

Memories of a Coup in the Shadow of the Olympics

***By Liliana Muscarella,
Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs***

The 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro provided a showcase for more than just the world's best athletes. Behind the stadium lights and out of sight of mainstream media outlets, a battle is brewing—one that is reminiscent of past military governments, political upheaval, and social strife.

In recent months, Brazil has witnessed extreme public discontent over the suspension of President Dilma Rousseff and the interim presidency of Michel Temer. Simultaneously, an increase in militarized violence and unprecedented legislation impedes Brazilians' rights to free speech and protest. Anti-government activism was particularly salient during the Rio Olympics, but in fact represents only a surface-level view of deep-rooted national distress. The Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) argues that current trends—social regress, censorship, violence, and criminalization of social movements—reflect a resurgence of past national discord that must not be ignored despite the glint of Olympic gold.^{1 2}

The Low Flame of Historical Marginalization

Popular unrest in Brazil is not new. The country has a contentious history that likely fortifies activists' resolve to protest despite governmental repression. Under past administrations, marginalized indigenous and poor communities have been similarly repressed. The result is institutionalized racism and death at the hands of the police.

The 103 percent increase in police killings in the months preceding the Olympics indicates that brutality in Brazilian shantytowns—favelas—has reached a new level of terror.³ Favela residents are almost exclusively black, poor, and without access to social mobility. Last year, black men made up about 75 percent of the victims of police killings.⁴ This year, the problem is exacerbated by the increased military forces introduced by Temer, who assured reporters that by taking this measure, “there will be peace at the Olympic Games.”⁵ Contrary to this statement, in the first week alone there were 59 armed shootouts, and during the games, eight Brazilians were killed.⁶ While police forces are currently focused on Rio, the situation sets a dangerous precedent for potential increased police presence in other states.

Adding to the national woes dimly exposed by this year's Olympics are the government land disputes with indigenous communities. According to an article by Aline Piva, a COHA Research Fellow, 36 indigenous people were killed and hundreds

more were physically assaulted in 2015. Piva states, “landowners often perpetrate these attacks with the complicity of local authorities so as to evict indigenous communities from their traditional lands.”⁷ This trend has escalated as the authorities increasingly side with the landowners and neglect the rights of the indigenous populations.⁸ Since the start of Temer’s interim presidency in May, indigenous groups have protested the violence brought against them in their native lands, saying, “Temer, enough with coups and regression on our rights! Demarcate land now!”⁹

Fueling the Fire of Discontent in Rio

Ongoing discontent in Brazil has been aggravated by Temer’s rise to power after an undemocratically initiated impeachment process that he himself brought against Rousseff. Tellingly, Temer’s 11 percent approval rating is just one point higher than Rousseff’s prior to her ouster.¹⁰ Like Rousseff, Temer and his cabinet have been accused of fiscal mismanagement and corruption; however, while the accusations against Rousseff were shown to have little evidence, the interim administration has consciously evaded corruption investigations (most notably, *Operação Lava-Jato*, or “Operation Car Wash”). Moreover, Temer has relentlessly pushed for an official impeachment of Rousseff so that he can rise as the legitimate president, in which case his presidential immunity would shield him from such investigations indefinitely.^{11 12}

Adding fuel to the fire is the perception that Temer’s corrupt administration represents another misuse of Brazilian taxpayer dollars, which were already believed to have been unwisely spent on extravagant Olympic stadiums under Rousseff. To express their discontent, teachers recently conducted a five-month-long occupation of schools just outside of Rio, which are crumbling under the shadow of shiny new Olympic stadiums.¹³ This protest did not go unnoticed by the Brazilian state, and police violence surged. One teacher stated that the “fact that they were ‘almost killed’ counts them as lucky,” especially in comparison to the ongoing police brutality in Rio’s favelas.¹⁴ Such demonstrations have also occurred outside of Rio, which reveals a broader level of national discontent.

