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It started with a bus fare increase...

Rio-based **Damian Platt** analyses 2013's mass demonstrations in Brazil

The third consecutive term of the leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (Worker's Party) Government was ticking along relatively comfortably for Dilma Rousseff, ongoing corruption scandals aside, until protests against a bus fare increase in São Paulo triggered similar action across the nation, drawing hundreds of thousands of dissatisfied Brazilians onto the streets in June 2013 to protest against a political system they see as corrupt and inefficient. The massive demonstrations came as a surprise to many observers. Brazil is the BRICS poster child: a strong democracy and an optimistic emerging economy, ripe for investment and ready for the future. The last time Brazilians took to the streets *en masse* was back in 1992 to call – successfully – for the impeachment of then President Fernando Collor, the man who froze the nation's bank accounts.

Rousseff, a former militant involved in organised opposition to the military dictatorship – who was imprisoned and tortured for her activity – was quick to identify the protests as a sign of the strength of 'our democracy' and new 'political energy'. The middle class is growing slowly and millions have been lifted out of extreme poverty by social assistance programs initiated by the Partido dos Trabalhadores. However as people

move laboriously up Brazil's skewed social ladder, they are hit by the expense of middle class life, where private health care and private education are standard, given the generally poor quality of public services. In short people might earn more but, while the cost of living rises, they are seeing poor returns from their growing contributions to the public coffers.

Rio de Janeiro, where the largest protests took place, is the current focus of national ambition. 300,000 people, or one million depending on who you listen to, came onto Rio's streets on 20th June 2013. Excessive marketing for World Cup preparations and the 2016 Olympics has grated on the population of a city where the cost of living has soared. While there have been notable improvements in public safety, a less violent city is a more expensive city. A principal target of resentment is State Governor Sérgio Cabral, whose support has plummeted to eight per cent in his second term of office. Once the initial surge of protests had subsided, demonstrators camped outside his home in the exclusive Leblon neighbourhood until he moved, presumably at the request of influential neighbours, elsewhere. Eduardo Paes, Rio's mayor, although not unscathed, has weathered the storm with more sagacity, making concessions and inviting protesters for talks.

Although the largest demonstrations were not much short of an outpouring of general discontent, there were some quick victories. Protesters in several cities achieved their immediate goal when local authorities, including Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, announced a freeze on bus fare rises. In Rio, the State Government abandoned unpopular plans to bulldoze a school and an indigenous people's museum to make way for a multi-storey car park near the Maracanã football stadium and future World Cup final venue. Mayor Paes also guaranteed the future survival of Vila Autodromo, a *favela* that was earmarked for demolition to make way for Olympic development. These achievements seemed unlikely before demonstrators took to the streets.

But while the protesters scored some points, two incidents highlighted the longstanding violence and human rights abuses suffered by the country's poor. On 24th June 2013, military police belonging to the BOPE special operations unit (portrayed brilliantly by José Padilha in his ultra-violent *Elite Squad* films) killed nine alleged drug traffickers in the sprawling Maré *favela* complex. One BOPE member also died in this unauthorised operation which left residents without >>>

Pictures: Maria Objetiva

Protests against a bus fare increase in São Paulo (below) triggered similar action across the nation, leading to hundreds of thousands on the streets protesting against a political system they see as corrupt and inefficient.

>>> electricity for 36 hours. Then in July 2013 members of a police 'pacification' unit, based in the enormous beachfront Rocinha favela, took a bricklayer called Amarildo into custody during a routine operation. He has not been seen since. This episode was condemned at the end of August 2013 by the Rio branch of the Brazilian Bar Association, which, together with respected local sociologist Michel Misse, launched a campaign to monitor and investigate killings and disappearances linked to police activity in the city. Misse documented 10,000 such incidents between 2001 and 2011. The average of one thousand police related deaths a year in Rio de Janeiro is more than triple the yearly average for the whole of the USA. The national truth commission investigation of human rights abuses under the military dictatorship, which ruled the country from 1964 to 1985, counts 540 disappearances for the whole country for that period. Misse's alarming figures exemplify the class chasm and violence which hamper societal development in Brazil. While the mass marches pointed to the possible existence of a youthful, informed middle class, eager to flex its muscle, the Maré

killings and Amarildo's disappearance confirm that Brazil's most vulnerable population continues to be at risk of human rights violations on a daily basis.

