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Brazil's Unrest: Social Contentions in an Emerging Economy

Tavo Borchert



try for decades.

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For months now crowds of people have been taking to the streets of Brazil's main cities for a very different reason than the lure of festivities that has made the country a tropical party paradise in the eyes of the world.

Public transportation fare raises in different regions of the country, which had already been attempted and caused unrest back in 2012, sparked off a wave of mass protests in June of 2013. Despite the authorities retreat in the face of public pressure, a number of contentions in the nation's contemporary social and political agenda have fueled the current demonstrations which have escalated to a level not seen in the

A Few Triggers

Public mispending has been a main point of contention in the current demonstrations as many view the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics as opportunities for the private sector to capitalize on tax payers' money. Such concern is not without plausible reason as Brazilians have long been acquainted with the misappropriation of taxpayer funds and the extremely poor conditions of basic public services like the notoriously precarious public health system. The neoliberal policies of the late 1980s and 1990s that favored private healthcare, dismantling the public system and degrading even more the working conditions in the sector, together with frequent diversions of funds by corruption schemes have continued to aggravate the critical situation left by the civil-military dictatorship.

Tackling widespread corruption has been another demand of protesters. The often inconclusive outcome of corruption cases provoked strong popular opposition to a constitutional amendment that intended to make the police in charge of all criminal investigations and limit the investigative powers of other institutions. The amendment would have curbed the Public Ministry's autonomy to oversee both the Judiciary and the Legislative powers, leaving a wider gap for corrupt politicians to continue escaping prosecution. (Given the fact that only 5% to 8% of crimes are solved in the country, overloading the police would likely worsen the present state of affairs). Moreover, it violated the United Nations Palermo Convention intended to pressure signatory nations, among which is Brazil, to prevent, detect and repress corruption within public institutions. Notwithstanding the support from a large number of representatives, the unpopular amendment was ruled unconstitutional.

Some professional and activist groups have also voiced their strong disapproval of another proposed piece of legislation – emphatically pushed by Christian fundamentalist lobbyists – that could open the way for psychologists to approach homoerotic behavior as a pathology. Besides the risk of potentially reiterating existing social prejudices of homosexuality as psychological disorder, the pressure from Christian members of the Congress to pass the proposition raised concerns about the growing interference of religious organizations in the State's affairs. This debate was further intensified by the public financing of Pope Francis' visit to the city of Rio de Janeiro for the celebration of the World Youth Day.

The State's Response

Since the first uprisings, ruthless repression by the State has ignited violent backlashes leaving some seriously wounded. The nationwide protests on September 7, Brazil's Independence Day, were harshly suppressed by security forces with mass arrests and many being injured. Following a pattern in the country's social history, police brutality has been worse in poor neighborhoods.

Polecamy

Lewość

Chyba nikt z nas, przybywszy na Wyspy, nie pozostał obojętny wobec faktu, że panuje tu ruch lewostronny. Konieczność zmiany nawyków i zwiększonej ostrożności, poczucie egzotyki, nieswojo wyglądające samochody... Oczywiście po pewnym czasie przywyka się do tego, jednak zbyt długi pobyt „za wodą” powoduje analogiczne uczucia przy powrocie na kontynent. Nawet ludziom, którzy regularnie przeprawiają się przez kanał wciąż zdarza się zastanawiać, z której strony objechać rondo. Ale czy zastanawialiśmy się, skąd właściwie wziął się ten dziwaczny pomysł jeżdżenia po przeciwnej stronie drogi niż wszyscy?

Tomasz Oryński



No votes yet

Dla naszego dobra, oczywiście

W niesłychanie drogim Carlsbergu powoli opada piana. Nic dziwnego, że kosztuje więcej niż gdzie indziej, na lotnisku wszystko jest droższe – to cena naszego bezpieczeństwa.

Gdyby to była jedynie kwestia wyższych cen, nie było by problemu – dałoby się to zrozumieć. Niestety rządy państw zaprzęgnięte w totalną wojnę z terroryzmem zaczęły ograniczać prawa obywatelskie, i nawet gdy emocje i trauma związane z atakami opadły, ograniczenia zostały. Tak opisuje to Zygmunt Bauman w książce "Europa niedokończona przygoda":

Maciej Przybycień



Average: 3 (1 vote)

Likewise, teachers that recently occupied Rio de Janeiro's City Chamber demanding just salaries and better working conditions were violently removed from the premises with many hurt as a result of police truculence.

