"I'm Mad as Hell...": Brazilian Protests in Comparative Perspective

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/08/06/im-mad-as-hell-and-im-not-going-to-take-this-anymore-brazilian-protests-in-comparative-perspective/

PETER KINGSTONE, AUG 6 2013

Pope Francis' visit to Brazil has come and gone largely without incident. By most accounts, it was a tremendous success and the new pontiff's modesty and positive message was well received both in Brazil and abroad. Security officials expressed concern about the Pope's desire to move openly and worried about the risks of violence in a country still reeling from weeks of unexpected protests. Instead, to some extent, the peaceful visit offers a plausible end marker to a discrete event – a brief moment of rage that boiled unexpectedly into the public realm. Now that the event is largely over, however, we can begin the process of trying to make sense of something that nobody predicted, shocked observers in Brazil and abroad, yet seems to have left little real consequences. Briefly, we need to ask three questions: what actually happened? What does it portend for Brazil? And how should we understand the protests in larger context?

What Happened?

On June 6th, 2013, a proposed 10% increase in bus fares in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro led to a protest by the *Movimento Passe Livre* (Free Fare Movement) opposing the proposal and demanding free transit. Bus fares are not trivial in a country in which low income citizens can spend as much as a quarter of their income on the slow, crowded, and terrible transportation system. Consequently, fare increases are politically fraught and have a long history of producing protests and even riots. On this occasion, however, an aggressive police response produced a public and media backlash and within days, what appeared initially as an isolated and not particularly popular movement became millions of Brazilians protesting in cities across the whole country. Protesters raged against a host of frustrations, most of which stemmed from gross inadequacies in public services, corruption and impunity, and the sense that politicians cared little for the concerns of average Brazilians. Vast (albeit badly inadequate) investment for staging the 2013 Confederation Cup, as well as the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics in 2016, brought the lack of investment in areas like public transportation, education and health into sharp relief. "Fifa" standard services became a common ironic battle cry of the protest movement.

The Dilma Rousseff government, like the whole of the world, was caught by surprise by the breadth and intensity of the movement. Initially, Dilma offered little in response, aside from rhetorical support for those on the streets and for the value of protest in a healthy democracy. As the protests continued and deepened, she finally began to react, offering one ineffective and underwhelming proposal after another. Media commentators across the spectrum dismissed her various offerings as "marketing." She did prevail upon mayors to revoke the bus fare increases. Subsequently, she offered a series of proposals ranging from constitutional reforms (first within the congress then when that failed, by plebiscite), increasing the number of doctors (by importing them from abroad, primarily Cuba), a national pact simultaneously offering more spending and control over inflation, and pledging to use the as yet unrealised pre-salt oil revenues to fund social services.[1] None of the attempts yielded much benefit with the apparently implacable crowds. By the end of June, new polls showed Dilma's political approval collapsing from the extraordinary highs she had enjoyed just a few weeks previously. Her public approval rating fell by 27% to only 30% approval. Looking at her "net approval" (total negative evaluations subtracted from total positive), her net approval was only +5% down from a net of +55% at the start of the month. For the first time in her term, she appeared

politically vulnerable. Indeed, her apparent tin ear and inability to connect with voters led some to call for the return of her tremendously popular predecessor and political benefactor, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

In the end, the protests mostly petered out. Protests against Rio de Janeiro's governor, Sergio Cabral, continued in the face of Cabral's Marie Antoinette-like disregard for public concerns and flagrant and arrogant displays of wealth. But, the end of the Confederation Cup and the growing presence of hooligans and their acts of violence and criminality changed the tone of the protests and coverage in major media and both probably contributed to a dissipation of the energy of the movement. Efforts by large organizations of the left and labour unions to take a leadership role led to a general strike on July 11. But the "organized" protest was much smaller and less effective as the "disorganized" protesters largely ignored the effort. Despite concerns during the Pope's visit, only small expressions of specific opposition to Church positions emerged. The World Cup may provoke yet another round of protesting, but for all intents and purposes, the so-called "Vinegar Revolution[2]" or "Brazilian Autumn" is over.

But What Does It All Mean?

A number of observers have pointed to a likely underlying mix of conditions that helped produce this wave of anger. First and foremost, the protesters were primarily young, middle class and educated. On the face of it, it does not appear to be a reaction of the poor who are in fact most hurt by rising bus prices. Instead, it appears that this was a protest of the "new middle classes" — those earning in the area of 4$ per day and above. This is the aspirational middle class – Class C in Brazilian terms — that have seen their incomes, consumption and opportunities rise dramatically in recent years. For this group, neither jobs nor basic conditions of living are the main concern. Rather "quality of life" ranks as the most important issue. On this, Brazil's serious under-investment in health, education, energy, housing and transportation are significant impediments to further improvements in quality of life, not the least because low public investment increases out-of-pocket private expenses even as the cost of living generally has increased as well. For those trying to get ahead and with relatively low incomes, these additional costs represent significant barriers to social mobility.

