

Mega-protests in Brazil

Lula da Silva's second term is seen by South African trade unions as a success story of transformation. How then does one explain recent mass action to radically transform Brazilian society and its ways of exercising political power? **Carlos Vainer** explains that current struggles go beyond transforming transportation, education and health policies.

Those who have been monitoring or are directly involved in the efforts to organise daily popular struggles have known for a long time that fragmented and scattered protests, dissatisfaction and resistance movements have been multiplying on the social fabric. How many times have we seen each other in meetings and informal conversations analysing or feeling sorry for the fragmentation, as well as trying to find political and organisational ways to facilitate convergence, unity, fronts, and associations that could bring together thematic and localised conflicts? For how long have we found ourselves trying to overcome the difficulties of converging micro-localised struggles, different perspectives and diverse socially based experiences?

However, the arrogance and brutality of those in power did, in a few days, what many activists, grassroots organisations and social movements have tried to do for a good while: unify grievances, struggles, demands, and desires. It isn't the first time this has happened in history. But what happened was beyond imagination

essentially due to the superiority of the ruling political coalitions as well as the mega-events cartel in the media and in the big national corporations, speculators and corporate international interests found in the International Football Federation (FIFA) and International Olympic Committee (IOC). Their blindness, self-sufficiency and violence brought into the collective action sphere hundreds of thousands, even millions of young – and not so young – unhappy citizens who believed until recently that nothing could be done but to accept the *status quo* reproduction.

Sceptical conservative sociologists, political scientists and regular media political analysts called upon to 'explain the events' missed it all when they called demonstrators 'rebels without a cause' and 'hooligans'. President Dilma Rousseff and FIFA President Joseph Blatter were booed at the Confederations Cup opening ceremony on 15 June. She clearly showed her perplexity and he had a faded, frozen smile on his face. They both had imagined they would be greeted warmly after building, at a cost of more than U\$1-billion, a soccer stadium for 70,000 people

in a city where the average soccer audience is around 2,000 souls!

The perplexity and misunderstandings, about the many and so diverse protests' origins can only find one explanation: the social and political autism showed by those in power. In other words, the dominant not only spread their ideology, but they believe in it. The Globo Corporation (owners of the second-largest commercial TV network in annual revenue worldwide and the Brazil's leading daily) not only projects a fictional world through its messages but believes it. As incredible as it may sound, the Globo Network believes in the Globo Network. Marketers believe in their political and social marketing and fail to connect themselves to understanding the world as it escapes their image constructs and their myths.

All of them were quickly surpassed and had to recognise that they stood before a large, powerful, deep and comprehensive political demonstration against the *status quo*. Unpartisan – for parties have been unable to channel and express the vitality and diversity of protests and claims – movements are far from representing a 'non-



political' or 'unfocused' process. The focus was there to be seen by those capable of looking at the tree and comprehending the forest: transportation, health, education, corruption, democracy, public resources waste, political participation, and human rights. Has any political party, in recent years, produced an agenda or schedule more precise and concrete? In a certain way, the high level of political awareness showed by the millions who were on the streets is surprising, although poorly organised.

These movements were not casual and they did not happen by chance. If repressive violence flared them, it did not explain them. However, Mao Zedong's Little Red Book collection, a 1930 text titled: 'A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire' gives an explanation. This small sentence warns us about the mistakes of those who have tried, and are still trying, to reduce the movements into a bus fare or into a better public transportation struggle. This is one claim among many. If the Free Fare Movement took the initiative, the spark still cannot explain the fire, but the conditions in which it found the prairie. The prairie, as we know, was dry and ready to burn and the wind blew intensely to spread the fire.

In order to understand the movements it is necessary to consider the many grievances and struggles that preceded them and that constituted their own foundation. One must also understand a scenario marked by the sports mega-events cycle. If the mega-events scenario, by itself, does not explain the social and political explosion, it would be hard to imagine such an explosion outside a context marked by the spree of public money, the surrender of our cities to the corporate world, and to the developers and otherwise organised cartels that orbit around FIFA and the IOC.

