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Recession Cancels Small-Town Carnival Celebrations in Brazil

by Gregory Scruggs

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Brazilian Carnival was less festive this year, as a deepening economic crisis dampened celebrations. Even as tourism numbers remained strong in the country's major Carnival destinations like Recife, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador, dozens of small-town Carnival celebrations were canceled by officials leery of spending public funds at a time of austerity ([NotiSur, Feb. 20, 2015](#), [Feb. 19, 2016](#), [Aug. 5, 2016](#)).

The annual celebration, which took place in the weeks leading up to and including the final Monday and Tuesday, Feb. 27 and 28, before Ash Wednesday and the Catholic observance of Lent, also led to an online rumor that President Michel Temer sought to cancel Carnival celebrations for the next 20 years as a budget-saving measure.

As a national holiday, work and schools are closed during the final two days of Carnival, prompting many smaller municipalities to host public celebrations. They may include samba performances, live music, street festivals, and other festivities that can incur costs for local government with overtime pay, portable toilets, and rental equipment. Well over 100 municipalities across Brazil opted to forgo publicly sponsored events this year, citing a lack of funds as the country plunges deeper into recession.

In the places where the show must go on, meanwhile, Carnival promoters got creative. Costumes were being recycled from previous years, and sound trucks that provide the music for parades went undecorated. VIP suites along parade routes, known as camarotes, could be paid in installments. In lieu of cash payment for entrance fees, some promoters accepted frequent flyer miles. And samba schools and street bands sold t-shirts, hats, food, and drink, in addition to launching crowdfunding campaigns, to raise money.

According to International Monetary Fund estimates, the Brazilian economy contracted by 8% in the two years ending in Dec. 2016. Economic recovery is not expected until 2018.

From samba to healthcare

The spate of cancelations spanned the country from north to south, affecting both relatively poor states like Ceará, where 22 towns called off celebrations, and more prosperous ones like Rio Grande do Sul, where 94 towns nixed Carnival. According to Famurs (Federacao das Associacoes Municipios), the southern state's association of municipalities, the collective loss of R\$956 million (US\$310 million) anticipated from the state government prompted the decision.

"The financial crisis affecting municipalities is now affecting culture," said Luiz Carlos Folador, the president of Famurs. "Not investing in Carnival was a tough decision, but a necessary one in this time of limited resources."

Taquari, a municipality of 26,000 located approximately 100 km from the state capital of Porto Alegre, opted not to spend the estimated R\$1 million (US\$324,000) on Carnival and instead allocated the funds to the local health service.

“We’re facing difficulties on a number of fronts, including medicine and exams,” said Mayor Emanuel Hassen de Jesus after consulting with the town’s samba schools and determining that this year’s show would be canceled.

Porto Ferreira, a town of 51,000 in São Paulo state, opted to save R\$120,000 (US\$39,000) and buy an ambulance. It was the type of decision that many local governments faced. Ouro Preto, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Minas Gerais with arguably the most popular small-town Carnival in Brazil, spent just 10% of its 2016 Carnival expense and settled for a simple street festival.

Espírito Santo also saw a rash of Carnival cancelations, driven both by municipal finances and the deteriorating security situation. State police went on strike demanding better pay on Feb. 4. The lack of police on the street quickly led to a spike in murders, theft, and other crimes. Just weeks before Carnival, 29 municipalities in the state announced they would not hold public celebrations, and the state’s hotel industry trade group reported that half of the bookings had been canceled. While the strike was resolved on Feb. 13, it was too late to salvage the state’s festivities.

As the number of municipalities canceling Carnival grew, rumors began spreading on Brazilian social media that Temer, who has promoted an aggressive austerity agenda to rein in public spending, was forcing a 20-year moratorium on municipal Carnival celebrations. This rumor was proven false; under the Brazilian Constitution, municipalities control their own spending.

Distraction from worries

A different mood prevailed in Brazil’s big-city Carnival celebrations, where the political and economic crisis that has engulfed the country in recent years meant that a distraction from everyday worries was very much in order for many Brazilians.

“We’re truly living through a very difficult moment,” Francisco Manoel de Carvalho, president of the legacy samba school Estação Primeira de Mangueira, said before the festivities began. “But I think Carnival has the potential to overcome all of that. I think this year’s celebration will be even bigger than last year’s. Brazilians love a challenge.”

Nevertheless, there were signs that this year’s celebration was different. Marcelo Crivella skipped his first Carnival as Rio’s mayor, opting instead to auction his customary camarote to raise public funds. The mayor, an ordained bishop in the Evangelical church, posted on social media, “We don’t know how to samba, we know how to work.”

Rio’s 2017 Carnival budget of R\$55 million (US\$17.8 million) was established by Crivella’s predecessor, which meant that public investments in the city’s festival infrastructure could remain intact. “Carnival is our main product to showcase tourism in our city,” said Marcelo Alves, president of the city tourism agency Riotur, at a January press conference.

Nevertheless, this year’s Carnival did not go off without a hitch. At the samba school parade, which is broadcast live on national television, two floats careened off course on the parade grounds, causing injuries. Elsewhere in Rio, the smaller, roving street parties known as blocos de rua were

also less animated. At least two dozen of the hundreds of blocos did not march this year due to a lack of sponsors or other sources of funding.

The city's chapter of the national hotel industry trade group reported that 72% of the city's hotel rooms were booked, compared with 86% last year. Cruise ship dockings were also down from 13 last year to seven this year. Despite reductions, Carnaval still brought in much needed income. Riotur estimated 1.1 million people came for Carnaval, generating some R\$3 billion (US\$1 billion) in economic activity.

In Salvador and Recife, Carnaval performed well, with hotel occupancy rates estimated at 95%. The Salvador tourism agency, Setur, reported 600,000 tourists on the city's streets during the festivities, a 9% increase over last year. The falling value of the Brazilian real, which hit record lows in late 2015 and remains historically low, made the trip more affordable for foreign tourists.

The National Commercial Confederation of Goods, Services, and Tourism estimates that Carnaval is responsible for R\$5.8 billion (US\$1.9 billion) in economic activity countrywide.

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