The State has systematically targeted black blocs even sending some members to maximum security prisons. As an attempt of intimidation a court judge has outlawed the use of masks or other face covering at public rallies; the ruling has been challenged by legal experts as unconstitutional. As a consequence, demonstrators protecting their faces with wet cloths instead gas bombs thrown by the security forces have been arbitrarily detained.

Police have also harassed independent media groups broadcasting the protests live on the internet. Some journalists, despite carrying professional identification and enjoying constitutional protection, have had their bags searched and several have been taken in for questioning. Notwithstanding, mainstream media has fueled the demonstrations by justifying State's violence and criminalizing some protesters with biased reports, which has led in some cases to hostilities towards reporters from large news corporations covering the events.

State's repression has only intensified the animosity of the protests and rapidly eroded the legitimacy of some local governments. In Rio de Janeiro, as a response to the unrelenting demonstrations against both the state and city administrations, the current Governor issued a decree compelling telecommunication companies to provide within twenty-four hours any personal information pertaining to a suspect when requested by a special commission in charge of investigating 'acts of vandalism'. Even though it was overturned due to its unconstitutionality, the decree was part of a broad strategy to criminalize the protests.

Not only is it revealing just how comprehensive this strategy may be, disturbing evidence suggests that many demonstrators reported as having used explosive devices against security forces were actually undercover police officers trying to incite violence and delegitimize the protest. Despite the government's denial of the accusation and promise to thoroughly investigate it, the case remains unresolved.

Looking in the Present the Unresolved Past

A recently released book charging Rio de Janeiro's current Security Commissioner of being a former intelligence agent for the 21-year civil-military dictatorship has furthered suspicion of the possible participation of Rio de Janeiro's state government in criminal acts. The expedient of inciting violence to disenfranchise any political dissident movement was largely used by the past regime. However, the state's fierce repression isn't the only present occurrence that has brought back memories of the brutal political period. Mainstream media's tendentious coverage followed by the draconian decree by the Governor of Rio de Janeiro have also stirred unsettled sentiments.

The dictatorship established in 1964 after the overthrow of a democratically elected government is without a question an unturned page in Brazil's contemporary history. The Brazilian State has never thoroughly investigated the hideous crimes committed during that period. Let alone has anyone involved in those crimes been criminally prosecuted; many rather still enjoy their pensions in anonymity. The destiny of hundreds of political prisoners from the period is still unknown, a fact that has prolonged the suffering of many families. The Federal Government has neither responded nor complied with a 2010 ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to investigate, elucidate and make responsible state agents who were involved in the disappearance of over 70 political opponents in the Araguaia Guerrilla.

Brazil's apathy towards such violations singles out the country among its neighbors – Argentina, Peru, Uruguay, Colombia and Chile – when it comes to complying with the American Convention on Human Rights. Cecília Coimbra, a former political prisoner, retired Psychology Professor from Universidade Federal Fluminense, founder and current Vice-President of the human rights group Tortura Nunca Mais-RJ, points out that 'among all the Latin American countries that have recently been under dictatorships Brazil is way behind in the process of offering reparation to the victims' ([Coimbra, 2012](#))

Where is Amarildo?

The urgency to address this issue has been reasserted by perhaps the most appalling and notorious occurrence in the midst of the present unrest.

Amarildo de Souza, a construction worker and resident of Rio de Janeiro's slum Rocinha, disappeared after being taken by a local police unit on July 14 for a 'routine check' – a common justification for the arrests of 'suspects' during the dictatorship. As like many detained during that time, Amarildo has not been seen since.

The disappearance of the construction worker, husband and father of six has caught the attention of people around the world. Signs translated into several languages asking 'Where is Amarildo?', a reference to a campaign launched by human rights activists in Rio de Janeiro, have been posted on internet social networks, and reports about Amarildo's disappearance have recently been shown on news channels in several countries.

