

Brazil's evangelical movement has become a major social, political force

By Jack Chang

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BRASILIA, Brazil - When Marcos Vinicius Dal Bello isn't leading prayers in his church's youth group, he's hitting central Brazil's highways and red-dirt side roads to drum up votes for his bishop.

Dal Bello, 23, credits the bishop, Robson Rodovalho, and the Sara Nossa Terra church with saving his troubled family, which was on the verge of falling apart before joining the huge evangelical church.

Now, he wants the church to rescue his country of 187 million people from what he considers a moral and political crisis. So does Rodovalho, an energetic former rock singer who's running for a seat in the country's Chamber of Deputies.

"Many people are standing up these days only to destroy," Dal Bello said recently while rushing between campaign events. "They want to destroy the family, to legalize drugs everywhere. We're here to spread the message of life. But it's not just this. We want to see society embrace the word of God."

Brazil's evangelical movement, which U.S. churches started a century ago, has exploded in this traditionally Roman Catholic country, nearly doubling during the 1990s to some 26.2 million people, or about 15 percent of the population, according to the most recent census, taken in 2000.

Evangelical leaders have ridden that wave to political power and pulled thousands of their followers into the political fray. They've bought dozens of newspapers and television and radio stations across the country in search of souls and votes.

"The evangelicals are opening political space for themselves and making room for what they see as their enormous potential," said sociologist Maria das Dores Campos Machado, an expert on the movement. "Growth is the objective here."

More than 60 evangelical Congress members, about 10 percent of the legislature, are the country's most effective legislative caucus. Their numbers have almost doubled since 1988.

In the state of Rio de Janeiro, the country's third most populous and the home to the country's largest evangelical churches, the past three governors have been evangelicals who made their religion a selling point.

The movement's power has risen to such levels that visits to Baptist, Pentecostal and other evangelical churches, usually cavernous buildings on the poor peripheries of major cities, have become crucial for candidates in the run-up to Brazil's presidential election on Sunday.

Over the past month, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has met at least three times with evangelical leaders in his bid for re-election. A Catholic and former radical leftist, Lula is trying to win the support of Pentecostal voters, which he failed to do four years ago.

"For many years of my life, people said if I was elected, I would close the doors of evangelical churches," he said recently at a temple of the Assembly of God, the country's biggest evangelical church, on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro.

"I say today that the evangelical church doesn't have any doubts about President Lula, and President Lula doesn't have any doubts about the evangelical church."

Some Catholics and rival politicians have concerns about the movement. Brazil has the world's largest Catholic population, estimated at about 125 million people.

Brazilians refer to any non-Catholic Christian as "evangelical," and the movement encompasses dozens of denominations. Pentecostal churches, Brazil's largest and fastest growing, emphasize the experience of conversion, focus on the divinity of Jesus Christ and consider the Bible the direct word of God.

Critics have condemned evangelicals for mixing worship and politics in a country that respects a separation of church and state. The leftist Socialism and Liberty Party recently pulled Rodovalho into one of Brazil's electoral courts for campaigning from the pulpit.

The bishop responded that evangelicals are forging a new electoral force that believes that politics, religion and daily life are inseparable.

At Sara Nossa Terra, Rodovalho is known to turn his services into household budgeting workshops, and his church, which claims 600,000 members worldwide, prides itself on catering to young members. Some services are mixed with hip-hop and Brazilian funk dance classes.

"For many people, this has long been a rule that faith and politics don't mix," he said. "We are breaking this and building a consciousness that says faith is an integral part of public life."

Brazil's evangelical legislators persuaded government agencies to let them distribute many forms of public assistance, even welfare checks, winning millions of converts.

Evangelical legislators in Brazil also have used congressional committees to expand the church's reach, awarding television and radio licenses to churches that have helped them expand internationally.

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, for one, has opened hundreds of churches in 90 countries, including 78 in the United States. Its main temple, located in a middle-class neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, seats some 10,000 worshippers.

"The evangelical churches are as powerful or more powerful than the Catholic Church now," said Brasilia-based political analyst Alexandre Barros. "They're moving a lot of legal money across borders to fund their expansion."

Most but not all evangelical politicians in Brazil are social conservatives. Most make opposition to abortion and gay marriage top issues. Both are illegal in Brazil. But some evangelical politicians argue for allowing abortion in some cases.

Evangelicals are among the leaders of Lula's center-left Workers' Party, as well as of more conservative parties.

They haven't been immune to the scandals that have paralyzed Brazil for months. Almost half of the members of the evangelical caucus are accused of participating in a wide-ranging corruption scheme in which legislators allegedly took bribes to buy overpriced ambulances with public funds.

"This is a political persecution," said one of those accused, Deputy Adelor Vieira. "There is still a tremendous amount of discrimination against evangelicals, and we are victims of that."

The scandals have disappointed many worshippers, but they haven't dampened enthusiasm for the churches, Dal Bello said.

"When you find something good, you want to share it with the world. That's why we're doing this campaign. This country needs God's help."

BRAZIL'S BIGGEST EVANGELICAL DENOMINATIONS (IN 2000)

Assembly of God, Pentecostal, 8,418,140 members

Baptist Evangelical Church, Baptist, 3,162,691 members

Congregational Christian Church of Brazil, Pentecostal, 2,489,113 members

Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Pentecostal, 2,101,887 members.