

Brazil's Angry Middle Class

Antônio Sampaio

On 26 May 2014, just a few weeks ahead of the World Cup, an angry crowd surrounded the Brazilian football team in Rio de Janeiro. Striking teachers attacked the team bus as it left the city's international airport, protesting the government's vast expenditure on preparations for the event and neglect of the education system. Heavily armed military police were called in to clear a path for the vehicle, and have followed the players ever since. For many Brazilians, passion for football was supplanted by demands for better infrastructure, salaries and quality of life: the 12 June Brazil–Croatia game that opened the tournament followed a year in which one person was killed and hundreds were estimated to have been injured in demonstrations around the country. This article went to press before the four-week-long competition had finished; football mania was at the time returning to Brazil. The country's mood was likely to be affected by the final result.

Although championed by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, president from 2003 to 2011, as a means to promote Brazil's rising status as an emerging power, the World Cup instead called attention to the gap between government narrative and actual development. The protest movement that hit the country's main cities on 20 June 2013 saw one million people take to the streets; their seemingly vague social and political demands reflected the aspirations of a new middle class whose political engagement has altered Brazil's budget priorities.

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During the 2008 inauguration of a project to construct a flyover in Rio, Lula told the media and authorities present that the vibrant economy would 'put Brazil on the level of developed countries in the coming years'.¹ Those years would be characterised by a deep economic crisis in developed countries, which Lula believed would be a mere *marolinha* (ripple) for Brazil.² Neither of his forecasts came true (Brazil's economy contracted by 0.2% in 2009), but Lula nonetheless captured the spirit of optimism among analysts, the media and the business world. The Lula era transmitted domestic confidence into foreign policy; it saw Brazil actively lead global trade and environmental talks, mediate geopolitical crises abroad and enjoy one of the most rapid economic advances in its history. During his domestic speeches and frequent trips abroad, Lula often mentioned the country's elevated position in the global economic system and strategic circles, such as the G20 and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa).

A rising middle class?

The Brazilian middle class numbers around 100m people, as defined by the government, which applies the term to individuals with an income of at least \$131 per month.³ The proportion of Brazilians who fell into this category grew from 38% in 2002 to 53% in 2012, and the average income of people in the group rose by 50% during the past decade, reaching \$259 per month.⁴ Although most people in the developed world would probably see this as at or near poverty level, a Pew Global Attitudes poll published in June 2013 found that 74% of Brazilians considered their personal financial situation to be 'good'.⁵ This reflects a rapid growth in income over a relatively short period, but it is a rise that has not granted a sense of security or comfort to the populations of Brazil and many other Latin American countries. This higher income has to accommodate expenditures on basic services that most Western states would provide, but in Brazil are delivered in insufficient quantities or precarious conditions. The World Bank describes this effect as a 'fragmented social contract': private schools are a basic necessity for most Brazilian families who want their children to have a good education, and private healthcare and security services are also widely used. The fact that Brazilians' taxes constitute the highest share

of GDP in Latin America (35%) has fed demand for better public services and infrastructure.⁶

The World Bank has stated that the average Latin American family classified as middle class is actually 'in a state of vulnerability'.⁷ The fears that accompany this insecure position explain why, last year, a small protest in Brazil's south (concerning demands for free public transportation) quickly grew to draw one million people from across the country on 20 June 2013. A common request was for hospitals and schools 'along FIFA standards', but urban mobility, better public education and tackling corruption also ranked high among the demonstrators' concerns.⁸ The quality of Brazil's national infrastructure and social services has remained at odds with the country's global ambitions: the rise in income of those in the lower sectors of Brazilian society has been just enough to create expectations that the government has been unable to meet.

