

Jul 16 2013

A Brazilian Spring? No, not really.

LSE IDEAS

By Professor Thiago Rodrigues and Fernando Brancoli



Crowds of protesters, police violence and expressions of discontent unseen for many decades—this is a good portrayal of what took place in the largest cities of Brazil during the first weeks of June 2013. The immediate reason for the wave of protests was the rise in bus fares, trains and subways in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Similar increase had already happened in other cities such as Porto Alegre and Goiânia, which prompted protests since last February, but the demonstrations in São Paulo and Rio caused larger and more numerous protests to spread across the country.

One of the most evocative days of protest was June 13th, when 20,000 people gathered in São Paulo's Avenida Paulista, the financial hub of Brazil. Military police confronted the protesters with extreme force, indiscriminately using tear

gas, pepper spray and rubber bullets. Dozens were arrested and hundreds of protesters were injured. That same night, a large peaceful protest took place in downtown Rio de Janeiro that was also violently attacked by the military police.

The repression in Rio and Sao Paulo exacerbated popular discontent. New protests emerged in other cities, such as Belo Horizonte and Recife. This culminated on June 20th, when close to 1.5 million people marched in over eighty cities across the country. Brazil had not experienced such levels of protest since the demonstrations against the military dictatorship in the late 1960s and the democratisation movement of the early 1980s. This new scenario has had symbolic moments. For example, when hundreds of people occupied the marquee of the National Congress building, in Brasilia. Most of these rallies were peaceful, with the significant exception of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro on June 17th. In São Paulo, a group of protesters tried to invade the Palace of the State Government. In Rio, a few dozen protesters invaded and set fire to some rooms at the Legislative Assembly. Banks and police stations were also destroyed. This scenario escalated on June 20th, when a larger group clashed with the military police in front of city hall, started small fires and looted supermarkets and electronics stores. On the same day, some demonstrators in Brasilia attacked the Foreign Ministry building with rocks and Molotov cocktails.

These mass mobilizations have puzzled analysts. Some, linked to traditional leftist thought, have pointed to the lack of cohesion, leadership and unified demands as weaknesses that jeopardise the development of what they call a 'positive agenda' for negotiations with the government. Others have attempted to identify the protests' causes as anger due to corruption and excessive spending for the 2014 World Cup, discontent with the lack of public investment in education and health, demands for a reform in the judiciary and the political system and cries against inflation. In this view, the rise of the public transport fares was simply a trigger. The mainstream media has highlighted the violent actions of protesters, classifying their actions as 'vandalism' and linking them to the supposedly 'radical demonstrators' or 'middle class youth' interested in spreading chaos. In São Paulo, the *Movimento Passe Livre* (Movement for the Free Fare-MPL), which articulates the claim for the return of the previous price of public transportation passes, presented the same argument, trying to move away from the broader demands in order to be seen as a legitimate and moderate interlocutor to negotiate with the authorities.

In this context, one can compare Brazil to the recent demonstrations in the Arab world and Turkey, the most recent focus of demonstrations. For example, photos and videos of both are highly comparable – particularly those of youth occupying public spaces and demanding political change. The use of the social media was also an important tool for organising the protests and as a forum for discussion, and the internet has served as a channel of symbolic international support and means of receiving messages from expats or sympathisers.

Yet, to define the Brazilian protests as a 'Brazilian Spring' would imply certain characteristics that do not correspond to the specificities of its case. The events in North Africa and the Middle East were essentially claims against authoritarian governments that controlled most of the press and the economic sector. Brazil is a democracy closer to the liberal-democratic model established in the post-Cold War world. Despite the fact that the police repression in Brazil has reached alarming levels of intensity and that the control of the press by private groups is evident, there are channels of free dissemination of information. These channels, especially on the internet, resulted in a flood of videos showing violent actions by police officers. Moreover, the demonstrations in the so-called Arab world are the result of demands that had been building up for years in a

context of strong political repression. In Egypt, the protests in Tahrir Square are the culmination of strikes and demonstrations that began decades earlier. The alleged economic reforms promoted by former president Hosni Mubarak, particularly the privatisation of state enterprises, were considered by a large part of the population as a mismanagement of public assets. Even the recent demonstrations that culminated in the military coup that withdrew President Mohamed Morsi were largely motivated by the inability of the leader to improve the economy.