The poverty of public investment and its effects on rising economic classes appears even worse in the face of declining economic performance. Brazil's economy has been slowing noticeably since the peak of 2010, encumbered by a number of uncompetitive pressures. Rising inflation (nearing 6.5%), weakening employment, falling disposable income, rising private debts and default rates accompanied by anemic growth and rising taxes (especially indirect) all contribute to squeeze the middle classes. In short, these are the conditions of a classic "revolution of rising expectations." Add in billions in investments for football and the Olympics that the country can ill afford, and frequently corrupt politicians who appear inured to the problems of its citizens, the protests do not appear particularly surprising.

It is not clear, however, what consequence this will have for Dilma and the ruling coalition or Brazilian politics generally. The same poll that showed Dilma's loss of support revealed two other key pieces of information. The first is that the main beneficiary politically was Marina Silva, the candidate of the Green Party from 2010, and probably correctly perceived as the only real "outsider" among prominent names. But, even with Marina's modest gains, Dilma still enjoyed the highest level of political support among possible contenders. Indeed, her pattern of support echoed Lula's 2006 voting base in the poor Northeast of the country. Among the poorest and in the poorest region, Dilma enjoyed net approval of +12% and +24% respectively. In effect, the PT's hard-core base has remained loyal despite the protests. That strong starting point offers Dilma and the PT a good chance to recover politically over the next year before the 2014 presidential elections. She is also aided by the fact that no other politician offered any reasonable, coherent, or particularly astute response to the protests. Dilma may have appeared wooden and ineffective, but nobody else knew how to respond either. She may have been tarnished, but no prospective candidate has articulated a clear agenda to challenge her.

I'm Mad as Hell: Brazil in Comparative Perspective

Brazil's "Vinegar Revolution" is one of many that have broken out in very recent years. Turkey's protest movement at almost the same time evokes obvious comparisons as both movements appeared to come out of nowhere within

countries widely seen as great success stories and emerging leaders in the new global political economy. But, the comparison does not end with Turkey. The Brazilian protests are among the many expressions of anger that have appeared in recent years in riots and protests in both the developed and developing world; in both democracies and authoritarian regimes.

In the classic film "Network," 'Howard Beale', a traditional and honest newscaster pushed aside by cynical new media executives, calls out to the public to get up and go their window and yell out as loud as they can "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this any longer." In one of the film's powerful scenes, the angry rant provokes people all over the city to do exactly that. It is an expression of rage against power, corruption, and unfairness that lacks specific form or targets and ultimately fails to produce any change. In the age of modern communications, Facebook, Twitter and other social media have become powerful mechanisms of producing exactly that effect, mobilizing people around shared expressions of outrage about the unfairness of the system. The Turkish protests share common elements with Brazil, as do protests in Southern Europe, Israel, Bulgaria, as well as the Occupy Movement in the US. These movements lack real leadership or organization. There is nobody with whom to negotiate and it is not really clear what to negotiate. Often, the list of grievances is long and diffuse – perhaps connected to some broad, general overarching theme. But, in all these cases, it is not clear how to identify the concrete policy solution that will satisfy protesters and peacefully end the conflict. In effect, it is not clear how to bring the concerns of the angry crowd into the institutional realm of politics.[3]

In authoritarian regimes, protest have been most potent when they've led to the collapse of a dictatorship, although as Egypt is demonstrating so tragically, it is much harder to build something enduring and democratic. The protests under democratic rule seem to have had much less impact. In all these cases, eventually the energy of the formless movement has dissipated and while the underlying causes remain, the political system has moved on, in some cases as if they never happened in the first place. The Occupy movement in the US has had virtually no measurable consequences for US politics. For a short while, the public discussion of inequality and the "1 percenters" brought into the open what public opinion surveys readily made evident – that Americans overwhelmingly believe that their political system is dominated by the wealthy for the benefit of the wealthy. Yet, within a few short months, the movement was effectively over and the depth of public anger returned into the shadows, unexpressed in any meaningful way politically.

Is the Occupy movement the likely course for the Vinegar Revolution? It is distinctly possible. Dilma deserves full credit for being much more responsive to the protests than Erdogan, Obama or any of the leaders of Southern Europe or Israel. Ineffective or not, Dilma made repeated efforts to articulate responses to what amounted to a vast cry against structural problems for which there is no quick fix. Obama cannot solve the deep inequalities of US politics with a simple policy solution. Nor can Dilma solve deeply rooted structural deficiencies in public services due to years of underinvestment and decades of neglect. She cannot quickly end institutional and cultural roots of public corruption. At this point, she cannot undo the World Cup or the Olympics. Finally, she cannot easily overcome the drags on Brazilian economic performance. Ultimately, she may win office again, but the underlying roots of public anger are likely to remain.

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[1] Public anger did yield some changes happened, most notably the defeat in Congress of a constitutional amendment proposal to limit the Public Ministry's powers to investigate official corruption (PEC-37). The heavy handed effort to protect politicians had been approved in committee, but failed in voting on the Congress floor in the face of public fury.

[2] So called because protesters used vinegar to protect themselves from police use of tear gas.

[3] The Chilean student protests offer an interesting contrasting example, where in fact a leadership structure with real organization and a clear reform agenda has kept the protests going, has forced multiple negotiating efforts, and has entered into the political system with a meaningful chance that the concerns of the movement will be reflected in upcoming elections.

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