

Brazilian protests explained. It's not the economy, stupid

Written by Mauricio Savarese
Sunday, 16 June 2013 14:11



Brazil isn't for beginners. No matter if you are a Brazilian or not, it takes a long time to understand how such a self-centered country works. I can't say I do, but as a former student in a state school who had his mother working as a maid, I have explored a part of the Brazilian society which is not popular among the middle class I now belong to.

The same middle class that has (poorly) projected our country abroad and is gradually changing. So let me go back in time to try to address the mindset behind the protests that are now rocking the streets of major cities back home.

Violent protests always lose in Brazil. It is just like our politics: if you are too hard on your opponent, no matter how right you are, you will lose.

If you are violent in Brazil you write a blank check for the police to do whatever it wants. It isn't right, but it is what it is. Until last Thursday the movement for free fares in public transport was losing. Badly. They started winning when they proved the violence was coming from the police. That is the main reason more and more people are supporting it. Other topics are surely in debate, but the main one, no doubt, is the police.

An important reminder: one can't look at Brazil as if we were Europe or the United States, where merit is above everything else. In Brazil, if you speak too much to the mind and nothing to heart, you lose. Violence always puts you away from the hearts, because we have already taken too much of it.

That is why big peaceful demonstrations are always powerful there and they are the ones that really work. They controversially worked in 1964 to pressure a president who was leaning to the left so he would leave his office. They worked to show dissatisfaction in 1984 so the dictatorship would end a few months later. They put Congress on its way to impeach president Fernando Collor in 1992.

Brazilian protests explained. It's not the economy, stupid

Written by Mauricio Savarese
Sunday, 16 June 2013 14:11

All were big, peaceful and cooked for very long. When protests weren't big enough or embodied a few vandals, police would act just to make them stop.

It is in their DNA, which is tainted by various accusations of abuses by national and international NGOs in the last decades.

From 1964 to 1985, police were even more feared than criminals. They were probably more violent — drug gangs weren't big then. Such violence is particularly true in the military police — which learned its lessons from the vicious School of the Americas, a place where pro-US Latin American dictators learned how to tame their peoples. Not only military police were taught repression, but they also learned torture.

They are trained to obey at all costs and are much different from the civil branch police or the federal police. If you speak Portuguese, a good book to know more about them is Rota 66, by Caco Barcelos. There you will see the most deadly killers in the military police got great jobs because... they were great killers. Some of them are city Councillors, State Congressmen and secretaries in important administrations today.

In censorship times, military police would do whatever they wanted. When democracy was restored, they formed death squads to kill alleged criminals in poor areas. They hid evidence against themselves. They had no ombudsman to address their excesses and were seen by authorities as a necessary evil. Poor Brazilians feared them, but as crime grew they learned how to tolerate police excesses. Some learned to love them. And politicians who were friends with them got more and more popular. But people never stopped worrying about the police. All they wanted was that they took on only "the bad guys", not them. They were also afraid of the police. In Brazil boundaries are that thin.

Downtown the police have always acted pretty much like on Thursday. When they had to stop protests on Sao Paulo's main road, they would be violent, but rarely as lethal as in the poor areas. Protests by teachers, unions and others were repressed alike. The excuses were very similar. "Vandals", "they are blocking the road" or "they attacked officers". Back then, though, there were no cameras, social media and international interest in a country that wasn't doing economically well and wasn't hosting any big sporting events any time soon.

Brazilian protests explained. It's not the economy, stupid

Written by Mauricio Savarese
Sunday, 16 June 2013 14:11

Back then there weren't a Confederations Cup bringing attention, a movement that defended something dear to the poorest and — above all — a repression that took on even people who had nothing to do with the demonstrations.

People that were leaving their jobs. People that were at home. People who were having a nice time at a pub. People that, in other times, might have been thrilled to see the police go after "the vandals". Since the police had no self control and took on everyone, the fear was gone — because they hit everyone, regardless of that they were doing during that night downtown Sao Paulo.

To make it even worse for themselves, military police deliberately attacked the press. They hate the media they used to censor and think only a few journalists (the tamed ones) know how to deal with them — those being reporters who talk about their need for more power. That is not something I heard about — I saw it myself in the many times I followed my police reporter uncle to work. One of the things I saw them do as a 15-year-old reporter wannabe was to bribe friendly journalists with items they had confiscated. The best gifts always went to TV reporters. Those who live in Brazil know exactly what that means; big ratings, exclusive interviews and blindly favorable coverage of police operations.

I deeply believe that resentment explains the fact 17 journalists were wounded in Sao Paulo on Thursday. That happened on the same day one of their officers was shown in all the papers with his face drenched in blood. Blood taken by the protesters, which were surrounded by criticism on that very night.

The police operation in São Paulo was so disastrous that it brought about a protest of journalists against unlawful arrests. Journalists in Brazil are so quiet about their rights they prefer to shut up instead of doing anything against massive lay-offs that happen every six months. They would just keep calm and carry on if they hadn't been attacked by the police. And media coverage would still be very much against the protests.

One photographer might lose his left eye. A reporter is in hospital after a rubber bullet hit her on her face. One was ran over by a military police vehicle and he says he was directly targeted by the driver as he took his pictures. By attacking the media and being liable to the whole society in social media, police gave life to a movement that could die out within weeks.

