

Whither Brazil? Popular Protest, Public Violence and Prospects for Change  
Nicholas Barnes  
PhD Candidate in Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

In recent weeks, millions of Brazilians have displayed their frustration and disillusionment with the political system through popular protest. But the movement remains fragmented and diffuse. On the subway ride to last Thursday's protest in Rio de Janeiro, I was immediately confronted with this reality. I found myself surrounded by other protesters. To my right stood a couple in their late 20's, who spoke about the injustice of the Confederations Cup, the warm-up to next years World Cup, and hoped that it would be cancelled if the protest went well. Both were wearing combat boots and heavy denim pants that seemed like something a policeman or firefighter might wear. This gave me pause. Maybe I was a little underdressed. I had only worn trainers, a pair of cargo shorts and a t-shirt. My fears diminished slightly when a large group of high school students, their faces painted the colors of the Brazilian flag, boarded the train. They wore shorts, t-shirts, and flip-flops or sneakers and their conversation was decidedly non-political. They were gossiping and flirting and appeared as if they were headed to an outdoor rock concert. At the time, I wondered what kind of protests these would turn out to be. After nearly two weeks, I am still left wondering.

*Who are the protesters?*

The largest protests in the major urban centers have been dominated by an assortment of middle class, educated youth. According to preliminary research carried out by Datafolha in São Paulo, 79% of the protesters last Thursday were receiving or had received at least some university or technical college education. In addition, at least half were younger than 25 years of age. From my experience, I would say that such reports accurately reflected the protest demographics in Rio de Janeiro that evening as well. It is not surprising, then, that most of the protesters were mobilized through social media. The main Facebook page for last Thursday's protest in Rio reported that more than 270,000 would be attending. Brazil's middle class now includes nearly 50% of the total population and is largely a product of the last decade of economic growth. This class in particular has experienced a significant rise in standards of living and access to education over that same period. But with these expanding opportunities and growth have come rising expectations. The middle class has found that quality public services, wages (especially for public sector employees) and opportunities for further upward mobility have lagged behind their expectations. However, these youth are not the only ones protesting.

In the days following last Thursday's massive outpouring, many smaller protests occurred across the country. Many underserved and underrepresented segments of the population have added their voices to the growing cacophony. These smaller protests have been understood as part of the larger protest movement as they share many of the same demands but they have addressed more local grievances. For instance, in many of Rio de Janeiro's peripheral neighborhoods and favelas (shantytowns), protests were not organized by middle class youth but by local working class poor who understand, better than any other segment of the population, the effects of rising transportation costs, non-existent or low-quality schools and health services, and a repressive public security apparatus. Many of these communities have been organizing, advocating, and protesting for such change for decades with little to show for it. Only with the expansion of activism and mobilization to the middle classes in the last several weeks have Brazil's political elites begun to pay attention. What remains unknown is if these groups are actually part of the same movement, advocating for the same reforms, and if they will be appeased by the same concessions.

*What are the demands?*

Although these protests began with the 20 cent rise in bus fares, they have come to encompass much

more. One of the most prominent grievances is the corruption of public officials. This phenomenon is nothing new for Brazil as the last mass protest in 1992 was to outcry the corrupt practices of then-President Fernando Collor de Mello. More recently, aides and allies of former-President Lula were found guilty and sentenced late last year in the Mensalão money laundering and vote-buying scheme, although Lula himself has never been officially linked. Protesters also commonly demand an end to a proposed amendment to the constitution which would make investigations of public corruption charges private and take them out of the hands of the Interior Ministry and instead place them with local state authorities. This proposal was rejected yesterday by the national congress. Another set of grievances relates to public spending and the poor quality of public services. Brazilians pay higher tax rates compared to other developing countries (roughly 36% of GDP) and feel they are not getting their money's worth. Instead of improving infrastructure for the health and education systems and providing affordable and reliable public transportation, politicians are accused of misusing public funds for their own personal benefit and that of corporations. A prime example is the inflated spending on soccer stadiums and other World Cup preparations which have outpaced budgeted expectations. Many of the most violent protests have occurred around the newly constructed and renovated stadiums which are currently hosting the Confederations Cup.

Looking more closely at any single issue area within the protest movement, the divisions are obvious. Regarding public transportation, the Free Fare Movement, which began the protests in São Paulo, is advocating for totally free public transportation in Brazilian cities. Other groups are demanding free rides just for students. Some are merely protesting for more affordable bus rates. On Monday, Dilma promised \$22 billion to be invested in public transportation in Brazil's biggest cities which will largely be spent by building more subways and improving infrastructure. Will this be enough to satisfy some of the protesters? It is difficult to know.

