8-23-2013

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Protests Could Affect Re-election Chances for Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff

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Category/Department: Brazil

Published: 2013-08-23

For almost a month beginning on June 10, Brazil was a powder keg. A slight increase in the fare for public-transportation—bad and expensive—acted as a detonator. First in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro and then in most cities in the country, throngs of people took to the streets calling for a reversal of the fare hike and also demanding improvements in health and education (NotiSur, July 12, 2013). The protest was convoked via social networks by the until-then-unknown Movimento Passe Livre (MPL). Other small movements joined in, and the main slogan went from a demand for a fare reduction to a demand for free transportation.

The police violently repressed the marches in which tens of thousands of people participated. The crowds responded by burning vehicles, attacking the headquarters of several government agencies, and blocking roads and principle access routes to cities and ports. Six days after the protests began, MPL leaders said that the protests had gotten out of hand and that they had not anticipated such a reaction. They disassociated themselves from new calls for street protests.

The marchers also expressed their indignation at the money spent during those same days on organizing the Confederations Cup—a two-week event involving eight soccer teams—as well as the enormous sums being spent on the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic games, to be hosted by Brazil.

With Brazil in the spotlight because the huge sporting events capture world attention, televised images of streets filled with protesters and police firing weapons into the crowds went around the globe. The opposition press fanned the flames and celebrated. The sporting events guaranteed the protest global coverage that damaged the government's image.

Rousseff embraces protests

On July 12, unions, including the pro-government Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), called a general strike, paralyzing the country for 24 hours. The following day, President Dilma Rousseff surprised the right. "We welcome the demonstrations. Today Brazil awoke stronger, and my government wants to say that we are willing to listen to the voices from the streets."

Before the strike, Rousseff's predecessor, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2002-2010), had been equally eloquent. "Long live protests," he said. "From protest to protest we are fixing the roof of the house. While protests in Europe are to not lose what has been won, in Brazil they are to gain new conquests."

Various analysts said that, amid the actions of the major media and rightist parties to capitalize on the discontent that arose so unexpectedly, MPL leaders, by withdrawing from the calls to action, gave a warning that resulted in Rousseff and Lula not coming out to quell the protest but rather to embrace it. After all, what people, egged on by the media and the right, were demanding was...
nothing more than the old banners raised by the left, and by themselves, in their political actions as part of the guerrillas (Rousseff) or the unions (Lula).

"The protests were not organized by the poorest sectors, which benefit most from the changes that this government has made to Brazilian society," wrote Jorge Ussan, an editor of the online progressive journal Carta Maior.

Marcelo Neri, president of the state Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA), said, "The sharp decline in inequality in the last decade could be provoking a reaction from sectors of society that benefitted historically from official policies."

Favorable economic indicators support the opinions of Ussan and Neri and show that, during the two Lula administrations (2002-2010) and Rousseff's administration, income distribution has become less concentrated. In 2001, the share of national income for the poorest 50% was only 12.5%, while that of the richest 1% was 14%. The latest figures (2009) show a slight change. At that time—and the situation has continued to improve, although statistics are not yet available—the share of the national income for the poorest 50% is now 15.5%, while that of the richest 1% is 12%. The rich did not lose so that the poor gained but rather the income of the poorest segment increased by a larger percentage.

Recent information from the private Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV) shows that, in 2001, the richest 20% had 24 times the wealth of the poorest 20%, while in 2011 that gap narrowed to 16.5. The FGV provided other significant figures: since 2003, almost 50 million people entered the consumer market, more than the entire population of Spain.

On June 18, the government gave in to protesters' demands. Public-transportation fares went back to what they were before the protest (US$1.53), the education budget was increased, and the government announced that it was willing to contract 10,000 foreign doctors and send them to the areas most in need, where Brazilian doctors do not want to go.

"Importing" health professionals is not a new idea; it was originally proposed during the first Lula administration. It always met strong resistance from the medical profession and the press because, although people often prefer treatment by Portuguese-speaking medical professionals for linguistic reasons, the country with sufficient human resources and medical personnel willing to work in inhospitable areas is Cuba.

"That rejection has many elements," wrote Brazilian Eric Nepomuceno on July 8 in the Argentine daily Página 12, "from balanced arguments to the usual class corporatism, passing through the ideological barrier. There is no shortage of idiots, such as those who insist that Cuba will send military instructors along with the Cuban doctors to start a communist revolution in Brazil."

Polls still favor Rousseff

In this environment, the country was overrun with polls. During the protests, voter intention for Rousseff fell from 52.8% to 33.4%. The president would not win in the first round but would prevail in a runoff, in which she would compete against environmentalist Marina Silva (20.7%), who moved into second place ahead of the most entrenched leaders of the right (NotiSur, Sept. 24, 2010). With small differences, but always in the same direction, all the polls had similar results.

Nepomuceno observed that "the only name that came out stronger after the protests was Marina Silva, a rare mixture of environmentalist and fundamentalist pastor in an evangelical Christian...."
church, who does not even have a party." He added, "It's often been said that during times of popular unrest, without direction or a clear course, the result is an openness to messianic leaders, hidden behind a cloud of promises of change. In Brazil, that situation favors Marina, but not enough to beat Dilma in a runoff."

During the weeks of protest, one of the few government leaders who went out into the streets to talk directly with protesters was Rio Grande do Sul Gov. Tarso Genro, one of the most ideological leaders of the governing Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). He gave the most accurate analysis of what happened for the government during those difficult days. "This process," he said, "had two movements. One typically electioneering, led by the major media with some social networks, laying the groundwork for the 2014 elections, and an authentic popular movement of those dissatisfied with the limited gains made so far."

Genro said that he was astounded by the naivety of some in the progressive sector, who confused the authentic protests of the students and certain social movements with the opposition press' manipulation of the movement, orienting it on two levels. First, discrediting the functions of the state, principally in health and public transportation, and second, trying to erase from popular memory, in a totalitarian way, the major gains of the Lula and Dilma administrations. That was combined with an attack on parties and politicians in general, which affects democracy, and which in the view of these conservatives must be substituted by a 'clean' process, facilitated by financial-capital managers."

Days earlier, on July 18, before an audience of university students in São Paulo, Lula had touched on something similar. "The worst that can happen is to give up on politics. Nowhere in the world is there an example of where the rejecting politics has been better than even rotten politics," said the former president. He warned the students, "When you are tired, but dog tired and not trusting anyone, even then, don't give up on politics and much less on parties, participate."

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