The Olympic Games provided a public stage upon which Brazilians could protest these and other grievances. In the past weeks, Brazilians took to the stadiums in Rio and the streets all over the country, condemning the Olympics, Rousseff’s overthrow, Temer’s interim government, and a roster of other social problems. In an ironic response, the administration’s unprecedented 85,000-strong security forces physically restrained or assaulted peaceful protesters, many of whom were students.^{15 16}

Despite the mass protests and fierce police retaliation that continue throughout Brazil, this discontent was hidden from mainstream Olympic broadcastings, aptly illustrating the Temer administration’s active censorship of political dissent. At the opening ceremonies, for example, when Temer was introduced, his name was greeted with boos—an act of popular protest that was initially cut from media transmissions.¹⁷ Furthermore, many attendees were threatened by armed police for bearing anti-Olympics or anti-Temer signs during the first week of competition. The predominant slogan, branded on signs, shirts, or human bodies, was “*Fora Temer*,” or “Out with Temer.”¹⁸ Some of these protestors were escorted from the premises, or were forced to stop demonstrating in order to be allowed to stay.¹⁹ Amnesty International declared that such violations of free speech and protest “shattered” the legacy of the Rio Olympics.²⁰

Fighting Fire with Paper Decrees

The government censorship and police repression exhibited over the past weeks reflect an unintended result of a bill enacted by President Rousseff prior to her removal. The so-called “Olympic Law” (Law 13284) was proposed to prevent racism and homophobia from making appearances at Olympic events, but has been interpreted differently by the Temer administration’s security officials.²¹ For example, Article 20 of Section V (Criminal Provisions) provides for a detention of three months to one year for “attracting public attention to local officials for ... advertising purposes.”²² This ambiguous clause is easily manipulated to encompass protesting as “advertising”—a loophole not lost on Olympic security forces. In this way, countless Brazilians, at the Olympics and throughout Brazil, have been denied their rights to free speech and demonstration.²³

Aside from the unconstitutionality of these actions, it is crucial to understand their tangible implications for the country.²⁴ Such repression represents a blatant effort by the Temer administration to quash the nation’s increasing dissatisfaction with its government. This effort, to be discussed in the following section, is undoubtedly reminiscent of past dictatorial regimes in Brazil.

Currently, minimal effort has been made to restore constitutional freedoms to Brazilians. A decision issued earlier this month by a federal judge was meant to deal with the stretched interpretation of the Olympic Law, but it has not led to much progress. Judge João Augusto Carneiro Araújo ruled that protesters “do not forfeit their constitutionally protected right to free speech just by attending the games.”²⁵ While this statement is significant in principle, it has meant little to state security forces; police brutality still continues under the pretext of restoring the peace, invoking Article 20 as its guarantor.²⁶ Such violence is not expected to decrease even with the closing of the games; after the 2014 World Cup, heightened police activity continued for almost a year.²⁷

Another way in which the government has justified its actions is the Criminal Organization Act (Law 12850) of 2013, which defines “criminal organization” and provides for the punishment of such organizations. The law was expanded in 2015 under Rousseff to include terrorist groups, but did not provide a definition for the term. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), “under the bill, ‘taking over’ various sites or ‘public or private buildings,’ is to be considered a ‘terrorist act,’ if motivated by ‘political extremism’ [or] provoking ‘generalized panic.’”²⁸ The ambiguity of this classification is compounded by last year’s elimination of a safeguard in the bill that ensured political demonstrations would not be charged as acts of terrorism.²⁹ As such, under Temer’s intensified security measures, peaceful protestors may be sentenced to 16 to 24 years in prison.³⁰

This has already started to occur, since the Criminal Organization Act’s definition of terrorists can be manipulated to include indigenous groups, rural workers, or any other member of a social movement. Recently, for example, two activists with the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Workers Movement, MST), a mass social movement traditionally against Temer, were imprisoned.³¹ Given the increase in police retaliation against protesters all over the country, this ongoing detention sets a precedent that could cause other Brazilians to be classified as political prisoners.