Regarding the involvement of political parties, protesters are similarly divided. Early on into Thursday's protest, a large group of various leftist and socialist party supporters, raised their banners and flags and began chanting their slogans. This partisan group was quickly met with "sem partido" (without party) refrains from the crowd to which the partisans replied with "sem fascismo". To my left, two young men began shouting. One demanded that the partisans leave, that they were the problem with the political system. The partisan refused, arguing that people had died during the dictatorship for the right of parties to organize. According to other reports, when the Central Trade Union (CUT)'s showed up to join the protest, their flags and banners were quickly ripped to shreds by the crowd. The protests continue to be largely non-partisan but it is unclear how long they can survive without the more cohesive organization that parties can provide.

#### *What kind of violence is occurring?*

The role of violence in these protests cannot be overstated. The size and popularity of the protests themselves is partially a product of the violence which occurred at the first protests nearly two weeks ago. Videos and images of police brutality quickly spread through social media and emboldened a much larger set of protesters last week. Despite the fact that the vast majority of protesters continue to renounce violence, a very small portion of them have been able to provoke some of Brazil's public security apparatus into violent action. Some individuals wish to engage in vandalism, looting and opportunistic violence for its own sake. There are also some radical protesters who may wish to provoke the government to overreact to further delegitimize the government and spread the protest movement. Both of these groups are present in protests around the country and, although in the extreme minority, have been able to derail otherwise peaceful demonstrations.

On Thursday, before the crowd had reached their destination, I noticed a large group of men in their

teens and early twenties that had already donned masks and covered their faces with scarves. At first I thought this was for protection from tear gas but because there were no signs of police yet, it was more likely to hide their identities. Some of them were engaging in some little spurts of violence with other protesters, especially around one of the activist platforms. They threw rocks and engaged other protesters with their fists and flag poles. Each time such violence would occur, the crowd would loudly chant “sem violência” and other protesters would interject to try to stop them. The group would quickly dissipate but reform suddenly, swarming every time violence threatened to break out. This group seemed to be of the first variety and would likely later be the ones who carried out much of the vandalism and looting.

As we approached city hall, a barricade of roughly fifty horse-mounted police faced the crowd. The protesters stopped in front of them, waving their flags, holding up their signs and chanting anti-Cabral slogans (Sergio Cabral is the governor of Rio de Janeiro state). This peaceful protest would continue for much of the next hour as more protesters filed into the plaza. Eventually, a small group of protesters closest to the horse-mounted barricade would successfully provoke the police by getting too close while others shot fireworks in their direction. The police responded by launching tear gas into the crowd and began to clear the streets. The crowd fragmented. Some protesters fled, a few sat down, attempting to prevent their removal while others continued to shout “sem violência”. The majority of protesters moved away from the violence in opposite directions along the main avenue. For the next several hours, small groups of protesters continued to engage the police by throwing rocks and trash bags that had been set on fire and would proceed to destroy public infrastructure (bus stops, street signs and lights), set fire to several cars and loot and vandalize some retail shops. According to the municipal government, the damages amounted to R\$1.5 million.

For their part, Brazil's public security institutions have a long history of using violent and repressive tactics against civilians that can be traced back to the military dictatorship (1964-85). However, their responses to protests have varied significantly. Countless protests have concluded without any violence. On the other hand, Thursday's highly organized response by military police and BOPE (a special forces unit trained in urban warfare) in Rio de Janeiro, suggests an effort to send a clear message to protesters about public order. The police targeted and pursued the protesters down the length of President Vargas Avenue and even followed them into several surrounding neighborhoods. Unlike the disorganized response to protests earlier in the week in which students and youth forced a retreat by police and proceeded to vandalize the state assembly building, it was clear from the mounted barricade and the presence of tanks and other armored vehicles along side streets that public officials did not want a repeat of Monday's outcome. On Thursday, security forces used tear gas, engaged in some beatings of protesters, and used rubber bullets. According to local media, more than fifty were sent to local hospitals with injuries. Similar low-level violence, vandalism and police brutality has been reported in many cities throughout the country though the reaction of Rio's police on Thursday seems to have been the most heavy-handed. Moreover, as marginalized groups continue to engage in protests, the public security apparatus' ability to use repressive violence against these groups will continue grow. For instance, a protest in Complexo da Maré, a large network of favelas in the north of Rio, eventually led to a violent invasion of the community by BOPE forces and a several-hour shootout with local gangs. Thirteen deaths have been officially confirmed. Local residents are outraged and immediately began more protests against such abusive and indiscriminate violence.

