

## Brazil's Forgotten Political Reforms After the June 2013 Protests

Ana Claudia TEIXEIRA and Gianpaolo BAIOCCHI

**In June 2013, Brazil faced an unprecedented wave of protests. First denouncing the rising fare of public transportation, the June protests gained momentum, showing that Brazilians craved for no less than a complete political reform. Assessing the legacy of this social movement, this essay points to the limits of citizen participation as it was implemented in Brazil in the preceding decades.**

No one could have predicted the wave of protests that shook Brazil in June 2013. Even the Free Fare Movement (*Movimento do Passe Livre*, or MPL),<sup>1</sup> the leading organization of the first demonstrations against rising bus fares in São Paulo, seemed caught off-guard as protests escalated. It is estimated that in São Paulo alone, the 17<sup>th</sup> of June march gathered 250,000 people. Some 140 other cities joined in the protests. Such numbers are a milestone in the history of the country, dwarfing both the protests of the 1980s (during the country's transition to democracy) and those of the 1990s (those that led to the impeachment of President Collor). The 2013 protests were also marked by a dizzying diversity of causes for dissatisfaction: not only bus fares and the right to mobility, but World Cup mega-projects, political corruption, poor public education, the lack of access to quality public health, and a host of other issues. Even socially conservative Brazilians made their presence felt, protesting against abortion, or in favor of the reduction of criminal age.

To many observers, it was as if a pressure cooker had exploded. Paradoxically, this took place during a period of unprecedented growth and economic prosperity, after over a decade of center-left governments, social policies such as the conditional cash transfer program *Bolsa Família*, as well as commitments to dialogue and citizen participation.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Free Fare Movement advocates the adoption of free fares in mass transit. The movement was founded in a session during the Worldwide Social Forum in 2005, in Porto Alegre, and gained prominence for its participation in the planning of the 2013 Brazilian protests.

## **The Limits of Brazil's Participatory Democracy**

The balance-sheet for the last dozen years under the Workers' Party national administration is, by most accounts, largely positive: a sharp reduction in poverty, sustained economic growth, a near-doubling of the number of students in university, and real gains in important social issues, like affirmative action. And while on certain scores, like land-redistribution and the reform of the political system, the administration has fallen short of expectations, most progressive commentators agree that national rule under the PT has represented a significant break from previous periods, appearing to chart a route of social and economic development different than free-market orthodoxies.<sup>2</sup> In terms of participation, specifically, since the beginning of the Lula administration in 2003, the opportunities for citizen engagement have increased. Participation in Brazil had followed a steady increase since the return to democracy in 1985, but the first Lula administration opened up significant new spaces. Despite ignoring many of the claims formulated by social movements and organized civil society, including the creation of a national participatory budget, the Lula administration created 25 new national councils for citizen dialogue and revived several of the existing ones. It promoted countless public hearings, workshops and forums, and national conferences, making it difficult to overestimate the sheer institutional investment in this participation.

Over the first eight years, the national administration held conferences on forty different themes, twenty-eight of which were new, including for instance conferences on the rights of the elderly, on cities, on the youth, on culture, on the environment, on LGBTTT. The best estimates assess that conferences mobilized at least 5 million participants, leading to more than 14,000 proposals and 1,100 motions. And these figures do not include myriad local efforts. Throughout the 2000s, municipalities created thousands of municipal councils to discuss various topics, and it became commonplace for cities to develop participatory master plans, participatory municipal constitutions, as well as involve citizens in all aspects of governance. Scholars have come to the conclusion that participation became central to the legal language of the Brazilian State (Gurza Lavalle, 2011). However, many analysts are still trying to understand how these participatory channels failed to give voice to the demands voiced at the protests. It is clear that demonstrations in some way reflect the limits of representation and participation in the Brazilian democracy, as diverse and robust those mechanisms might be today.