Brazil's economic prosperity during the 2000s, which peaked in 2010 with an annual growth of 7.5% of GDP, was fuelled mainly by commodity exports and increasing consumption. Following a global trend, demand for protein-rich products has grown quickly; beef consumption, for example, has risen by 14% in the past five years.⁹ Brazilians' expenditure on food increased by 26% between 2003 and 2009, and the number of vehicles in 12 of Brazil's main cities almost doubled between 2001 and 2011, reaching 20.5m.¹⁰ Yet, agricultural productivity only increased by an average of 1.1% per year, and investment in infrastructure projects actually decreased compared with that of the 1990s (as a percentage of GDP), averaging just 2.19% between 2001 and 2012.¹¹

The rest of the world struggled to understand the source of Brazilians' visible anger – and struggled most of all to analyse how it fitted into the global trend in heightened political activism. Two years after the Arab Spring, and as rioters defied authoritarian measures by the Turkish government in Istanbul's Taksim Square, international media outlets initially used the nickname 'tropical spring' to describe events in Brazil, but quickly dropped it after realising that there was not much of a winter immediately preceding it – at least of the political type. Yet the scenes were similar to those of the popular revolutions that swept through the Arab world, with street battles between protesters and police in many major cities.

The Confederations Cup in June 2013 was to be the opening act in the global celebration of Brazil's emerging power, followed by the World Cup this year and the Rio Summer Olympic Games of 2016. Yet Brazilians focused on the contrast between domestic bottlenecks and the expensive foreign outreach represented by the mega sporting events. In the weeks before the Confederations Cup, several state capitals announced a \$0.90 increase in bus fares, raising the cost of living for many in Brazil's clogged urban centres (trains are almost non-existent, although lines are now being gradually expanded). This seemingly prosaic issue was taken up by a layer of society that at the start of the century was regarded as a privileged minority. While the authorities were busy making plans for the construction or refurbishment of football stadiums, at a cost of \$3.6 billion, the lives of middle-class Brazilians were a mixture of genuine comfort and daily tribulation.¹²

The cost of food also rose, partially because of a global increase in prices, but also due to the longer-term domestic trends of high transportation costs and insufficient supply as the country focused much of its agricultural activity on exports, particularly soybeans destined for China. Despite living in one of the world's main food-exporting countries, Brazilians saw the price of tomatoes go up by 1,000% in the first half of 2013, and the average restaurant bill increase by 11%, double the rate of inflation.¹³

At their peak in June 2013, the protests were the largest in Brazil's current phase of democratic rule. A popular Twitter hashtag at that time was '#OGiganteAcordou' (the giant has awoken), a reference to Brazilians' famously indifferent attitude to politics since the time of their struggle with the military dictatorship that ruled from 1964 to 1985. At the time, left-wing guerrilla groups engaged in a protracted conflict with Brazil's rulers, who responded with massive curbs on press freedom and brutal campaigns against the insurgents and political opponents. Among the targets of the military rulers was Dilma Rousseff, the country's current president, who was jailed in 1970 and tortured.

Brazil's current authorities are still searching for the bodies of the survivors of the Araguaia militia, thought to be in a jungle region in the interior of the country. In 1969 insurgent leader Carlos Marighella drew on the struggle to write one of the classics of guerrilla-warfare literature, *Minimanual of*

the Urban Guerrilla, which served as an important guide for Cold War rebel groups in Brazil and elsewhere. That insurgency was defeated. However, in the mid-1980s, the military dictatorship was seriously shaken by the first of three waves of protest in modern Brazilian history. On 16 April 1984, an estimated 1.5m people gathered in São Paulo to demand the reinstatement of presidential elections, as part of a movement called *Diretas Já* (Direct Voting Now). The junta appointed a civilian president, and free elections eventually came in 1989. The presidency of Fernando Collor de Mello, the second leader of the ensuing democratic period, was marred by corruption scandals and a disastrous economic plan to curb inflation that resulted in the confiscation of every savings account in the country. After an appearance on national television in which he asked Brazilians to put on the national colours and protest against his political rivals, 350,000 people gathered in São Paulo to demand that he be impeached (as he was, in August 1992). This was the last large-scale protest in Brazil before the current wave.

