Hosting World Cup, Summer Olympics Brings Brazil Headaches

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Hosting World Cup, Summer Olympics Brings Brazil Headaches
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Preparations to host two of the world's major sporting events—the 2014 soccer World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics—are changing the face of the South American giant (NotiSur, July 1, 2011), and not only because of the infrastructure projects being built to house thousands of athletes and, it is believed, some 2 million visitors. What is worse, say analysts close to Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff, they are changing the government's timing and methods.

Many sectors want to benefit from the eyes of the world being on Brazil for reasons other than its formidable economic performance. With the world looking at how the country is preparing to confront its endemic insecurity problem, the police in several states are going on strike with demands that many are calling disproportionate and unaffordable for the state's treasury. With powerful sports interests monitoring infrastructure projects and doubting the government's actions, workers who build the stadiums and housing facilities for the athletes are also going on strike with surprising demands.

Police and workers know that everything they say and do will have greater impact now than under normal circumstances. The World Cup and the Summer Olympics have led the government to do what has not been done since the administration of former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003)—privatize sensitive areas, such as the largest airports.

In this context, the military is making its contribution, attacking the government for possible ramifications of the work of a commission, created but not yet staffed, that will be in charge of gathering information on human rights violations during the 1964-1985 dictatorship.

Costly police strikes hit several cities
The police strikes have already left residents in the states of Maranhão y Ceará (one of the 12 sites where the World Cup games will be played) unprotected, but they took on greater importance when in early February 30,000 members of the Polícia Militar from Bahia joined them and left 13 million residents defenseless.

The results of the 12-day strike in Bahia spoke volumes. Commerce and tourism suffered losses estimated at US$2.2 billion, 402 vehicles were stolen and not recovered (33 per day of the strike), and 196 people were killed (more than double the normal rate for the state). At least 40 bodies showed clear signs of execution.

Eric Nepomuceno, one of the most respected journalists in the country, said, "There are strong indications that vigilante groups took advantage of the situation to execute enemies or settle scores."

An as-yet-unknown number of businesses were looted and destroyed, and more than 100 cars and public buses were burned. During those 12 days, strikers counted on allies—"bands of criminals
whom they protect and with whom they do business," said Nepomuceno. In addition to looting, they functioned as an efficient factory for producing alarmist rumors and organized daily street blockades to demonstrate their power.

Their methodology was always the same: They stole trucks and other large vehicles and abandoned them on the busiest avenues. The images and the news disseminated around the world were discouraging for those who had once thought of visiting one of Brazil's most beautiful states and a leading tourist destination. Salvador, the capital of Bahia, is another site of World Cup games.

**Bahia police want extra pay for "risky" work**

As in Maranhão and Ceará, the Bahia police asked that their salaries be doubled, from about US $840 a month to US$1,600. But they also demanded extra pay for "hazardous activities," an absurd request given that joining the police force means engaging in inherently dangerous activities. In Brazil, public security depends on two police bodies—the Policia Civil (investigative) and the Policia Militar (which should be for prevention and repression).

"It is difficult to say which of the two is more corrupt. It is not uncommon for some [police] in their free time to work with criminal gangs. The number of police involved in violent acts is more shocking with each passing day and, although strong punishments are announced, there seems to be a kind of consolidated impunity," wrote Mario Jakoskind, correspondent for the Uruguayan magazine Brecha. The journalist complained that "the Policia Militar have close ties to the Army."

Because of that fact and the disproportionate demands, both Bahia Gov. Jacques Warner and President Rousseff resorted to language unfamiliar to members of the progressive Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) administration. The police actions, exacerbated by the rightist press, resulted in Warner and Rousseff falling so far into the trap set for them that human rights agencies as well as PT militants said that the language reminded them of the most critical years of the dictatorship.

Both sectors were unhappy that the World Cup and the Olympics were a higher priority than general interests (NotiSur, Sept. 23, 2011).

Just two weeks before the start of the world-renowned Carnaval celebration, Rio de Janeiro—another World Cup site—elected to call a new police strike. With a society that has made Carnaval the most cherished and well-attended fiesta, common sense prevailed and the police postponed their protest.

Workers who built the soccer stadium at Natal, a city in the extreme northeast that is also a World Cup site, led the strike, supported ostensibly by the major opposition media. The protest lasted only two days, sufficient for the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), soccer's world governing body, to accuse the government of "not being sufficiently committed" to the organizing of the World Cup. In previous weeks, workers who had been building the stadiums in Brasilia, Rio de Janeiro, Recife, and Salvador de Bahia had led similar protests, and FIFA reacted in the same way as it did in Natal.

**Privatization of airports another cost of the games**

The World Cup and the Olympics also produced a notable change to a longstanding PT position—opposition to privatizations. Now, with the need to present visitors with the best image of the country from the time they arrive, Rousseff opted to privatize three airports in host cities. And these are not terminals in smaller cities but the major airports in the country: Brasilia (the capital), São
Paulo (the largest airport in Latin America and the busiest in South America), and Campinas (in São Paulo state, the busiest cargo airport in the country).

Incidentally, the state received more than US$14 billion for the airport concessions, a significant sum for a government that has just enacted US$29 billion in austerity measures that will primarily affect defense and health. In coming weeks, the government will open public bidding for concessions for the Natal and Rio de Janeiro airports. The last privatizations, which the PT opposed, were carried out in 1998, during President Cardoso's first term, and mainly affected the strategic telecommunications sector.

In this context, once again the retired Army, Navy, and Air Force officers clubs made their views known to the public in an effort to stop the formal induction of the Comissão da Verdade, whose mandate will be to gather information regarding human rights violations during the years the officers commanded the three military branches (NotiSur, Nov. 18, 2011). Their complaint is not intimately related to the sporting events, but it is very useful for the opposition because it can be portrayed abroad as "another insecurity factor," wrote the conservative daily O Globo.

Everyone in Brazil knows that the commission is a huge headache for the government. More than three months after the law was passed that created it, its seven members have still not been named. "This issue has become unpalatable for the government," said the daily Gazeta do Povo, published in the state of Paraná, "which is not in a position to name those persons."

The government was left with few options in that regard because, to ensure passage of the law creating the commission, it was necessary to negotiate with sectors that supported the dictatorship and those that fought it, which resulted in the commitment that commission members could not include anyone who belonged or was close to either side.

The retired officers—who are annoyed by remarks by members of Rousseff's Cabinet—know that for the president this is effectively an "unpalatable" issue and one that is difficult to resolve. While the three military associations "represent retired officers, they transmit the dissatisfaction that exists among active-duty personnel, who for disciplinary reasons cannot express them," said an article in the rightist daily O Estado de São Paulo, which was reproduced around the world by leading news agencies. That happened Feb. 17, the same day that the Bahia police ended their strike. It was like a continuation of those dramatic events.

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