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Brazilians Take to the Streets and Change 2014 Political, Electoral Landscape

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Two weeks in June, marked by massive demonstrations in more than 300 cities, have completely and radically changed Brazil's political, cultural, and social landscape. The events will likely have repercussions on the 2014 elections, when Brazilians will choose a new president, a position now held by President Dilma Rousseff of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT).

President Rousseff was the public figure whose image was most tarnished by the widespread street protests in the second half of June 2013. The latest Datafolha poll published in the newspaper Folha de São Paulo showed an unprecedented drop in the president's approval rating. Datafolha, which regularly tracks approval ratings for the president and other government officials, found that Rousseff's approval plummeted from 57% to 30% in the days following the massive demonstrations. The poll focused primarily on São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Belo Horizonte, Brazil's largest cities.

The drastic drop in support has led to questions about the PT's political program, with many party members arguing that the PT's presidential candidate in 2014 should be former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011).

Bus-fare increases catalyst for protests

The immediate cause of the unexpected massive popular demonstrations—which caught political parties, the media, and all institutions off guard—was opposition to fare increases in public transportation—buses, subways, and trains—in the city of São Paulo. São Paulo Mayor Fernando Haddad, a member of the PT, and São Paulo state Gov. Geraldo Alckmin of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) announced the fare increases—from R$3 (3 reais, US$1.32) to R$3.20 (US$1.41)—in late May; they went into effect June 2.

The first protest against the increases took place on June 3, when members of the Movimento pelo Passe Livre (MPL) blocked a highway in São Paulo. Other sporadic demonstrations took place in the next few days but the movement became much stronger beginning on June 11, with a large demonstration in downtown São Paulo, the largest city in the country and the center of a metropolitan area of 20 million people.

On June 17, a huge popular outpouring filled the streets of São Paulo. The police responded with force, and several journalists were injured. The tone of the media's coverage began to change after that, becoming more sympathetic to the work of the MPL and other groups and organizations that joined in the mobilizations.

From then on, similar demonstrations took place in dozens of major cities. On June 20, the movement reached its peak, with millions of Brazilians taking to the streets. Public buildings were attacked in several cities. A few protesters, without the backing of the MPL and the majority of demonstrators, committed acts of vandalism and were met with harsh police repression. But the
police also repressed peaceful demonstrators, bringing increased criticism of the security forces' actions.

A central characteristic of all the demonstrators was that organizations, political parties, and unions, which traditionally bring out supporters for such actions, did not mobilize the people. This time, the demonstrations were spontaneous, with massive participation by primary, secondary, and university students who were mobilized through social networks, particularly Facebook. Several analysts said young people do not feel adequately represented by the country's political institutions. During the protests, demonstrators harassed activists from unions and leftist parties like the PT.

Another important factor was that participation in the cycle of demonstrations increased progressively as the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Confederations Cup was being played in several Brazilian cities. The Confederations Cup is a soccer tournament played prior to the FIFA World Cup, which will be held in Brazil in 2014 and which has been widely criticized for spending billions on new stadiums.

The World Cup is expected to cost R$29 billion (US$12.9 billion), most of which will be spent on stadiums and airport improvements. However, expected improvements in urban transportation in large Brazilian cities have not gone as planned.

While the initial motives for the large demonstrations in June were rundown urban public transportation and rate increases, they quickly encompassed other demands: against corruption and for political reforms, respect for diversity, and substantial improvements in health care and education.

Overall, they were the largest street demonstrations in the country's history, larger than the 1992 street mobilizations demanding the ouster of President Fernando Collor de Mello (1990-1992) for corruption (NotiSur, Jan. 5, 1993).

President Rousseff slow to respond, proposes wide-ranging remedies

On June 21, pressured by events that seemed to be spinning out of control across Brazil, President Rousseff spoke on national radio and television. Without referring to the police crackdown on protesters, the president said she would listen to protest leaders and would propose to the governors and mayors of large cities "a national pact to improve public services."

Rousseff also urged Congress to approve a bill allocating 100% of royalties from oil extraction in the pre-salt layer of Brazil's continental shelf (NotiSur, Jan. 9, 2009) to education and said she would back an effort to immediately bring "thousands of doctors from abroad" to expand the public health care system (Sistema Único de Saúde, SUS). Regarding the World Cup, the president said that "federal money spent on stadiums comes from financing that will be repaid by the companies and the state governments that use these stadiums."

On June 24, meeting with state governors, the president also proposed holding a referendum to authorize a national constituent assembly to effect political reform by changing the 1988 Constitution.

Rousseff's response and her proposals have elicited much controversy. Brazilian doctors and their organizations have criticized the proposal to hire foreign doctors to improve the public health care
system. And political parties, including some that support the Rousseff administration, are divided on whether to support a referendum for political reform.

**Will public’s increased participation last?**

In any event, the June demonstration led to immediate social and political changes in Brazil. The public-transportation fare increases in São Paulo and in most other states were suspended. In some cases, new fares were lower than they were before the protests.

And Congress, much criticized in recent years by allegations of corruption involving lawmakers, also passed some popular short-term measures. For example, it approved allocating 75% of royalties from oil extraction in the pre-salt layer for education and 25% for health. It also passed a bill making corruption a heinous crime. State and municipal governments immediately passed measures to expedite hiring physicians for public health care services. A bill aimed at "curing" homosexuality was withdrawn, and Congress’ traditional July recess was suspended.

In late June and early July, demonstrations continued on a smaller scale and with new features. More specific popular demands began to emerge, and demonstrators began to organize to ensure greater social achievements. Large unions, absent during the demonstrations, came together to call for a general strike for July 11. One of the strongest actions was by truck drivers, who blocked roads to demand a reduction in toll fees that they consider excessive. In São Paulo, the richest state in Brazil, Gov. Alckmin suspended a toll increase, which had been set for early July.

Civil society organizations are once again speaking out. On June 22, a group of organizations that have traditionally participated in struggles for democracy and social change released an open letter expressing support for the popular street demonstrations, welcoming especially the youth and harshly criticizing the police crackdown.

"We are part of that multitude that arose from the Comitês Populares da Copa, the free-passage movements, the Marcha das Vadias, the indigenous movements, movements fighting for housing and access to the city, movements of students, blacks, and women, and human rights and landless-campesinos movements. We are in the streets to denounce all forms of discrimination and violations of rights," read the open letter, signed by Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras (AMB), Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST), Instituto de Estudos Socioeconômicos (INESC), Sociedade Paraense de Defesa dos Direitos Humanos, and other organizations.

The Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB) also spoke. On June 21, the bishops of the CNBB Permanent Council expressed "solidarity and support for peaceful demonstrations, which have brought people of all ages, especially young people, into the streets. This is a phenomenon involving the Brazilian people and the awakening of a new consciousness. It requires attention and insight to identify its values and limits, always with a view to building the just and fraternal society that we desire."

Brazil has changed since June 2013. What will happen in the coming months and years is completely uncertain. Also unclear is what voters will do in the 2014 elections for president, state governors, deputies, and senators. The proposed constituent assembly to promote political reform is a question mark. But one result is certain: the voices against corruption, injustice, and shoddy public services will continue, leading to major changes in the social and political structure of Brazil.