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Racial Quotas in Brazil Touch Off Fierce Debate

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RIO DE JANEIRO, April 4 —

The Brazilian government, responding to demands to improve the lot of the black population, has begun imposing racial quotas for government jobs, contracts and university admissions. But that has unleashed an acrimonious debate in a country that traditionally prides itself on being a harmonious "racial democracy."

The initial battleground is a pair of public universities here, which have just accepted a freshman class that is 40 percent black. As in the United States, though, white students who were not admitted despite scoring higher on entrance examinations have challenged that action in courts. They contend that they are being denied the "equality of access to schooling" guaranteed by Brazil's 1988 Constitution. Civil rights advocates in this nation of 175 million, which has the largest black population of any nation outside of Africa, predict that the debate is likely to intensify even further as a result of a sweeping racial Equality Statute now before Congress.

That bill, supported by the left-wing government that took power here on Jan. 1, would make racial quotas obligatory at all levels of government and require them even in casting television programs and commercials. "This policy is absolutely correct in terms of philosophy and ethics," Justice Minister Márcio Thomaz Bastos said at a news conference with foreign reporters here this week. "I have no doubt of it. After all, this country has an enormous debt because of the iniquity that was slavery in Brazil."

As a byproduct of the debate, Brazilians are also being forced to define who is black, a process they find puzzling and alien. More than 300 terms are used to designate skin color — from the dark-skinned crioulo to the light-skinned brancarao — and racially mixed relationships are the norm rather than the exception. As a result, racial categories have never been defined as they were in more segregated countries.

College admission in Brazil is highly competitive, with many more applicants than places available, especially for prestigious public universities, and entrance examination scores count for everything. Of the 1.4 million students admitted to universities in Brazil each year, only 3 percent identify themselves as black, and only 18 percent come from the public schools, where most black Brazilians study. Because of the university admissions dispute here, the Supreme Court has been asked to rule on the constitutionality of racial quotas, and has indicated that it will do so quite soon. Since the chief justice himself imposed a hiring quota for court employees last year, civil rights advocates are expecting a favorable decision, which they say could have an impact here comparable to that of *Brown v. Board of Education* in the United States.

"This is a historic moment, and the court has a historic opportunity to undo the terrible injustice that was committed in 1888," when slavery was legally abolished but no government support was provided to newly freed blacks, said Zulu Araújo, a director of the Palmares Foundation, a government agency that addresses the interests of black Brazilians. "I have no doubt that the justices will vote in favor of quotas and establish the new paradigm of racial equality that this country needs."

But critics of the measures say the government is merely making a difficult problem worse by turning to what they consider to be a solution imported from the United States, a country in which racial definitions and relations are very different. "Do they want racial war in Brazil?" said a recent article in the daily *O Estado de São Paulo*, which also complained in an editorial that the government was "officializing racial discrimination." Some opponents of racial quotas also argue that racism is not a feature of Brazilian society and that conditions for blacks will improve as poverty is gradually eliminated.

But civil rights advocates point to statistics showing that white Brazilians earn more, live longer, receive more education and are less likely to be arrested than black citizens. "This is not merely a social problem," said José Vicente, a lawyer and sociologist in São Paulo who is president of Afrobras, a black advocacy group. "We have to recognize that this is a racist society and that people with dark skin have been systematically excluded from space in that society for more than 400 years."

Under the new system for college admissions adopted here, all applicants declaring themselves to be of "African descent" on admission forms are considered to be black and given preferential treatment. But that has led to complaints of abuses, in which students who do not have dark skin or features considered African — including some of Asian or Jewish descent — have designated themselves as black to improve their chances of being admitted.

No one can agree, however, on a better system. In a televised campaign debate last year, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, now the country's president, was widely criticized when he maintained that "scientific criteria" could be used to determine who is black. "A black person," Mr. Bastos said this week, "is someone who feels black and lives as a black. I don't believe there is any objective, scientific criteria."

Since assuming office three months ago, Mr. da Silva has taken a number of steps, both practical and symbolic, to stress his commitment to racial equality. His cabinet includes four black members, among them the minister of a newly created Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality, and he has made clear his intention to name the first black justice to the Supreme Court.

Among advocates of quotas, the government's sympathy to their position is stimulating a parallel debate over what percentage should be set aside for blacks. According to census figures, about 45 percent of Brazil's 175 million people consider themselves to be black or "pardo," a broad and deliberately vague designation that can be applied both to those who are of mixed race and people of Indian descent. But many of those pushing hardest for quotas argue that the ceiling should be set, at least for the moment, at 20 percent. "Anything more than that is doomed to failure and would lead to a social convulsion," said Mr. Vicente, the leader of the black advocacy group.

Others contend that quotas should vary from state to state and be based on the percentage of the population that is black or brown. More than 80 percent of people in the northeastern state of

Bahia fall into that category, while fewer than 10 percent of the population in states in the far south bordering Argentina describe themselves as Afro-Brazilians.

"This whole debate about quotas and who is black is just a diversion that masks more serious issues that we haven't addressed yet," Mr. Araújo said, somewhat impatiently. "Any doorman knows who is black and should be sent to the service entrance, just as any cop knows who is black and should be stopped on the street and ordered to produce identification."

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