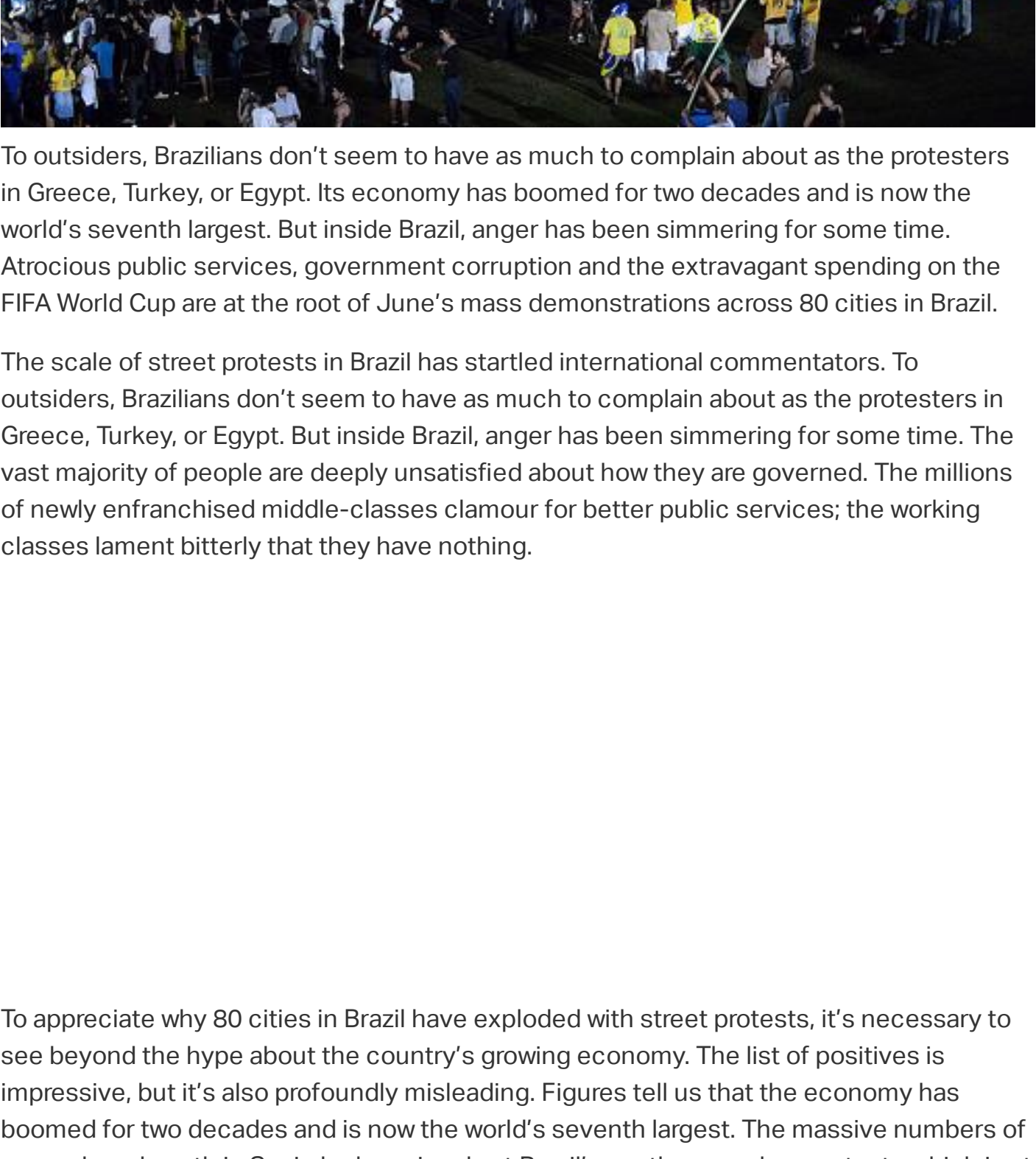


Brazil Riots: Citizens Unite In Contempt For Political Class

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To outsiders, Brazilians don't seem to have as much to complain about as the protesters in Greece, Turkey, or Egypt. Its economy has boomed for two decades and is now the world's seventh largest. But inside Brazil, anger has been simmering for some time. Atrocious public services, government corruption and the extravagant spending on the FIFA World Cup are at the root of June's mass demonstrations across 80 cities in Brazil.