The protests in Brazil, in contrast, took place in a context in which the country has been growing at an expressive rate for the last decade, with strong investments in social programs that help the poorest segments of the population. The so-called 'new middle class' has gained original consumption patterns and a generation of young people born after the 1990s is establishing new relations with politics and government representatives. This sector sees the benefits achieved as already acquired rights and it demands the improvement of state benefits – funded in part by one of the largest tax fares in the world. This explains why the demonstrations that began by demanding a reduction on the bus fares spread so quickly, and why they have continued even [after some cities conceded the reduction of the ticket prices](#).

However, it is undeniable that some degree of transnational symbolism created by the events in North Africa and the Middle East has spilled over to Brazil. Youths intensely used social media to voice their demands to the world. To some extent, there is a feeling of 'if they can do it, so can we'. Whilst this may not serve as a sole explanation, it is clear that some degree of emblematic encouragement has galvanised the population – even if indirectly. Diffuse networks of solidarity between Brazil and Turkey formed almost simultaneously. The ubiquitous Guy Fawkes masks, from the comics 'V for Vendetta' are also present in the Brazilian capitals, making the demonstrators' faces more similar, whether in Cairo or Brasilia.

The difficulty in explaining what happens in Brazil suggests that something different may emerge in the country. The demonstrations have sought to occupy public spaces in an inventive and distinctive way. This new occupation was carried out by a multitude of people, many of which were youths born long after the much-debated depletion of traditional labor unions and political representations. This multiplicity of voices, including the violent actions, must be read politically: plundering is neither mere vandalism nor has been unsystematic. Most violent acts have been directed against government buildings, banks and police symbols. Therefore, even if democracy as a political model does not stand it, this violence is also a political act of transgression aimed at the authorities, forcing them to take a stance. Nevertheless, the mass media, the political parties, some intellectuals and the official governmental propaganda have made efforts to unify all the violent and confrontational acts seen all over Brazil for the last month under a single group of so-called 'vandals'.

The specific claim for the democratisation of the urban space as well as the protests against the political system and its institutions may be appeased on a moderate lodging. There are elements in these manifestations marked by a nationalistic discourse which demands a new model for the national 'ethics', which only reinforces the status quo by focusing on its continued improvement and refinement. One may see this moment as a critical episode that allows the enactment of new practices and economic policies, secluded from the current models. This approach would avoid institutional responses that could be created only to ease the youth's unrest. The political parties in power are now gathering their marketing specialists to design campaigns that 'approach the youth'. President Dilma Rousseff tried to answer to the massive amplification of claims by convoking a national plebiscite to address political reform that would include issues such as the implementation of a new general rule for regional political representativeness, the definition of the financing rules of political campaigns and the end of the secret vote for representatives. Her idea was construed by the opposition and part of her own supporters as an evasive measure to postpone or to conceal the concrete economic and political problems. Rousseff's popularity has consequently sunk.

Meanwhile, pushed by demands for political reform and measures to fight corruption, associated with the National football team participation at the FIFA's Confederation Cup, much of the recent manifestations assumed a nationalist tone. There were episodes in which political party's supporters were aggressively expelled from the street manifestations by people holding Brazilian flags under the motto: 'The only flag is the Brazilian flag'. It has been reported that some neo-nazi groups were among the middle class protesters. The ambiguity of the 'nationalist claims' remains with its unclear position: a mixture of 'fascist-like' movements and nationalist claims combined with political discontent. The government's early measures and the mass media's approach to the protests were both compromised to offer an institutional response to claims—and most of the people who have marched since the first days of June urge for this kind of response.

If so, the current events in Brazil may be stuck in a reformist path closer to the Spanish *Indignados* or Occupy Wall Street, with demands centered by the call for political and economical moralisation. However, there is always the unexpected which inhabits the discontent of young people and emanates from those restless, full of life and potential. The unexpected may emerge vivid in Brazil, a tropical country that has no spring.

Thiago Rodrigues is a Professor of International Relations at the Institute of Strategic Studies (INEST) of the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and researcher at the Ecopolitics Project (Nu-Sol/PUC-SP).

Fernando Brancoli is a PhD Candidate in International Relations – San Tiago Dantas Program (Unesp | Unicamp | PUC-SP).

Photo courtesy of <http://www.businessinsider.com/brazil-protest-pictures-photos-2013-6?op=1>

This entry was posted in [Latin America](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).