MEGA-EVENTS, MEGA-BUSINESSES, MEGA-PROTESTS

Another important aspect deserves to be mentioned here: in a number of cities, including those in which there will be no games in 2014 or 2016, there is a clear awareness of the meaning, direction, goals and results to expect from the mega-events. One can consider, indeed, that the World Cup and Olympics Popular Committees and their National Articulation (ANCOP) efforts throughout the last two years markedly contributed to build a collective consciousness, more widespread than could be thought of.

Mega-events are now understood as unbearable burdens on our people, which divert priority resources to benefit the good old powerful partners. Although the demonstrations have opened a new struggle scenario, forcefully reconfigured new power relations, and opened grand new possibilities for advancing popular movements' achievements, it is essential

to have the entire spectrum clearly identified in order to establish the next steps for the different movements and popular organisations.

Since the first demonstrations, the complete inability to understand what was happening on the part of right-wing forces became clear, as was shown by their usual driving force, the Globo Network – representing the big media corporations and playing the role of a 'ruling classes central committee'. After paying respect to the 'firm police action against troublemakers' for a few days, the grand media started to set 'legitimate claimers' and 'vandals' apart. After two weeks, the main national broadcast, Globo's *Jornal Nacional*, finally started to throw some light on the brutality of police repression and the provocative 'official and orderly' actions.

Different political parties' and government agents' rhetoric started to line up, at different speeds, with

a new tone, as millions of people took to the streets. Disoriented, not knowing what to do, mayors who had just denounced rioters and hoodlums, and had vowed the impossibility of reviewing bus fares, began to review the increases and dropped the fares. How could they now explain that forcefully raised fares could be lowered? This showed their inconsistencies, disorientation and absolute lack of policies to address public transportation problems – a crucial problem of our cities.

The attempt to dampen the demonstrations with a few concessions could only have the opposite effect. People got the message: fighting and pressure leads to achievements that seemed impossible yesterday. 'If you have any claims or protests, go to the streets and demonstrate about them.' 'We want this and we want more,' answered the streets with more demonstrations and more people, and the prairie caught fire.



Wellson Silva

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, after the first strikes at ABC (three of the most important metropolitan industrial cities in the state of São Paulo), strikes hit the entire country: workers (re)discovered this form of struggle and its effectiveness. Something similar now happened: the people, and young people in particular, (re)discovered the potential and richness of public demonstrations and marches and gained the streets of Rio, São Paulo, of all capital cities, of small towns from north to south, east to west. This first stage seemed to end with a comprehensive victory.

ADDRESS TO THE NATION

President Rouseff's address to the nation, which should be analysed carefully especially its tone and meaning, perhaps signalled the beginning of a second stage. The first hypothesis constructed in light of her first two years in office, filled with big corporations' partnerships and their mega-projects, would recommend taking the speech with caution and not very seriously. In fact, Rouseff's administration has honoured so far the recent eight years of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's 'governance pact' with the most reactionary forces in the country.

The power and favours granted to the interests represented by the trio of Ricardo Teixeira (former Brazilian Football Confederation's (CBF) president); José Marin (CBF's current president); and Joseph Blatter (FIFA President) and the Brazilian Olympic Committee (COB) would be sufficient to say that there is nothing to expect from the current coalition government. Everything would only be a camera trick - a rhetoric operation seeking to identify with the demonstrations' freshness, creativeness and purposefulness. Summarising, the speech would only be a revival of the traditional co-optation strategies, driven, as usual, by the most organised and negotiation-based sectors.

The second hypothesis assumes there would be something in the political context that would be the basis for a new scenario. In this case, it is also possible to assume that, indeed, the president and the federal government's hard core have listened and learned something from 'the direct message from the streets' as said by the president. There would have been a clash between different sectors of the coalition government and that would have resulted in a compass realignment towards change, as timid as it might be, in dealing with the problems the movements echoed in the streets. This would make the government more sensitive to the demonstrations which would conquer more space in the decision-making processes.

However, there were gaps and silences especially the deafening silence on police brutality. Abundant mentions of 'vandalism' - echoing the Globo Network slogan - were made, but there was not a single reference to the open and brutal violations of the right to free expression enacted by the states' police forces. While the very same administration discusses elsewhere the right to memory and truth regarding the military period (1964-1985), the legacy of the military dictatorship to democracy in Brazil becomes clearer than ever when police and special federal forces brutalise peaceful demonstrators.

