

Blindsided in Brazil

Mac Margolis 17 hours ago

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The massive protests that have shaken the Brazilian streets this month have been impressive by any standard. Since June 6, waves of demonstrators, tens of thousands at a time, have marched and chanted, demanding a litany of sweeping changes and putting elected officials on edge and police at the ready.



But who are the new Brazilian insurgents? What do they want, and how will they parlay their exhilarating slogans and righteous fury over a litany of issues into real change and policies?

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From a ragged band of discontents, the [Free Pass Movement](#) (a group demanding free public transportation) managed to spark a national revolt as tenacious as it is amorphous. The protesters, mostly young, many from comfortable homes, have bonded with maids and messengers, office boys and girls, in the biggest display of public outpouring since Brazil's return to full democracy a quarter century ago. Yet waded through the seething crowds—derided as anarchists to some and hailed as tropical freedom fighters by others—and you'll be hard-pressed to find a leader among the insurgents in tennis shoes and soccer jerseys and painted faces.

The wonks and wizards of public policy are poring over spreadsheets and census data, while eggheads are scrambling for their copies of *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, the celebrated 2012 book by Manuel Castells, the Spanish philosopher who dissected the funk in the global street.

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With crowds afoot, Brazilian leaders aren't waiting for explanations. Mayors in a dozen cities have announced reductions in bus fares, a move widely interpreted as a sop to the crowds but also a ploy to head off wider demonstrations. Less clear is how they will pay for the resulting shortfall in municipal budgets—\$89 million in the city of Rio alone—without shortchanging the other items on the protesters' list of demands, such as better government hospitals and schools. The peril is the familiar populist sleight of hand, where "demagogues" trumpet benefits and pass on the bill, says historian José Murilo de Carvalho, a scholar of popular movements.

The Free Pass Movement quickly claimed the fare reductions as a victory for the street, but also seemed unimpressed by the official gesture. "We want to topple barriers between rich and poor, break down walls between the center city and the slums," declared Paulo Motoryn, a social sciences major at São Paulo's Catholic University and one of Free Pass's many voices. The movement's higher aim is "to consolidate the people as the political actor of unparalleled importance to fight for a Brazil with more social justice, with inequality and with opportunities for one and all."

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In a sense, the Brazilian insurgency is a copy cat uprising, taking its cues from the rebels in [Istanbul](#), Tunis, and Cairo, where young people with a gripe and smartphones spilled into the streets to make history and tweet it at the same time. Brazil's intifada also is driven by amorphous crowds fed up with the status quo and driven by a politically combustible mix of resentment, frustration, and hope, with no clear manifesto or well-articulated plan.

One of the defining aspects of the uprising is its elusiveness. The student rebels do not want leaders; they reject existing political parties and distrust elected officials. They are the sons and daughters of a generation of Brazilians who fought the dictatorship, helped revive direct elections, and laid down their arms and stones to be voted into power. Now they are turning on their godfathers, and their list of grievances against "just about everything" (*tudo isso que está aí*, in Portuguese) is a work in progress, grounded by a refusal to patronized. Some 53 percent of Brazilian youths doubt that elections are honest, says Marcelo Neri, Brazilian secretary of strategic affairs and a social-policy expert.

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What's also clear is how the movement blindsided politicians and academics, many of whom had comforted themselves with elaborate surveys and data points that consistently showed that Brazilians are ever more prosperous, confident, and hopeful about their future. "No one saw this coming," says Carvalho. "Everyone was convinced that everything was OK."

Brazil, indeed, has much to boast about. Thanks to a stable economy, low inflation, record-low unemployment (5.8 percent), and hefty increases in the minimum wage, some 40 million Brazilians have escaped dire poverty. For the first time in history, this lopsided pyramid of a society—with a huge slab of poor at the base and a slender wedge of ultra-rich at the top—is now a middle-class nation. And while other fast-growing emerging nations, such as China, saw the gaps between rich and poor widen as they grew, Brazil celebrated a sharp drop in [inequality](#).

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The welfare bonanza was echoed by repeated opinion surveys. For six years running, a 160-plus country Gallup poll on perceptions of well-being ranked Brazilians as the most [optimistic people](#) on the planet. Asked to predict how they would fare in five years, Brazilians graded their chances for betterment at 9.2 on a scale of 10. The average grade for youth worldwide was 7.1.

Such robust data have left the Brazil bulls searching for reasons for the explosion on the streets. "The economic numbers simply do not suggest a reversal of fortune that would explain the discontent we are seeing," says Neri.

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Some observers speculate that with Brazil set to host a number of high-profile international events, from Pope Francis's visit next month to the 2016 Summer Olympics, some of the activists are seizing the opportunity to argue their case on a global stage.

Clearly, not all is well. Though public transportation has improved in São Paulo and Rio, traffic is hellish and commuting can be a three-to-four-hour ordeal. Inflation has spiked, the economy is slowing, and political corruption is perceived as widespread. Of the 25 high-ranking lawmakers, financial executives and political grandees convicted last year by the Supreme Court in a massive congressional vote-buying scheme, none is yet behind bars.

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More troublesome, many of the condemned stand a fair chance of escaping prison or seeing their sentences lightened through a complicated system of appeals. All this has stoked public skepticism and heightened the sensation that Brasília, the capital city, on an isolated central plateau, is "divorced from the rest of the country, far from where the people can boo the Congress or [president](#)," says Carvalho.

But this is not new. What's different is the rise of a surprising new generation of activists, with no party allegiances, a hair trigger for social injustice, and a taste of prosperity and progress that has whetted their appetite for more. The flipside of the Brazilian smile is that happiness can quickly sour when expectations are dashed. "Optimism can quickly turn to frustration, especially among youth," says Neri. For now, look for the Brazilian streets to seethe.

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