Many analysts attribute the protests to the depletion of Brazil's model of urbanization – the lack of quality of public services and urban rights, the lack of public spaces, the limits of consumer-based citizenship – always reminding us that the spark for these protests was police repression and lack of responsiveness from all levels of government. Others point to the depletion of traditional forms of social organization. A notable

---

<sup>2</sup> There has been lively debate about how to make sense of Brazil's center-left project under the PT. Some of the debate is captured in Morais, Lecio, and Alfredo Saad-Filho 2007; Singer 2012; Anderson 2011. There are a number of additional useful, specific analyses of different aspects of national PT rule, including foreign policy (Cervo 2010); the party itself (Samuels 2006; Hunter 2010); social protection (Costa 2010). For more general discussions on the so-called "pink tide" of Latin America, of which Brazil's Lula is only one example, see Weyland, Kurt, Raúl L. Madrid, and Wendy Hunter 2010; Beasley et al 2009; Lievesley, and Ludlam 2010; French 2009.

absence from the protests were unions, established social movements that may have been present at first, and leftist parties. A third group of analysts reflect on the results. As Ortellado (2013) notes, the greatest legacy of the demonstrations was the successful combination of clear demands and effective strategies. In fact, one of the most important legacies of the June protests was that protests in the street were actually *successful* in reducing bus fares almost immediately in all large Brazilian cities while bringing the idea of the “free-pass” to the center of political debates. And this was achieved, ultimately by collective actors who remained entirely autonomous from the government. This had already existed since the country’s transition to democracy, but the new element was the combination of horizontal and countercultural politics of movements with a mature sense of strategy.

The legacy of the June protests is however greater. The manifestations for the free bus pass inspired other protests differing from traditional social movements. It is as if there were two simultaneous protests in Brazil: one started by the MPL (*Movimento do Passe Livre*), with its clarity and strategy, to which other demands were added; and another protest, more explosive and inchoate.

### **From Fares to Political Reform**

Shortly after the biggest protests of June 17<sup>th</sup>, when several cities besides São Paulo were already mobilized, it was clear that what was at stake was no longer just fares. President Dilma Rousseff took to the airwaves, proposing five “pacts”, including a call for a referendum on political reform, an issue that had been stalled in Congress for many years. The point of view of the federal government seemed to be that the demonstrations signaled a huge democratic deficit, in which politicians lacked legitimacy and the population did not feel heard or respected. Rousseff’s move for a referendum did not succeed and Congress reacted badly. By law, it is the prerogative of Congress to call referendums, and members of Congress felt cornered and fearful that a reform process could happen out of their control.

Disappointment mounted among activists and alarm among analysts. Gabriel Cohn (2013) warned, in an interview, that Brazilians were creating a system of “perverse selection”: “the more you say that politicians are worthless... the more you scare those who have democratic attitudes and democratic beliefs. This discourages them to enter the political game. You destroy the basic institutions from the inside.” Marcos Nobre (2013) assumed there were two possible consequences of the demonstrations. One would be a radical reform of the political system to accommodate demands, and the other would be an ever more closed political system based on “low intensity democracy.”

Luiza Erundina, a former Mayor of São Paulo and congresswoman for the Socialist Party who had been working on the reforms for many years stated in October that Congress’s refusal to organize a referendum proved the democratic deficit in the country. She declared that “political reform [would] never come from Congress” and that she had deluded herself and the population in thinking otherwise. She cast her lot with the growing movement for political reform.

## **The Struggle for Political Reform**

The public debate on political reform predates the 2013 protests. In July 2004, in São Paulo, a group of organizations set up a seminar on “the meanings of democracy and participation” to evaluate, 16 years after the 1988 Constitution, the state of the country’s democracy. Participants were anxious to make sense of what the Lula government was proposing in terms of participation and democracy. After extensive discussions, a consensus emerged around the idea of political reform, understood in a broad sense, as well as around a set of specific demands about institutional reforms. The demands included not only the reform of the electoral system, but also a series of tweaks to representative democracy, trying to address decision-making in society as a whole.

This whole process generated a unifying platform relying on several pillars: the strengthening of mechanisms of direct democracy (such as plebiscites), the strengthening of participatory/deliberative democracy, the improvement of representative democracy, the democratization of information and communication, and the democratization of a more transparent judiciary. Within this broad platform there were specific proposals like the importance of protecting public campaign financing, and closed-list elections with gender quotas. Since the beginning, activists had pursued two strategies: to mobilize society in discussion around these themes and to provoke debate in Congress. The campaign produced materials: radio and video programs, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and public debates organized all over Brazil. Friendly politicians sparked the creation of the Parliamentary Front for Political Reform.

## **The Changing meanings of Participation in the PT**

When Lula came to power there had been much anticipation about the prospects of participatory democracy in his government owing to three related facts. First, of course, his personal history: his trajectory as a union activist and his close ties with the labor movement. Second, the history of the Workers Party, founded as it was by social movements, its internal commitment to participatory democracy, and its many active elected officials. When the PT arrived in Brasilia, it did so with two decades of experience with progressive and participatory municipal administrations, the “participatory budget” being only the best known of these practices.

