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What the World Cup means for Latin America

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By Guy Burton

For much of the past century Latin America has been characterised as Washington's 'backyard'. Economically and militarily, the region's states have never been in a position to compete with the United States while the Cold War provided the backdrop against which governments largely opted for American patronage. The experience of those that opted for a more independent and socially transformative role, such as Cuba and Allende's Chile, was not a happy one, the former being frozen out and obliged to seek support from Moscow and the latter succumbing to a US-supported coup and repressive military dictatorship.

But one arena where Latin America could compete with the US – indeed, even triumph over it – was on the football field. And with the World Cup due to kick off in South Africa later this week, it is perhaps worth considering the way in which the tournament has been used by the region's governments to promote themselves globally.

Latin American countries have won half of eighteen World Cups held since the first one in 1930. Brazil holds the record, with five victories, with Argentina and Uruguay both having won it twice each. The political influence was present at the start: Uruguay's appointment as inaugural hosts by FIFA (the international football body) in 1930 had as much to do with it celebrating its centenary as an independent state as much as it did with being the Olympic champion in 1924 and 1928 (and prior to the World Cup the world championship for the sport).

Brazil, which has always sought a leading international role, applied for the 1942 World Cup. Its main competition came from Germany. However, the Second World War was to interrupt the competition and prevent any competitive football by European teams in this period.

Brazil's offer was reiterated and taken up after the end of hostilities in 1946. In the absence of any interest from the war-ravaged European countries, Brazil's bid for the 1950 competition was the only one. The country saw the event as an opportunity to showcase Brazil's global progress and set about building the largest stadium in the world, the Maracana.

Across the nation there was high confidence that this was to be Brazil's year. The shock that followed the country's defeat to Uruguay in the final game of the tournament – and hence the championship for Uruguay's second and final success – plunged many into a state of grief, including several suicides. Brazil's defeat was significant on two levels. Politically, it undermined the Brazilian leadership's belief in itself as the country of the future and of success. In football terms, despite Uruguay's football and demographic decline compared to Brazil, when the two countries meet the match is subject to acute levels of attention by Brazilians and excessive celebration whenever they win.

Brazil's defeat in 1950 haunted the nation until it finally achieved its first win in 1958 at the tournament in Sweden. This made Brazil the first – and so far only – nation to win the competition outside of its own hemisphere (repeating the feat in Japan/Korea in 2002). It held onto the trophy in 1962 when the competition was next staged in Latin America, this time in Chile. That Chile was able to host the event was an achievement since much of the stadia, along with the country's infrastructure had to be rebuilt in the wake of the 1960 earthquake, the largest so far recorded.

With FIFA adopting an alternation of hosts between Europe and South America, the region's next turn came in 1970 when Mexico hosted the first of its two to date. Already before the tournament opened football had served as a backdrop to conflict between El Salvador and Honduras, dubbed the 'Football War'. Although neither side qualified for the finals, the matches were played between the two countries amid rising tensions related to increasing migration by Salvadorans to Honduras and their expulsion. A day before the second game was played hostilities began, lasting several days and resulting in no decisive outcome for either side.

A year later when the tournament was finally held, it was considered a classic and was won by arguably the greatest Brazilian side ever produced. Brazil's victory meant that it had won the competition for the third time, thereby earning it the right to permanent ownership of the original trophy. However, the occasion coincided two with both the rise of military repression and

an industrial boom known as the 'economic miracle'. Linking football success to the latter, the generals in charge sought to divert public attention away from the excesses being carried out. This was apparent in the use of the pro-government football hymn, 'Go Forward Brazil'.

The same was to follow in an arguably more cynical fashion in 1978. That tournament was held in Argentina and won by the hosts, which had been granted the right to stage the event in 1966. However, during the early 1970s growing political tension had contributed to a 'dirty war', resulting in a military coup in 1976. Between 10,000 and 30,000 people disappeared during the seven years of dictatorship. Protest against the military government included a committee to boycott the World Cup which received support in France, West Germany and the Netherlands. However, divisions within the Left, including the Soviet Union's continued economic links with the regime and a lack of support for the boycott by the Argentine Communist Party, weakened the movement. The regime saw an opportunity to exploit the tournament for its own purposes, spending around US\$700m on infrastructure, equal to around 10% of the national debt and postponing non-World Cup related projects during the period.

Colombia was scheduled to host the event in 1986, having won the right in 1974. However, in the years that followed the country became increasingly plagued by internal strife including kidnappings and rising debts. By the early 1980s it was apparent that the country would not be able to provide the infrastructure necessary to host the event. In 1983 the decision was taken to move the competition, with Canada, Brazil, the US and Mexico all presenting bids.

Within one of the strongest applications, the US was rejected on two main grounds: one, FIFA's opposition to the various rule changes made to the game by the American authorities in their country; and two, FIFA's commercial priorities. The Mexican vice-president of FIFA not only owned several football clubs and a media company, but also provided the framework for the way the competition is now presented, bringing in sponsors and raising ticket prices to the advantage of the football world body.

Despite winning the right to stage the tournament for a second time, Mexico's main achievement was not only the pitch but like Chile two decades earlier in actually holding the event. Eight months before the competition began an earthquake struck Mexico City but did not damage the stadia. Most of the games kicked off in the midday heat as to ensure European TV coverage, which was provided by the media company owned by FIFA's Mexican vice-president. Argentina was the victors for a second time, dispatching England in a quarterfinal against which the recent Falklands/Malvinas conflict served as a backdrop. Although both team managers had sought to downplay the political aspect, Argentine players admitted a degree of satisfaction and revenge in the result.

Following Argentina's success, Latin American honours have fallen to Brazil twice more, in 1994 and 2002. The 1994 victory was jumped on by the country's president, who after the country's economic decline during the 'Lost Decade', wanted to transfer the team's success to the national psyche. The year also saw the introduction of the Real Plan which brought an end to inflation and led to a consumer boom in Brazil – an occasion not lost to the successful team, who returned from the US World Cup with tonnes of products. Similarly in 2002 the then president also sought to link the team's achievement with the country's economic recovery.

Since Mexico in 1986, Latin America has not played host to the World Cup, FIFA having opted to bring in other continents including Asia and Africa. However, in 2003 it announced that the 2014 competition would take place in South America. Brazil, Argentina and Colombia all declared their interest, although the South American confederation eventually opted to put its full backing behind Brazil. Its bid was formally accepted in late 2007.

Brazil's success in winning the bid has echoes with the last time it staged it in 1950, by providing an opportunity for the country to demonstrate the extent to which it has advanced globally (this was further helped by President Lula's involvement in supporting its successful 2009 bid to stage the Olympic Games two years after the World Cup). But many will hope that this time the result will be different, with Brazil presenting a success on the pitch as well as off it. However, this remains far from certain; earlier this year FIFA put the country on notice, highlighting concern with the slow pace of preparations.

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