*The protests
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Even without a dictatorship or a particular political figure to overthrow, the third wave of protests, known among Brazilians as the 'journeys of June', has been longer and more violent than the previous two. But it occurs in the absence of a clear political demand or ideological purpose. This has led many to ask whether the demonstrations have a chance of achieving meaningful change or are merely unfocused gatherings of students and troublemakers. Confusion swept the country at the onset of the movement, as massive protests by smiling families and artists took place alongside clashes sparked by dark-clothed members of the anarchist Black Bloc movement. Arnaldo Jabor, a commentator on one of Brazil's most popular news shows, called the thousands of Brazilians in the streets 'vandals'. Five days later, on the same show, he retracted his remarks. The young protesters were in the streets, he now said, because the country was politically and economically 'paralysed'.¹⁴

The general disenchantment was as non-specific as it was pervasive. President Rouseff suffered a huge drop in the opinion polls last year, but so did opposition politicians. (Most of them, including the president, later

recovered, albeit without regaining their previous levels of support.) The energy sustaining the frequent eruption of protests came not from the country's political foundations but from its political economy; they showed that a secure democracy and the absence of political extremism were not enough to guarantee domestic stability.

Education and social media

The access to higher education that accompanies rising incomes has provided Brazilians with new tools for political engagement. University attendance among citizens aged 18–24, the group key to both the civil unrest and accompanying social-media activity, grew from 15% in 2002 to 29.9% in 2011.¹⁵ Students accounted for 52% of demonstrators in 2013. This increasingly ambitious and connected population felt let down by a labour market that lacked the jobs they expected. Economic growth slowed almost to a halt after 2010, and two months before the June 2013 protests youth unemployment reached 12.4%, triple Brazil's overall rate.¹⁶

The country's decade-long rise coincided with a massive increase in the number of citizens with access to the Internet, to 85.9m, or slightly less than half of the population.¹⁷ Brazilians make up the second-largest national population on Facebook and Twitter, with 41m accounts and 8% of all users on the latter site.¹⁸ Shortly after the start of the demonstrations against the increase in bus fares, three hashtags calling for protests were used around 1,584,000 times in two weeks.¹⁹ Smartphones, which were used to share images of police violence, have traditionally been expensive in Brazil and only recently became commonplace. The number of Internet-enabled mobile devices has jumped by 43% in the past three years, providing a crucial means for political activism.

In contrast to many other countries recently hit by demonstrations, such as Turkey, Brazil has a strong democracy. Whereas Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan moved to 'eradicate' Twitter from his country, blocking the website along with YouTube in March 2014, Brazilian policymakers recognised the population's right to protest and did not infringe free speech.²⁰

Greater Internet connectivity has also caused a qualitative break from the tradition of mobilisation in Brazil, which had usually involved politi-

cal parties or leaders from Brasilia. Lula, who represented the now ruling Workers' Party, was an important figure in the first wave of protests. The second wave was primarily led by students, but their activities were overseen and directed by parties opposed to President Collor. In contrast, demonstrators in the current wave have spoken out against the involvement of party activists. While the protesters of 1992 expressed their allegiance to a common cause by painting their faces with the colours of the national flag, demonstrators now proudly display placards featuring hashtags and unite around the Internet.

President Rousseff was a protégée of Lula, who embodied a progressive populism that gets some credit for improving the lives of Brazil's masses. Today, however, no such leader can match the Internet's power of mobilisation, because it is impossible for an individual to represent such a diffuse set of causes. Emotional responses shared through hashtags and free Wi-Fi networks connected people, but they also confused the authorities and the mainstream media. High prices, urban mobility, health and education were at the top of the demonstrators' long list of demands, but the overarching theme has been one of 'relative deprivation', in Ted Robert Gurr's formulation.²¹ Gurr identifies a discrepancy between people's expectations and their current states as one of the key drivers of political violence. This idea is borne out by the recent history of Latin America, where demonstrations have become more frequent and more violent in some of the region's most stable and economically healthy states, such as Brazil, Chile and Peru. All of these countries saw violent clashes in the streets that their democratically elected governments struggled to understand. Tellingly, 46% of demonstrators in Brazil had never been to a protest before, and 80% said they joined the movement through social media.²²

