was summoned to explain his actions. Somewhat embarrassed, he sincerely recognised his inactivity and promised he would do better the following year.

He never had the time to implement his worthy proposals. At the beginning of January of the following year, sinister voices began to circulate. Wherever the mayor went, suspicious individuals were frequently spotted in the vicinity. His family began to feel afraid. His older sister, a Dorotea Sister and a close friend of mine, came to me and confided her fears. Lacking experience of the rotten side of the world of politics, I did not give it any weight and responded: "Don't worry: those people are not capable of killing a fly". Two weeks later - 31 January 1991 - the mayor was murdered by an assassin in front of his terrified wife on the doorstep of his home. Notified immediately, I ran over to the spot ... the body still lay on the ground...The sister, despondent, pointed her finger at me and shouted: "Here they are, the threats!" I felt a huge agony inside, an immense sadness. The wake for the mayor, held in Morros Church, lasted three days.

Everybody knew who the assassins were: we waited for the police to arrest them immediately. Nothing happened. After the funeral, our adversaries returned to power. Though it took time to complete the necessary investigations, in the end the police arrested those responsible for planning the crime. Heavens above! The judge had just issued the arrest warrants when 99 percent of the politicians in Maranhão - senators and deputies of the state parliament - used all their political influence, forcing him immediately to free the accused. Since then, the issue has never been discussed in public.

At this point the local mafia thought it was an opportune moment to get rid of me as well. Even though I had always kept a certain distance from the political debate, I was considered to be the driving force behind the whole process. The plan to kill me - a fake road accident - wasn't a stupid one, but somehow it became public and was abandoned (provisionally, as we will see later on). We lost the next elections by a handful of votes, but we did not lose heart. And in 1996, the grassroots communities (CdB) presented a young teacher, Clovis Bacellar, a highly conscientious student of mine from the age of 10, as a candidate for the mayoral elections. The victory was spectacular: more than 60 percent of the suffrage. His administration was even more spectacular: hospitals with doctors and medicines; new roads in the outskirts of the town; a transport service for students living in the rural area of the municipality; an aqueduct and so on. Finally, we had visual proof that our utopia was becoming a reality.

There is an interesting event of that time which I should not omit. Despite their heavy defeat, our adversaries continued with their threats. I was already in Marabá in Pará state when I was informed of the threats. Since the secretary

of the Brazilian president was a friend of mine (we had studied together in Nova Friburgo), I wrote a letter to him explaining the circumstances and a list of the names of those responsible for the assassination of the mayor, beginning with a senator. The secretary passed my message on to a federal deputy for Maranhão, who in turn gave it to the interested parties. They promptly denied the accusation, proclaiming their innocence. But nobody, the public nature of the document notwithstanding, sued me for slander. On the contrary, on the 1999 feast of *Nossa Senhora Aparecida*,¹ they sent four gunmen who broke into my house, but luckily I wasn't in. Once more I had escaped the threat, thanks to divine protection and the timely intervention of the military and federal police. Nevertheless, for my personal security, our regional superior (at that time Father Claudio Perani) ordered me to go to Belém for a couple of weeks.

In the 2000 elections, Clovis Bacellar was re-elected with a substantial majority. At this point it is necessary to explain that Clovis, from the time he was first elected as mayor, always lived with an armed bodyguard who accompanied him wherever he went, day or night. But to live always with a stranger at one's side was tiring. Intimacy with his family suffered the most. For that reason, in November 2002, Clovis decided to dispense with the services of his "protector", an understandable, but fatal decision. In the last week of December, Clovis rang me in Marabá. He was very worried because he had heard about a recent, extremely secret meeting of his political adversaries. To ease his fears, he decided to pay me a visit with his family in mid-January. That trip never took place: on the night of 14 January he was assassinated in ambush. How? Exactly the same way that, 12 years earlier, our enemies had planned to kill me: a car accident. They didn't even change the location. I received the tragic news on 15 January. I immediately got into my car, and in about 10 hours drove the 800 km which separated Marabá from Morros. After only 12 years, violence had defeated the forces of good - Clovis, 37 years of age. He left behind four children, the eldest of whom was 15, and a wife, Silvana. Again so many tears, so much weeping, so many questions: why?

The investigation was not a serious one: the authorities closed the case in haste. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, it was classified as a simple car accident. I shall say nothing of all that happened in the years that followed: dismay, impunity, division. Nevertheless, in 2008, there were fresh elections and the grassroots communities (CdB) (and other people of good will) approved Silvana, Clovis's widow, as their candidate. The supporters of the old oligopoly contested the elections with significant financial resources. In fact, they even 'bought up' many of our leaders. But the local members of the grassroots communities (CdB) (*gli anawin dei Vangeli*) did not give up. On the eve of the elections of 4 October I received a letter in Manaus from a close friend in Morros in which he said, "The prospects are bleak". That election day

¹ Our Lady who Appeared on 12 October

I was at Januacà Lake on the edge of the Amazon River. I raised my eyes to heaven and said this simple prayer: "Lord, do me one favour: make Silvana win". I felt inside that He had heard me. The following morning, back in Manaus, I learned that I had not been mistaken: Silvana had won by a margin of 100 votes or little more (4,700 to 4,600).

On 1 January 2009, after three days of travel by car, airplane and coach, I arrived in Morros for the commemoration, once again, the victory of the united poor of the word of the gospel. Silvana, accepting the role as leader of the municipality, began her discourse saying: I am not here to serve myself, but to do the will of the Lord: to serve the people of Morros.

Luigi Muraro SJ
Brazil

*Original Italian
Translation by James Stapleton*