It should also be noted that not all police violence that occurs is encouraged or condoned by public security officials. Such events are difficult to monitor and, as evidenced by military police hiding their badges in previous protests, some are acting outside of their official orders. Early on in the violence on Thursday, a couple of mounted police rode towards the crowd and out of formation, threatening and

quickly dispersing the crowd much to the displeasure of a commanding officer who was ordering their exit. In these volatile circumstances it is difficult to know how much leeway officials on the ground have to engage protesters especially when such individuals are feeling threatened themselves. That being said, the public security institutions continue to be some of the most conservative and intransigent in Brazil and, despite intermittent attempts at reforms, hardline elements within the police bureaucracy likely continue to hope for an escalation of the violence. For their part, public officials have failed to comment on the sometimes excessive use of force by the public security apparatus.

#### *What will happen in the short-term?*

Since Thursday's nationwide outpouring, the central government's response has been conciliatory. The 20 cent rise in bus fares were quickly revoked. In a nationally televised message on Friday, President Dilma Rousseff publicly welcomed the sentiment of the protests though condemned the looting and vandalism that took place. In her message, she promised to increase spending on public transportation and the health and education systems as well as to combat corruption but gave few specifics. On Monday, she chaired a meeting of all the governors and many of the mayors of the largest cities in which they agreed to some reforms, including: greater control of inflation and fiscal transparency; \$22 billion in spending on public transportation; the use of 100% of oil revenues on the education system and higher pay for teachers; stiffer penalties in cases of public corruption; and a more complete political reform of Congress. It should be noted that several of these reforms are recycled initiatives from Dilma's Worker's Party. The opposition parties have forwarded their own agenda and suggested that Dilma has overstepped her powers.

Some in the protest movement have already called these pronouncements empty promises. Other major protests have been scheduled in the coming days in which we may again see large numbers in the streets. It remains to be seen how adamantly protesters refuse politics as usual and these concessions from public officials. The trajectory of the protests will depend heavily on how the disparate groups within the protest movement respond. My guess is that many of the middle class youth may already be willing to accept the concessions and massive protests will fade. However, other groups with more cohesive organization may have a much longer and more contentious battle in mind. The protests have reinvigorated many of the country's social movements and more activist segments and it is likely that future protests will take on more local and specific grievances. If this is the case, the public security apparatus will likely respond with more repressive measures as public opinion fades or becomes more divided.

#### *What are the possible longer-term impacts?*

The protests face two challenges in achieving their long-term goals. First, they lack a leadership which can unify protest demands and coordinate their continuation. Several parties and activist groups have attempted to spearhead a more cohesive movement but, as of yet, they have been unable to do so. They also lack, as already mentioned, a set of clearly laid out demands. President Dilma has attempted to address their major concerns in her concessions but reforming the Congress, creating more transparent political institutions and providing higher quality public services will take years. Brazilian politicians would be ill-advised to ignore these messages, however, as a large majority of Brazilians seem to agree with the demands of the protesters even if they themselves are unwilling to march in the streets. The greatest opportunity might be for Dilma herself who has taken the initiative to advocate for change. She has always been viewed as more of a technocrat and has never been the darling of the middle and lower classes in the way of her predecessor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. If she can somehow harness the sentiment of these protests and carry out incremental and positive changes in the areas she has laid out ahead of next years elections, she will be easily reelected and revitalize a Worker's Party that has been badly damaged by corruption and scandal in the last several years.

Overall, these protests are clearly a positive development for democracy in Brazil. There is a real opportunity to change the political culture if a focus on improved public services and greater accountability and transparency from public officials are taken up as the long-term demands of a broad spectrum of society. However, violent escalation and a tendency toward fragmentation and polarization at the party level could derail these opportunities. Some more radical elements of the protest movement are unlikely to concede in the short-term and this will test the ability of public officials and the public security apparatus to deal with these groups in an evenhanded manner. Perhaps most importantly, now that specific promises have been made, the majority of Brazilians that support political reform must hold these politicians and parties accountable in next year's elections. Finally, the protest movement itself must find a leadership and a way to transition toward supporting candidates and parties if they are not to go the way of the Occupy Movement in the United States.