The replacement of charismatic, recognisable leaders with a diffuse network of movements and proto-groups has paved the way for tactics and ideological affiliations that are new to Brazil. The Black Bloc is one of these semi-organised groups, linking itself to the broader protest movement and the grievances driving it. Increasingly active in many countries, the organisation is a loose grouping of masked youths who often mingle with predominantly peaceful demonstrators and provoke violent clashes with

police, before dispersing. In Brazil, the group's fierce opposition to the state reflects a rejection of traditional politics as a viable route for change. In its place, the Black Bloc has advocated political violence, which Brazil had not witnessed since the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, the group's views were tolerated, and sometimes openly supported, by large numbers of protesters last year, during the start of the unrest. (Their support has fallen drastically since then.) Police investigations after the clashes revealed the likely source of the Black Bloc's radical stance: most of the group's activists were under the age of 25, came from the poor peripheries of large cities, lived with their parents and did not have formal employment.²³ They had glimpsed Brazil's economic ascendance but were among the worst affected by crumbling infrastructure and urban chaos.

Damage control

Brazil's World Cup involved an information war of sorts. Protesters endeavoured to maximise the coverage they received from the world's media, while the authorities attempted to maintain a sense of the 'absolute tranquillity' predicted by President Rousseff. In time, the demonstrations became smaller, but tended to be dominated by violent groups. (There was a smattering of such violence during the first stage of the World Cup.) Unrelated to religious extremism or ethnic rivalry, the third wave of unrest nonetheless posed a credible threat to Brazil's strategy of wielding cultural influence and economic power. The international criticism drawn by incidences of police brutality was particularly damaging to the country's image.

Like many leaderships elsewhere in Latin America, the Brazilian government has reacted with major shifts in policy, scrambling to make up for its neglect of large segments of society. In June last year, it was forced to revise many of its strategic priorities over the course of just a few weeks. Congress quickly approved a bill to funnel nearly all royalties from Brazil's vast offshore oil reserves into education and health. A proposal for the reform of the political system, designed to make it more responsive and to curb corruption, was put forward and may be approved before 2015. Urban-mobility campaigners were rewarded with an investment commitment on infrastructure of around \$23bn.²⁴ Successive administrations in Brazil, like those in

most Latin American countries, have used the times of plenty which began in the 2000s to create cash-transfer schemes for the poor and often overlooked complex projects in urban mobility and infrastructure. But society has moved faster than governments, and the middle class now demands services and infrastructure that will take time to deliver, such as complex subways, high-quality education systems and reformed political structures.

The challenges faced by Brazil are likely to be repeated elsewhere as the populations of many countries grow more affluent. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that the global middle class will expand from 1.8bn people in 2009 to 4.9bn in 2030, with the bulk of the growth occurring in emerging countries, particularly those in Asia.²⁵ India's middle class is expected to grow by 200m in the next six years.²⁶ The same stratum of Latin American society grew by 50% between 2003 and 2009.²⁷ Social structures and cultures may vary from region to region, but large-scale shifts in demands and connectivity are common to all emerging countries affected by such trends.

Their struggle to adapt is made harder by the fact that these countries now have to distribute resources while their economies slow. Brazil's story may therefore hold important lessons for other states, particularly large democracies. The growth of Brazil's economy slowed to slightly more than 2% last year, and it is not an isolated case. The IMF states that the average growth rate for emerging markets is now three percentage points lower than in 2010, with the most populous countries, especially China and India, accounting for the largest share of this decline.²⁸

The Brazilian state has been placed under increasing domestic and international pressure to respond to the demands of its citizens, even as the mega sporting events keep coming (the Summer Olympic Games are two years away). Its uneven economic performance indicates the potential for large-scale protests elsewhere in the emerging world, as rising affluence becomes, ironically, a source of unrest. Connectivity and middle-class grievances have accelerated on a global level, and events in Brazil should be taken as a wake-up call for governments facing similar challenges. The capacity of these states to understand and quickly meet the new demands being voiced is crucial to their internal stability and global ambitions.

Notes

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