The episode has reiterated concerns about the state's current security policy. Amarildo was detained by the 'Pacifying Police Unit' (UPP) – a program designed by Rio de Janeiro's Security Commissioner and launched by the state government. Touted as a strategy to tackle crime in the slums and improve the communities' life, it has been criticized by many experts and human rights activists as a mere temporary fix to mask Rio de Janeiro's chronic social problems for the upcoming 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics. Others also see an economic agenda behind the initiative with the slums being potential hubs for some service industries. The criticism towards the initiative has been reinforced by a number of abuses committed by the pacifying police reported by communities wherein the program has been implemented.

In response to Amarildo's disappearance the officers involved in the case were initially assigned to administrative tasks. The CCTVs and the police car GPS were mysteriously inoperative at the moment of Amarildo's arrest. Rio de Janeiro's state administration promised a thorough investigation.



Social and Political Contentions

Going from years of uncontrolled inflation to the fifth largest economy, Brazil has recently played a more active political role globally. In the eyes of many, the country has gradually become a stable liberal democracy since the end of its civil-military dictatorship in 1985. Notwithstanding the nation's growth potential, the discontent manifested in the ongoing demonstrations seems to contradict the common postulate that asserts liberal policies as yielding social prosperity. Behind the neoliberal rhetoric that has elevated Brazil to the better-sounding rank of 'developing economy' hides a social reality that questions much of the past years positive perceptions about the country.

The political changes of the more recent times have not met the hopes of large portions of the population. In fact, the transition to 'democracy' has yet to come for many among Brazil's lower social strata.

Despite the publicity generated by Amarildo's disappearance the episode is unfortunately not an exception. Vicious practices from the dictatorial regime have never been completely ceased; however, the target nowadays is generally the poor population. According to the Brazilian sociologist Fábio Araújo, more than 90,000 people have disappeared in the state of Rio de Janeiro in the past twenty-three years, after the country's transition to 'democracy'. Although Araújo points out that there is no record of how many among those were in fact in police custody, he suggests that crimes of homicide during the current administration could be masked by the cases of disappearances. According to the Public Security Institute (ISP), in 2007, the first year of the current Governor's mandate, 4,633 people were reported missing. Since then the number of such occurrences has only risen, increasing by 28% in 2012. Nevertheless, during the same period the rate of homicides dropped by 31% ([link](#)). Such a drop certainly enhances Rio de Janeiro's image as the host city of the coming sports events in the eyes of FIFA and the Olympic committee, as well as prospective visitors.

As a clear indication of how vices of the dictatorial past have continued into the democratic regime, investigators assigned to Amarildo's case believe that the construction worker was submitted to electric shocks and suffocated to death at the local police station. Despite the fact that Amarildo's body has not yet been identified, intercepted phone calls unveiled a plot by the officers involved in his death to mislead the ongoing investigation. As a consequence, ten policemen, including a Major, head of the Pacifying Program at Rocinha, have recently been held

without bail. In the course of the investigation, twenty-two other residents have also come forward and reported undergoing torture sessions at the slum's Pacifying Police station as an attempt by officers to get information about local criminals.

These disturbing and illegal acts point to the urgency for the State to investigate and punish the similar crimes committed during the dictatorship and send a clear message that such atrocious precedents will in no way be tolerated. Even though a special committee, Comissão Nacional da Verdade, has been appointed to take on the task, the group has faced strong resistance from conservative sectors of the society. For instance, the country's armed forces have continuously regarded court rulings to declassify all the files from the dictatorial period, provoking much social contention (in a recent visit to a military base in Rio de Janeiro that housed a former torture center some legislators were impeded from entering the facilities due to their past ties with leftist organizations). In reality, an overwhelming number of members of those institutions believe that the dictatorial regime and its criminal policies were a necessary strategy to prevent the threat of communism and safeguard the democratic state.

Such views, however, are not just shared by military institutions. In fact, among the main national media corporations – dominated by the country's most powerful oligarchies – the majority openly supported the 1964 civil-military coup. Based on the same rationale, at least some of them provided logistical support for the capturing and torturing of political militants. While losing some of their influence to international companies established in the country in the past decades, they have managed to maintain their agenda through congressional lobbying. Moreover, many TV and radio stations are owned by conservative politicians who use such media to further their self-interest. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the large media corporations have tried to delegitimize any independent news coverage of the present protests.