Brazilian protests explained. It's not the economy, stupid

Written by Mauricio Savarese
Sunday, 16 June 2013 14:11

Brazilians hate violence. And they hate the police; some secretly and some openly. When the police lost control, many could feel it and everyone could see it. And that is why the writing is on the wall in Sao Paulo. It would soon spread to the rest of the country, including the capital where Brazil beat Japan 3-0 in a match that was supposed to be a party.

It is important to say the military police are stronger than ever in Sao Paulo and in many parts of Brazil. In Sao Paulo, former mayor Gilberto Kassab put former policemen to run many boroughs (these officials are neither elected there nor have as much power as in other countries, though). Governor Geraldo Alckmin has a very hard line stance on crime, which very often means ignoring human rights, according to international organizations such as Amnesty International. President Dilma Rousseff even offered up to step up the pressure on protesters by sending more police.

All politicians want to be friends with the police, but they still wouldn't pay them much more than they do now. And the fact they are still poorly paid is a scapegoat for their violence. Violence that is preached by those on the top and repeated by those below, who need to be violent to get better positions. The system feeds itself.

If the officers don't get a better job within the corporation, they might as well go into politics. Or become powerful militia. Or open a security business that makes deals with the government. It was the only body to profit from the sheer violence Brazilians hate. Perhaps that is because they thought their laid-backness demanded them to give a dirty role to someone, and that someone has been the military police for many decades.

If transport fares had gone up in January, as they were supposed to, maybe there would be fewer protests. They were kept till now because the rise would affect inflation in the beginning of the school year in Brazil. To say this is about inflation is the equivalent of saying the protests in Turkey are about a shopping mall. It is just not the case, although it surely gave an initial spark to what was to become a bigger movement.

So when you look at the size of the protests in Brazil, one thing has to pop into your mind: this is mostly about the police. If it weren't for them, people would be going home to watch football.

Brazilian protests explained. It's not the economy, stupid

Written by Mauricio Savarese
Sunday, 16 June 2013 14:11

Other key words if you want to know more about what military police have done wrong in the last decades: torture, death squads, unlawful prisons, assassination of 111 unarmed inmates in 1992, accusations of racism and much much more. This didn't start in 2013 — it comes from decades. It takes a good time talking to different parts of Brazilian society and some personal experience in the country to understand that.

Except for the best American papers, El Pais, The Economist and the FT, most of the international media doesn't seem to completely understand the protests in Brazil so far. I am not saying I do, but I surely can't see a link to inflation being more obvious than the one to police violence. Even the protesters themselves have said over and over this isn't about transport fares or higher prices — it is a range of subjects. And they also know they turned the tide around because the repression was absurd and unjustifiable.

As a reader, I have to say most of international media tends to be harsher on our police — which is many times good — but without the experience in the country to know our minds and the real thing behind protesters this time.

National media is full of people who have never dealt with police violence themselves, because they were always where the trouble didn't get to — most journalists from my generation are very hardworking, but are clueless about the lives of poor Brazilians. That is why it doesn't see there is poor people involved in the demonstrations, and not only left-wing university alumni who found a reason to break out of boredom.

The Brazilian economy might be sluggish this year, but that is not an issue for a country where inflation could be 100% a month in the nineties. We are not that demanding. We just don't like violence, because it is not in most people's DNA and law abiding citizens feel crushed between police and criminal violence. That is why a critic of the movement against new transport fares like me now supports it. It is because of the police violence.

Sometime ago, even reasonably peaceful demonstrations could be portrayed as a brawl started by a group of hot-headed people, lawfully spanked by the police. That still happens a lot in the poor areas, where media coverage is none. It is a completely different case when that happens downtown the biggest city in the Southern Hemisphere, where dissatisfaction meets social media, smartphones and people who are fed up with various issues.

Brazilian protests explained. It's not the economy, stupid

Written by Mauricio Savarese
Sunday, 16 June 2013 14:11

For Christ's sake, military police have arrested people (including journalists) for carrying vinegar to avoid the harms of tear gas. Not atomic vinegar, not Molotov vinegar. Only a stupid amount of vinegar. You should probably know it is lawful to carry it around in Brazil. It could only happen because of a mechanism like the military police, a State within the State in Brazil.

That is why I believe protesters will soon push for police reform. They probably know buses for free isn't really an achievable goal. Police reform is.

There must be transparent and effective investigations on the police operations. Those who abused their power must be punished. Brazilians are not okay with protesters that set buses on fire or broke windows just to get some attention. These have to be punished as well. But there is no comparison between the responsibility that lies on a bunch of hooligans in a massively peaceful protest and that of agents of the State, sponsored by the taxpayer, who did what they did allegedly in our name. Not in my name. Not in a million years.

Voting in free elections is great, but it isn't enough to a stable democracy like Brazil. Having a free Justice is key, but we need everyone to respect the law. Brazil has to earn its presence in the global arena. Hosting the World Cup and the Olympics might be enough for regimes like those in Russia and China, where disrespect for human rights is even bolder and press isn't free at all. Not for a multicultural, tolerant and modern country like Brazil might become.

As long as the police bring violence to the people they are supposed to protect, June 13 will be remembered. Inflation might be forgotten next month.

Mauricio Savarese: Living la vida loca of journalism since 2003. Living la vida britannia of studying since July 2012. Interactive Journalism MA at City University, freelancer and a junkie for football and politics. Twitter account: @msavarese. Email: savarese.mauricio@gmail.com.