BELÉM, Brazil — SOME Brazilian politicians duck questions about the scope of their aspirations, insisting they have absolutely no plans, say, of running for mayor of São Paulo, seeking a cabinet post or wielding power from some other coveted perch in Brazil’s huge bureaucracy.

Then there is Roberto Mangabeira Unger, the Harvard philosopher who once counted Barack Obama among his students. Not given much to small talk, Mr. Unger is known to quote Hegel and Thomas Jefferson in the same breath. He expounds on subjects like the human condition.

When an interviewer once asked him if he hoped to become president of Brazil, Mr. Unger said with a laugh, “I was always much more ambitious than that.”
Bespectacled, wielding a pocket watch and almost always clad in a suit, tie and cuff links — even when he is traveling into the far reaches of the Amazon rain forest — Mr. Unger, 68, cuts a singular figure in Brazilian politics.

**The Saturday Profile**

*A weekly profile of the individuals who are shaping the world around them.*

Known in the United States for the 1998 book he wrote with Cornel West, “The Future of American Progressivism,” Mr. Unger once dabbled unsuccessfully in electoral politics in Brazil but more recently has settled into a career as an appointed public figure. In February, Brazil’s president, Dilma Rousseff, named him to the post of minister of strategic affairs, charged with fostering long-term thinking about Brazil, plucking him from Harvard Law School where he has held tenure since the 1970s.

Photo

Mr. Unger, second from left, in Melgaço. His philosophy conceives of Brazil as a “great creative anarchy.” Credit Marizilda Cruppe for The New York Times

In an interview aboard the private jet operated by the Brazilian Air Force that he uses to travel around the country, Mr. Unger explained that he viewed his role as an intellectual provocateur of sorts. “I have to create tension within the administration and agitate outside.”
He acknowledges that he lacks the common touch. In 1990, for example, he ran for Congress in Rio on a platform of improving life in the favelas, the poor areas that largely began as squatter settlements. After he lost, he found that most of his support came from middle-class areas where he had not bothered to campaign.

He suffers from something of a language barrier, speaking ornate Portuguese with a thick American accent and formally addressing residents of remote jungle outposts as “my fellow citizens.”

“I can’t really understand him,” said Miguela Freitas, 32, a student studying to earn her teaching degree in Melgaço, an isolated town in the Amazon where Mr. Unger and his entourage blew through on a whirlwind tour of the vast Pará State in June. “He’s very serious, like a pastor at the pulpit,” she said, eyeing Mr. Unger as he spoke.

Someone like Mr. Unger might not expect to get very far in a political culture where the insurgents these days tend to be — no joke — clowns expressing disgust with the system or libertarians masquerading as superheroes. But Mr. Unger, an avowed leftist, is enjoying his own surge, navigating the corridors of power in the capital, Brasília, with the grace of a bull in a china shop.

His radical philosophy, nurtured in more than 15 books, involves calls to disrupt existing institutions to avoid what he describes as the “sterilization” of human potential; the belief that redemption is achieved through self-transformation; and ideas like conceiving of Brazil as a “great creative anarchy.”

CONTROVERSY swirled around Mr. Unger when he held the same ministerial post from 2007 to 2009 during the administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Mr. Unger got the job then, even though he had publicly called Mr. da Silva’s government the “most corrupt in our national history.”

Back then, he drew criticism for supporting a buildup of Brazil’s defense capabilities and urging an overhaul of Amazon development. Mr. Unger is off to a similar start since returning this year from Harvard.

He is raising concern among Brazilian climate scientists that he is trying to curtail their influence. He has undiplomatically questioned why the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is led by a career diplomat. And he has called for a rebellion against prevailing intellectual property and patent measures.

Mr. Unger felt the tug of politics from an early age. He was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1947 to a Brazilian mother and an American father, but his parents raised him in Manhattan, where his father worked as a lawyer. As a child, Mr. Unger spent vacations in Rio with his maternal grandfather, Octávio Mangabeira, a prominent politician from Bahia State.

He would stay with his grandfather in the stately Hotel Glória and stroll with him to the Senate (Rio was still the capital then), rambles during which people would approach the senator and kiss his hand. Mr. Unger would observe the oratory in the Senate before joining his grandfather and other graybeard political figures for dinner.
After his father died when he was 11, Mr. Unger’s mother moved back to Brazil. He went to law school in Rio before attending Harvard Law School in the late 1960s, a time of upheaval in Brazil after the military dictatorship installed in 1964 hardened its rule.

He stayed at Harvard to teach, pioneering Critical Legal Studies, an area challenging accepted norms in legal theory, before returning to Brazil. His wife, Tamara Lothian, who teaches law at Columbia University, and their four children still live in the United States.

Do not get Mr. Unger started on President Obama, arguably his most famous student at Harvard.

“He was always very personable,” he said with a shrug about Mr. Obama, who took his “Reinventing Democracy” class. “But he doesn’t like to fight, and never fought for anything.” He urged Americans not to vote for Mr. Obama in 2012, citing in particular the public assistance for Wall Street firms after the 2008 financial crisis.

As Mr. Unger settles into his post, he describes his mission as helping Brazil “define a new strategy of development,” based on strengthening educational capabilities and broadening economic opportunities. To that end, he is spending a lot of time traveling around Brazil to hear what his fellow citizens have to say about the country’s pressing issues and its prospects.

Here in Belém, he met with the governor from the opposition Social Democracy party before delivering a speech at the Pará Commercial Association, an old-guard business group. Over a lunch of filet mignon, rice with jambú (an Amazonian herb with analgesic properties) and guava juice, he sternly told them, “The forest must be worth more standing than chopped down.”

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Some in the audience stared at Mr. Unger. A man with a belly protruding from his blazer and a pinkie ring rolled his eyes. Others gazed at the Facebook timelines on their iPhones. The crowd offered polite applause when Mr. Unger finished talking.

Called a “preposterous romantic” by his critics, Mr. Unger is notoriously slippery at times. “It’s better to have a voice within the state than to have a voice outside, but it’s better to have a voice outside the state than to have no voice within the state,” he said, cracking what seemed to be a smile.

Few politicians in Brazil know the United States as well as Mr. Unger. One moment, he is riffing on Andrew Jackson’s role in democratizing the market economy in the pre-Civil War United States, the next he is discussing how Theodore Roosevelt, the American president who nearly died while exploring a tributary of the Amazon, saw in Brazil a variant of the American spirit.

“Philosophers are despot who have no armies to command,” said Mr. Unger, borrowing a phrase from “The Man Without Qualities,” the novel by the Austrian writer Robert Musil. Mr. Unger said his foray into politics “has taken away my shield,” contending that it was still easier to change a country than a person.
“What philosophers must avoid,” Mr. Unger added, “is the temptation to follow Plato’s example and to seek influence by whispering into the ears of the powerful.”