Rising from the Ashes

There are striking similarities between the unrest unfolding today and the political and social turmoil that scarred Brazil during the military government that ruled from 1964 to 1985. Universo Online (UOL), a Brazilian media outlet, recently spoke with several historians, who agreed upon three primary similarities between the two eras: political crisis, economic recession, and social uproar.³²

The first two themes are closely intertwined, especially in the examples of President João Goulart, who was ousted in a military coup in 1964, and President Dilma Rousseff, who was overthrown under the pretext of democratic impeachment proceedings. Both presidents faced backlash for attempting to implement liberal social reforms to mediate historical inequities. Under Goulart in particular, leftist reforms threatened the conservative elite, such as bankers, military officials, and even members of his own cabinet.³³ Rousseff has also been unpopular with conservatives—her welfare programs lifted millions out of poverty at their businesses' expense.^{34 35} UOL explicitly connects the power of the discontented elite with each government's demise.³⁶

In order to corroborate this connection, it is important to recognize that the undemocratic overthrow of both Goulart and Rousseff is not unique: Goulart's predecessors, Jânio Quadros and Getúlio Vargas, likewise attempted progressive reforms but were unable to enact them due to a string of political crises within their administrations. Vargas, in fact, was so disillusioned by his inability to affect change that, hours after his own cabinet urged him to resign, he committed suicide. He left a note to his supporters: "I gave you my life. I now offer my death."^{37 38}

The social uprising that reached a pinnacle under the Olympic spotlight is undeniably reminiscent of previous government repression. Demonstrations throughout the country echo those held in the aftermath of the 1964 coup against outspoken populist Goulart.³⁹ The so-called "years of lead" (1969-1974) under military President Emílio Garrastazu Médici, for example, marked a period of censorship, extrajudicial imprisonment, and even torture.⁴⁰ The current administration's own censorship and invocation of laws such as the Criminal Organization Act indicate an uncomfortable similarity between the two eras.

Elucidating the frightening prospect of a new military state is Temer's restoration of a dictatorship-era intelligence bureau: the Gabinete de Segurança Institucional (Institutional Security Office, GSI), a component of the Agência Brasileira de Inteligência (Brazilian Intelligence Agency, ABIN).⁴¹ ABIN is the descendant of a similar institution founded by a leader of the 1964 coup against Goulart: Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco.⁴² Before her removal, President Rousseff had succeeded in suspending ABIN, but one of Temer's first acts as interim president was to resurrect it.⁴³ *The Intercept*, a progressive online publication, compares ABIN's revitalized ideology to the U.S. "War on Terror" mentality under George W. Bush. Surveillance, scare tactics, and criminalization are the hallmarks of the era, much as they were under Castelo Branco, Médici, and the other leaders of the Brazilian military government.⁴⁴

Putting Out the Fire: "Fora Temer!"

The weakening of democratic institutions in Brazil is a fact that can no longer be denied. Besides the excitement of competition and the prospect of national glory, the

Olympics also provided the world with a glimpse of the country's turmoil. In the wake of undemocratic impeachment proceedings, the games acted as a catalyst of mass protest and a spotlight for decades of discontent. Temer's government has only worsened the strife by attempting to repress such demonstrations and thereby infringing upon various human and constitutional rights.

Aside from the immediate injustice of these actions, they also echo a tumultuous history that must not be allowed to repeat itself. The pattern of social unrest, political repression, and militarized violence is familiar to the Brazilian people given the political upheaval and military government of the last century. If the current administration does not recognize the legitimate grievances of the "Fora Temer" movement, a recurrence of the past may be inevitable, and the prospect of a peaceful resolution will go up in smoke.

*Translated by author.

***By Liliana Muscarella,
Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs***

***With special thanks to Aline Piva,
Research Fellow at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs***

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