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SOME SOUTHERN BRAZILIANS WANT OUT

Jeb Blount, Special to The Christian Science Monitor

SANTA CRUZ DO SUL, BRAZIL— IRTON MARX is fed up with fighting Brazil's bad image.

The squalid shantytowns, corrupt politicians, and economic chaos some foreigners associate with Brazil hardly exist in Santa Cruz do Sul, a

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prosperous, squeaky-clean city of 150,000 in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Portuguese signs remind visitors that they are in Brazil, but the fair-haired, light-skinned locals seem more a part of Germany or Northern Italy than the compatriots of the Iberian, Indian, and African peoples who dominate the rest of the country.

Furthermore, Mr. Marx can't stand samba. For a good time, he prefers the polka music of the Biergarten. Carnival, he says, is "disgusting."

Marx is so fed up that he wants out. As the leader of the Santa Cruz-based, Pro-Pampa Movement, he is fighting hard for the separation of Brazil's three southernmost states and the creation of an independent Federal Republic of the Gaucho Pampa, the plains area in southern Brazil defined by its cowboy past.

"Brazil is like the old Roman Empire; it is big and falling apart," says Marx, a blue-eyed, sandy-haired owner of a clothing factory and a publishing company. "Our culture and economy are different here in the south. We are part of the first world. We are subsidizing the whole country and getting nothing back. Our high-tech industries are being hurt by Brazil's horrible image of corruption and mismanagement."

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Weddings

Amid Brazil's economic crisis and in the run-up to an April 21 referendum that may restructure the federal government, the Pro-Pampa Movement is probably the most explicit example of longstanding regional bickering over fiscal and political issues.

The movement already has a flag, is issuing identity cards, and claims more than 700,000 official members in Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Parana - the three states he hopes will secede, with a total population of about 22 million. Marx says he wants to adopt the deutsche mark as the currency of the new republic and make German and Italian official languages alongside Portuguese.

Compared to the rest of Brazil, slavery was rare in the south and much of the region is dominated by descendants of immigrants who came from Germany and Northern Italy in the last half of the 19th century. In Santa Cruz and other cities German language is a required subject in school.

The region's "Teutonic" character, Marx says, is threatened by the mass migration of poor, unskilled, and mostly non-white workers from the impoverished Brazilian northeast.

"When we are in the factory working," he explains, "the northeasterner is

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on the beach. Our republic won't have any preference or prejudice toward any ethnic or religious group, but we want to maintain our way of life. We don't want shantytowns of Rio or Sao Paulo." Real grievances

Even the many political figures and newspapers who denounce the Pro-Pampa Movement's racist overtones admit that its strength is based on real grievances.

"The disintegrating effects of the global economy are happening in Brazil too," said Espacio Camargo, a leading Brazilian historian who has debated Marx. "In the face of this, Brazil has begun to fall apart. I happen to think that this Pro-Pampa Movement is proto-fascist, but it is based on honest concerns."

In particular, Ms. Camargo says, the country's 50-year-old nationalist economic and political model no longer functions. Under this model, economic power was concentrated in such cities as Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro and a disproportionate share of political power was given to an almost feudal political elite in the plantation states of the Northeast.

Businesses in the south, the strongest Brazilian bastion of private enterprise, has found it hard to compete against the state-owned

monopolies and subsidized cartels that grew naturally out of Brazil's state-led, development-at-any-cost philosophy. The south is the agricultural heartland, but it has suffered from promotion of farming in frontier regions and restrictive export markets.

Outnumbered in Congress, the south also receives few government services in return for its taxes, political analysts say. Unlike other regions, it depends primarily on local and state funding for public expenditures. Huge transfers of wealth to the north have made the powerful elites there richer without dramatically helping the poor, discrediting the federal system even in the eyes of southern supporters of Brazilian nationalism.

These distortions, Camargo says, are exacerbated by Brazil's deep economic crisis.

"The economic problems we are facing - high inflation, huge debt, bureaucracy - have made the soft spots of our system even weaker," she says. "The central government is out of touch and each region is fighting against the other for resources. In such circumstances, it is easy for movements like Marx's to flourish. These are upstanding middle class people like those in Weimar Germany. They have good reasons, but crisis is making them take it to extremes."

Camargo's concerns are echoed by Rio Grande do Sul Gov. Alceu Collares. Mr. Collares, the son of black and Indian parents, opposes secession, but his economic and political grievances are almost identical to Marx's. Seeking justice

"I believe this state has pride in being Brazilian and in national unity," Collares says. "We aren't in the business of attacking other regions, but we must have economic and political justice. We are under-represented in Congress and constantly see our resources squandered."

Marx says it is only a matter of time before people like Collares come to the same conclusion he has reached.

"The whole world is going in the same direction," he says. "Smaller countries mean better government. No large country will escape fragmentation, not even the United States. Our leaving will be the best thing that ever happened to Brazil. It will force them to change, and we will all be better off."

Marx takes pains to insist that his movement is not racist.

"There is a prejudice against Germans throughout the world," he says.

"The minute we talk about preserving our culture we are called Nazis. Black people can talk about black pride, why can't we talk about German pride? We are German and we want to preserve our culture."

Almost as soon as he says this he launches into a joke: "Did you hear the story about Collares's visit to the zoo after he was elected? The gorilla there said to him: 'Who's your lawyer? I've been locked in here for seven years, and you're out there free.' "

After a good chuckle he adds: "Don't get me wrong. I have nothing against black people. We just want people who work. Collares is with us, I know. The blacks in our factory work hard and I drink from the same cup they do."

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