The promiscuity between the State and the private sector, heightened by the ongoing preparation for the forthcoming sports events, has contributed to deepening the general disillusionment towards the country's politics. The need to compromise with the largest number of parties possible from a broad and disparate ideological spectrum for the sake of political stability has turned the National Congress into an arena for self-interested groups to bargain with the Executive power. It has for instance allowed opportunist legislators to occupy strategic positions in the House, favoring private inner circles and perpetuating their mandates. In a dynamic that has yielded corruption scandals that have discredited the State's institutional powers.

Although on one hand the Worker's Party, in office for its third mandate, has tried to address some of the country's chronic problems by launching social programs to assist the deprived population, it has on the other hand adopted market practices that have, to a certain extent, alienated the financial world. Such ambiguous policy has been in some ways successful in co-opting organized social movements and at the same time nurturing an image of a virtuous administration in the eyes of the world's liberal institutions. Bolstering consumerism has been adopted in the guise of social inclusion.

Even though nowadays social priorities seem to give way to the country's rushed gentrification for the upcoming 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics, the federal government has recently proposed a program to increase the length of medical studies and turn the last two years into a compulsory residence in communities that lack assistance. As a previous attempt to attract doctors to those regions by offering competitive salaries had failed, the government also decided to bring professionals from other countries to temporarily make up for the deficiency. Professionals in the sector, who have long complained about the precarious work conditions in such communities, have vehemently opposed the initiative. Doctors associations have organized against the hiring of foreign doctors, indicating how corporatism comes way ahead of the need of the population in the market rationality.

An Open Question

The demonstrations, despite some decrease, continue to happen in the main cities of Brazil. On October 7 a small protest happened in Sao Paulo, during which many were seriously wounded after the explosion of a homemade device. In Rio de Janeiro on the same day, 50,000 people (10,000 according to the police) marched in the city center streets in support of the ongoing public teacher's strike. Banks, stores and one embassy were wrecked by some of the demonstrators.

Despite the social dimension of the current events, cries of a nation's awakening or a new country sprouting from a sudden political awareness must be taken with great caution. The protests are not a social movement unified around a cohesive agenda with a clear and objective goal. The majority of demonstrators in the urban areas are young individuals from the middle class (family participation has been greater in cities' poorer outskirts). Even though their demands appear to echo a general discontent among the population, their voices are not hegemonic in their social stratum. In spite of the urgent call to invest in the public sector as a much needed social inclusive strategy, the prospect of higher earnings from private practice in the urban centers appears to be an underlying factor in the fierce opposition by medical doctors – overwhelmingly from the more privileged middle class – to the government's proposed program, indicating that class antagonisms are also at the heart of the ongoing unrest.

The State violence has reinforced the need for creating effective strategies to eradicate institutionalized authoritarian practices inherited from past regimes. However, many in the middle class not only supported the 1964 coup but have also expressed nostalgia for that period. What's more, as shown in recent national polls, state arbitrariness such as human rights violations against criminals, the majority of whom are from deprived populations, appears to significant support in urban areas.

Although the mainstream media's biased coverage has brought attention to the monopoly in the sector and the extremely limited public participation in its regulation, many of its professionals are not only recruited from the privileged strata but have also been trained at universities whose market-oriented programs most frequently favor conservative views. The increasing influence of Christian fundamentalists in the Congress has allowed TV and Radio concessions to these churches throughout the country. Their large presence may be aided by the growing number of people who have resorted to 'divine providence' in the face of general disbelief in earthly political institutions.

The popular rejection of the country's current politics, reiterated by calls for a political reform, has been acknowledged by the federal government with a possible plebiscite, much to the content of conservative sectors. Notwithstanding, the question of whether a reform may effectively address the situation remains open. Perhaps the real problem lies in the notion of modernity in the eyes of the world, as suggested by Slavoj Žižek. What if the contentions currently voiced on the streets of Brazil are not 'merely contingent perturbations but instead structural necessities' of global capitalism?

Average: 5 (1 vote)

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