The scale of street protests in Brazil has startled international commentators. To outsiders, Brazilians don't seem to have as much to complain about as the protesters in Greece, Turkey, or Egypt. But inside Brazil, anger has been simmering for some time. The vast majority of people are deeply unsatisfied about how they are governed. The millions of newly enfranchised middle-classes clamour for better public services; the working classes lament bitterly that they have nothing.

To appreciate why 80 cities in Brazil have exploded with street protests, it's necessary to see beyond the hype about the country's growing economy. The list of positives is impressive, but it's also profoundly misleading. Figures tell us that the economy has boomed for two decades and is now the world's seventh largest. The massive numbers of unemployed youth in Spain look enviously at Brazil's youth unemployment rate which is at an all-time low. The Brazilian middle-class has been expanding at a remarkable rate, with 40 million added between 2004 and 2010. The Government is fond of pointing out that the doubling of the minimum wage, coupled with the introduction of family grants, has reduced inequality much faster than in any other BRIC country.

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But beyond these figures lie innumerable sources of discontent. For a start, the economy is stagnating. Annual growth has fallen to around 2.4% and inflation is well over 6%. Consumer confidence has slumped and ordinary Brazilians are anxious about rising prices. Even figures showing inequality has improved become much less impressive when one considers that Brazil remains one of the most unequal countries in the world. The top 10% earn half the national income and about 8.5% of the population exist below the poverty line.

A further source of bitterness is that Brazilians pay the highest taxes outside the developed world of 36% GDP, but have to put up with appalling public services. In an international comparison of education systems by the OECD, Brazilian students came 53rd out of 65 countries. The public transport system is a mess, according to Professor Filipe Campante, a Brazilian professor of public policy at Harvard University. Professor Campante says the average bus commute in Sao Paulo is more than an hour and in some parts of the city it takes three hours to get to work. Buses are often jam-packed with nowhere to sit down.

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"Millions of Brazil's new middle-classes used to be poor and marginalised, but now they want to use the public services and see they are in a terrible state," said Professor Campante. "Rio's subway system worked well 15 years ago, but now it's crowded and unreliable. People feel a deep sense of discontent with political institutions, which are seen as inefficient, corrupt, and unresponsive. They see a lot of public money disappearing into the pockets of the politicians."

One of the most incisive observers of Brazilian society, Chris Gaffney, a visiting professor in the Department of Architecture and Urbanism at the Universidade Federal Fluminense, agrees that the protests are predominantly a middle-class phenomenon. "They are a reaction of the educated middle-class to the deteriorating condition of institutional democracy and the inability of politicians to provide good services. Everything is much more expensive than it used to be with no increase in quality."

"Because the public education is terrible, the middle class feels like they have to send their children to private schools. And public health care is also terrible, so those who can pay for private care. Meanwhile, the Brazilian President, Dilma Rousseff, is authoritarian and detached from reality. After some initial positive steps to combat corruption, she stopped."

Analysis of the social backgrounds of the protesters bears out Professor Gaffney's belief that they are mainly middle-class. The Brazilian Institute of Opinion and Statistics calculated that 76% are in work and 79% earn more than twice the minimum wage. President Dilma Rousseff has acknowledged that the middle-classes "want more and have the right to more".

But labelling the protests 'middle-class' is an oversimplification. Some groups of protesters have come from the 6% of Brazilians living in the 'favelas' bordering Brazil's big cities. These ramshackle shanty towns are often lawless places ruled by drug lords. Police have little control. Extreme poverty is rife and many children receive little schooling. In the protests, favela banners highlighted police abuses and security problems.

Another less desirable element of the protests has been the right-wing agitators. For example, two right-wing groups, Organisation Opposed to Corruption and Online Revolution, used the internet to advocate the return of militarism following the burning of the flags of the Workers Party at protests in São Paulo.

Such incidents have so far been on the fringes, but Gaffney says they are a worrying trend. He says that a 'vertical' element has been introduced into the initially 'horizontal' protests, which had no political affiliations. "The vertical political elements are coming in with their flags and their particular agendas, which is disheartening. Right-wing groups have called the majority of the protestors whiny playboys and threatened to beat them to a pulp. They say they will instigate the police and they will beat the hell out of you as well. Everyone's making it a political opportunity."

The rapid expansion of the protests to take in the whole of Brazilian society could only have happened in the age of social media. The first rather modest protests were organised by the Movimento Passe Livre on June 6 in São Paulo over a 20-centavo (nine-cent) increase in bus fares. But matters escalated on June 13, when the brutal Brazilian military police routed peaceable crowds with stun grenades and rubber bullets. Innocent bystanders were dragged into the attacks and demonstrators found with vinegar - used to lessen the effect of tear gas - were arrested.