The expectation was that the administration would break with the old ways of doing politics, as well as with favor trading, a practice characterizing many government affairs in Brazil. It was hoped that the old ways of governing would be replaced by new forms of citizen participation. Participation was instituted - in droves, actually - but its meaning changed.

If what called attention to the PT in the 1980s was its origin as a “party of social movements,” what drew attention to it in the 1990s was the model of local participation it had developed. By the early 2000s, the PT had ruled over two hundred municipalities of all sizes. Often, these attempts to govern with the real participation of people were successful, transforming the creativity of popular voices into the exercise of legitimate power. Apart from experiences of Participatory Budgets, PT administrations experimented with countless institutional forms of participation: policy councils focusing on women, the elderly, Afro-Brazilians, youth, the environment and many

other topics. By the late 1990s, the phrase “PT way of governing” had become synonymous with participation, transparency, and good governance. A central component of this participation was its connection with real decision-making and a broader strategy of social transformation. Local administrations, through these participatory mechanisms, were able to develop and legitimize redistributive policies.

However, things began to change in the Lula government from the very start. Participatory Budgeting, for example, was reduced to one sentence in the 90-page government plan, and was understood as “forums for discussion on the budget.” Similarly, the goals of other participatory mechanisms were lowered, a move justified by the argument that the PT, facing a split Congress, had won the elections, but not power. Most analysts have described the PT government as one of contradictions, reproducing the old system but also achieving significant goals (Singer, 2012). The sharpest criticisms have raised the specter of cooptation (Ricci, 2010), or hegemony in reverse (Oliveira, Braga and Rizek, 2010). These authors have consistently concluded that there was a substantial continuity with previous periods in Brazilian history, when financial elites continued to exert influence and derive benefit from a corrupted state.

However, these analyses tend to underplay the role of politics and political struggle within the government itself. The PT is a left movement deeply linked with the social movements that emerged in Brasilia with many ill-resolved questions. An important factor that made the Lula government different was the sheer number of social movement activists in the government, many of whom created new ministries and departments. In a survey that analyzed the origin of political appointments in the federal administration, some 45% belonged to labor movements and 46% to social movements, well above the national average (D’Araújo, 2007:44). Despite the fact that these activists brought significant experience in participatory institutions, under the federal administration this participation was largely divorced from decision-making. The government’s ability to “listen” to social movements - a much less demanding form of participation compared with earlier periods - was the way the government handled the tension between its historical links with social movements and the political compromises, that characterized the national PT administration. So, as the PT abandoned its earlier understandings of what participation meant – its strategic gamble on “people in the street” or on “popular pressure,” and its respect for “popular knowledge” – it gave way to a new model of governance based on congressional compromise and consultative practices of “listening” and “dialogue.”

In addition, there was a gap between organized sectors involved with the channels of the federal government dialogue and a largely uninvolved population. In a recent interview, Pochmann (2014) indicates figures proving this last point. In the last decade, the number of university students doubled, but most have not joined the student movement; 1.2 million low-income families now have homes but have not joined neighborhood associations; 22 million people have joined the labor market, but the numbers of members in unions have not increased. A second limit relates to the policy issues at hand. Within the government there is very little participation in the economic decisions of the country or on issues of infrastructure. Participatory channels largely focus on social policies and their implementation. Transportation, for example, (precisely the target of demonstrations) is not discussed in any institutional body. The municipal government of São Paulo recently announced a council on transportation, with elections in March 2014.

## Looking Forward

As we speak, it has been nearly a year since the first protests began. As the country gears up to host the World Cup, one wonders about the legacies of such mobilizations. On the one hand, the protests decisively showed that contestatory street politics can have results in ways that participatory forums and traditional democratic mechanisms cannot. Since the protests, the country has seen many mobilizations, this time from organized sectors: the landless movement, the homeless movement, the civil servant unions, which have all found renewed energy for protests and strikes. On the other hand, the protests showed the limits of the Workers' Party, which for many years has been seen as the only legitimate interlocutor and representative of social movements. Not only did the protests expose the limits of participatory mechanisms, but they have brought to the fore a generation of people little connected to traditional social movements, unions, or the party itself.