On a Friday evening in September 2013 I listened to three lawyers who have been voluntarily defending and accompanying protesters detained by the police. Carol, Clarice and Natalia tell a story which leaves me depressed. I left Rio for three months just as the protests were beginning, and was enthused by what seemed to be a possible tidal change in public opinion, because for once it seemed that a critical mass of average Brazilians were taking matters into their own hands. I wrote a comment piece for *The Guardian* where I celebrated the fact that protesters appeared to have avoided attempts by the traditional Brazilian mass media to characterise them as vandals and rioters. Three months down the line it seems that the powers-that-be have succeeded in their goal of criminalising the protesters. Carol tells me that her mother, who leaned out of the window to shout support in June 2013, now sees them as mere troublemakers.

Liberdade, Belo Horizonte, 22nd June. Belo Horizonte (2.5m inhabitants) – like any big city in Brazil, the poorest people cannot afford to buy a house or an apartment.

Her mother's change of attitude appears largely informed by violent TV scenes of clashes as demonstrators face baton charges and tear gas grenades. This began with the dispersal of the massive 20th June 2013 march, when military police charged protesters at different points across the city centre. Because of this, the lawyers say, the largely peaceful demonstration ended in mayhem. At this point the general public began to dissociate themselves from the protests. I ask about an incident during July 2013. Shortly after the Pope had left a meeting at the Governor's palace by helicopter a protest outside turned violent. Both demonstrators and police filmed two men in t-shirts conspiring to throw petrol bombs. Other cinematographers captured images of what appeared to be the same men running behind police lines shortly afterwards. Threatened with arrest, one pulls out ID, waving it at confused 'colleagues'. These images led to allegations – fiercely denied – that undercover police used violence against other police in an attempt to destabilise the demonstration. Bruno Telles, a 25 year-old student arrested on suspicion of throwing the

first bomb, was released when TV images and police statements contradicted each other. It looked like someone wanted to frame him. A backpack containing Molotov cocktails was also found at the scene of the protests. Its owner is unknown. Violent episodes like this led to characterisation of Brazil's protests as 'riots' in the international press, notably in *The Times*.

What happened with the episode outside the Governor's palace, I ask? Was it really instigated by undercover police? The lawyers think it might have been, but tell me the investigation was archived. Really? But didn't anyone follow up? We don't know, they say, those were the days when the Pope was visiting – so much was going on. Since that moment numbers on the streets have fallen dramatically, down to a hard core of 'Black Bloc' anarchist style protesters, who are mostly teenagers. The State Governor has introduced a law – unconstitutional, I'm told – to prevent such demonstrators from using masks to conceal their faces. Public opinion is strongly in favour of such a measure: after all, who wants to let vandals gain the upper hand?

Despite recent social advances, Brazil is still a fiercely unequal society. It registered 46 dollar billionaires in 2013, a 25 per cent increase on 2012, according to Forbes. The protests, and the belligerent State response, reflect the contradictory nature of this emerging power. While a new generation struggles to find its voice and millions are lifted out of poverty, corrupt power structures and centuries-old social conflict continue to hinder progress. It is no accident that Fernando Collor – the disgraced former president impeached after the mass protests of 1992 – holds court today at the centre of power in Brasília, where he is a Senator. And while everyone knows where to find Collor, no one will say what happened to Amarildo, and neither do we know who threw the petrol bombs at police outside the Governor's palace.

Damian Platt was a Brazil Campaigner for Amnesty International between 1997 and 2005 and is co-author of the book *Culture is Our Weapon*. He is based in Rio de Janeiro from where he runs a consultancy service and publishes the blog *Culture is Your Weapon*.