The V For Vinegar movement was born and spread quickly to more than 80 cities, culminating in the massive street protests of June 20, when more than one million Brazilians marched. Banners aired innumerable grievances against the Government, but the anger crystallised around the extravagant spending on the FIFA football World Cup 2014. "First-world stadiums; third-world schools and hospitals", said one typical placard.

Brazil has already spent 7 billion reais (US\$3 billion) on the stadia for the World Cup and only half of them are finished. It is estimated that US\$13 billion will eventually be spent on the World Cup and a further US\$13 billion on the 2016 Olympics, in Rio de Janeiro. Football-mad Brazilians are not against the World Cup, but they are angered by the insincerity of the Government's promises of a 'legacy' of superior infrastructure. Already, five of the 12 host cities have reneged on promises to build new bus lanes, metros, or monorails. Mass spend on gleaming new stadia, whilst public services remain second-rate, has exemplified the incompetence of the Government.

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Gaffney said: "The Government promised that private money would fund the stadiums, but it's turned out to be state money coming out of taxes. Brazilians know all this public money is going into the hands of private individuals tied to government. They have seen the same old systems of political corruption amplified by the World Cup programmes. The Government is spending tens of billions on mega-events guaranteeing profits for the rest of the world while ordinary people struggle to get from A to B."

Gaffney said Brazil would inevitably be left with the same redundant 'white elephants' that now bedevil South Africa following their hosting of the 2010 World Cup. The sums being spent, he said, were outrageous considering the handful of world cup games. The Maracana stadium, the location for the final, has undergone a US\$600 million renovation. Gaffney calculated that to pay for the upgrades, world cup tickets would need to cost US\$1000 each. Meanwhile, ticket prices for football games have increased 300 per cent in eight years, pricing out ordinary fans. A lot of Brazilian football lovers are so disillusioned that they have started supporting Argentina.

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Brazilians may be protesting against different things to the Egyptians, or Turks, but there is a feeling of solidarity and many Brazilian street protesters have carried Turkish flags. The Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, acknowledged the parallels when he complained to a crowd of his supporters: "The same plot is being laid in Brazil. The symbols, the banners, Twitter and the international media are the same."

The role of social media is of enormous importance and the mainly youthful protesters. One Brazilian banner said: "We are the social network" and the same banner might have been seen in Egypt and Turkey. The new style of 'horizontal' protests is influenced by the spirit of the Arab Spring and New York's Occupy Wall Street.

According to Tali Hatuka, an Israeli urban geographer, the protests are "based on informal leadership and a multitude of voices". In the past, there would have been a pyramid structure with a centralised leadership.

"It is remarkable how leaderless the Brazilian protests have been," said Professor Campante. "The initial complaints about bus fares soon took a back seat. No one claimed to speak for the movement and there were very few specific demands. It quickly became fragmented."

The English Marxist writer, Eric Hobsbawm, believed that this type of fragmented protest could have no lasting political influence. He said only political parties could bring about change. But this view is outdated in the age of social media. "I do think the protests are having an effect. The Brazilian Government has been scrambling to react to the protesters' demands, which is not easy as they are so diffuse, but they have already made a number of concessions," said Professor Campante.

President Dilma Rousseff has dropped the bus fare rises and promised a referendum on political reform. Although her popularity in Brazil is at an all-time low, most of the protests were directed at the system rather than at her personally. "Political reform is desperately needed," said Gaffney. "Brazilian politics is coalition-based so the ruling party has to operate under the umbrella of 27 parties. The President has to appease a huge number of people to get anything through congress. As a result, everyone comes to feed at the trough, which leads to corruption and influence peddling."

Further promises in the wake of the protests have included more stringent penalties for corruption, a US\$23 billion programme of improvements to public transport and more support for healthcare and education. The influence of the protesters was even felt in the Brazilian legislature. One of the few explicit demands was to abandon proposals to introduce the PEC 37 bill, which would have limited the powers of federal prosecutors to deal with the corruption of government officials. On June 27, the lower house of congress voted out the bill by 403 votes to nine.

"The resounding defeat was down to the pressure of the people who mobilised against PEC 37," said Professor Campante. "A lot of the parties were in favour of it until the protests. It shows clearly that the Government is reacting to the demands, and it remains to be seen whether it placates the protesters."

By David Smith

David is an English journalist who, when he's not exploring the social consequences of political actions, likes to write about cricket for some light relief.

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