Secondly, the speech avoids government accountability over the use of public resources to build



Protestor in Native American attire.

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sumptuous and useless mega-events infrastructure. When the president said the federal budget was not used to finance such works she told the nation a half-truth since the Federal Treasury guarantees mega-events through The National Bank for Social and Economic Development, which in turn finances and subsidises useless stadia costs, absurd road projects, hotels, etc. Treasury also gave tax exemptions to FIFA and IOC associated companies in violation of the Fiscal Responsibility Act.

Thirdly, it was not made clear whether responding to streets 'legitimate demands' meant redirecting transfer of resources from large corporations, through public-private partnerships or other types of friendly arrangements back to public coffers. In other words, in order to fulfil the commitments made now, governments will have to present the bill to those who have indulged themselves with public investments and subsidies. The proposed redefinition of priorities should penalise those who have been privileged partners in the government coalition such as big developers, speculators and contractors such as Odebrecht, Camargo Corrêa, OAS, Carioca Engenharia, Eike Batista, Carvalho Hosken, and Andrade Gutierrez.

These 'stake-holders' or 'privilege club' win every single bid for public-private partnerships and large investment projects. Together with big bankers they are among the major donors to election campaigns. To what extent would the federal government be willing to penalise its private partners, who until yesterday were the main associates in the exercise of power and allocation of public resources?

Rousseff added: 'Those who were on the streets yesterday gave a direct message to the whole society and especially the rulers of all instances. This direct message from the streets stands for more citizenship, better schools, better hospitals,

health centres, and for the right to participation. This direct message from the streets shows a demand for high quality transportation at fair prices and for the right to influence government decisions at legislature, and judicial levels'.

It is important to notice that, unlike other politicians and analysts, the president recognises that the demonstrations were not only about sector and material demands, but also exposed a desire for 'more citizenship' and to 'influence in decisions'. Is it not a way to, indirectly but clearly, recognise that citizens' rights and the democratic right to influence in public decisions have not been properly secured? Should it not be taken as self-criticism? In any event, it is a victory of all sectors and movements who have, in recent years, said and repeated this very argument, and have struggled to reverse the situation.

The president also stated that the protestors' agendas won national approval and that 'we must take advantage of the demonstrations strength to produce more changes - changes that benefit the entire Brazilian population'. This is another self-criticism which recognises that popular agendas have not been national priorities. It is up to all movements to demand that this new approach is established.

The president further announced: 'I will meet with the peaceful demonstration leaders, youth organisations, unions, and labour movements' representatives, and popular associations. We need their contributions, reflections and experiences, their energy and creativity, their faith in the future, and their ability to question past and present mistakes'. Announcing that she will meet demonstrators' leaders is also a confession that she hasn't met them in the past or recently.

Finally, and even more importantly, the president solemnly declared: 'It is citizenship and not economic power that should be heard first.' By saying

this, the president admitted, though subtly, that economic power has been heard in the first place and that the commitment to change course is a promise to which she must be made accountable.

This address should be considered as one more sign of the movement strength, and an unquestionable political victory. But it is also possible to assume that, to some extent, the president and the coalition government leadership have realised the risks of departing so strikingly from people's aspirations.

NEXT STEPS

Articles like this, written in the heat of events, run the risk or may be doomed to become quickly out-dated. But it is still easier to explain the past than to explore the future, especially when so many millions mobilise and, from one moment to another, burst on the public scene and new historical possibilities seem to be opened to the people. History does not follow a continuous pace or a linear path: it accelerates, it warps, it slows, it realigns. Lenin once said that 'there are days in history that take years to go by, and there are years in history that go by in a matter of days'. In these accelerated moments, when everything seems possible, those who seek social change are challenged to uncover and explore all possibilities.

As a poster sums up: 'Sorry for the inconvenience; we are changing the country'. All of a sudden, this seems possible. We should not discard this possibility, which only arises a few times in a generation's history. Another Brazil is possible, and it might be blooming. ¹⁸

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