A final legacy has been to renew the interest in political reform, and it is against this background that the movement for political reform continues to build momentum. In the civil society, there are two ongoing, complementary initiatives. On the one hand, a popular initiative has been collecting signatures since September 2013. And another plenary of social movements is organizing a plebiscite for an exclusive and sovereign constituent assembly to reform the political system. The reactions of the most conservative sectors in Congress and the mainstream media have been negative, questioning the legitimacy of organized sectors to propose changes in the electoral system. We cannot predict the future, whether or not there will be broad support for political reform, much less which elements will be implemented. It is possible that conservative sectors decide to hijack the platform so that implemented reforms do not really change anything in the existing status quo. It would not be the first time that such a thing happens in Brazil.

But we may wonder whether political reforms go far enough. The proposed changes are certainly important. It is undeniably critical to curb the influence of economic power over the electoral process, as well as to introduce mechanisms to improve access to the electoral system. But the demonstrations also lead us to reflect on other absences. Is what is missing in Brazil more participation, more debate, more voices in decision-making? Or is it also missing a political project going beyond class compromise in trying to recover the utopian legacy of participation?

## Further Reading

Maria Celina d'Araujo (dir.), *Governo Lula: contornos sociais e políticos da elite no poder*. Rio de Janeiro, CPDOC, 2007.

Beasley-Murray, Jon, Maxwell A. Cameron, and Eric Hershberg. "Latin America's left turns: An introduction." *Third World Quarterly* 30.2 (2009): 319-330.

Cervo, Amado Luiz. "Brazil's rise on the international scene: Brazil and the World." *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 53.SPE (2010): 7-32.

Costa, Nilson do Rosário. "Social protection in Brazil: universalism and targeting in the FHC and Lula administrations." *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva* 14.3 (2009): 693-706.

Anderson, Perry. "Lula's Brazil." *London Review of Books* 33.7 (2011): 3-12.

French, John D. "Understanding the Politics of Latin America's Plural Lefts (Chavez/Lula): social democracy, populism and convergence on the path to a post-neoliberal world." *Third World Quarterly* 30.2 (2009): 349-370.

Gabriel Cohn, entretien em journal *Valor Economico*, 21/06/2013

Weyland, Kurt, Raúl L. Madrid, and Wendy Hunter, eds. *Leftist Governments in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Hunter, Wendy. *The transformation of the Workers' Party in Brazil, 1989-2009*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Adrian Gurza Lavalle, « Após a participação : nota introdutória », *Lua Nova* (Impresso), vol. 84, 2011, p. 13-24.

Lievesley, Geraldine A., and Steve Ludlam. *Reclaiming Latin America: experiments in radical social democracy*. 2009.

Marcos Nobre. « Protesto é resposta à tecnocracia », entretien em journal *Valor Econômico*, 18/06/2013.

Francisco Oliveira, Ruy Braga, Cibele Rizek (dir.), *Hegemonia às avessas : economia, política e cultura na era da servidão financeira*, São Paulo, Boitempo, 2010.

Pablo Ortellado, « Os protestos de junho entre o processo e o resultado », in Pablo Ortellado, Helena Judensnaider, Luciana Lima, Marcelo Pomar (dir.), *Vinte centavos : a luta contra o aumento*, São Paulo, Veneta, 2013,

Márcio Pochmann, entretien « Pochmann : 2014 pode ter a última eleição com candidaturas populares », (<http://www.viomundo.com.br/politica/marcio-pochmann-eleicao-de-2014-pode-ser-a-ultima-com-candidaturas-populares-ao-parlamento.html>) [access on 25/02/2014].

POLIS, INESC. 2011. *Arquitetura da Participação no Brasil. Relatório de Pesquisa*, São Paulo, Polis, 2011, ([www.polis.org.br/uploads/1262/1262.pdf](http://www.polis.org.br/uploads/1262/1262.pdf)).

Ruda Ricci, *Lulismo : da era dos movimentos sociais à ascensão da nova classe média brasileira*, Brasília, Fundação Astrojildo Pereira, 2010.

Samuels, David. "Sources of mass partisanship in Brazil." *Latin American Politics and Society* 48.2 (2006): 1-27.

Lincoln Secco, « As jornadas de junho », in Alicia Toffan et al. (dir), *Cidades Rebeldes : Passe livre e as manifestações que tomaram as ruas do Brasil*, São Paulo, Boitempo, Carta Maior, 2013, p. 71-78.

Morais, Lecio, and Alfredo Saad-Filho. "Da economia política à política econômica: o novo-desenvolvimentismo eo governo Lula." *Revista de economia política* 31.4 (2011): 507-527.

Andre Singer, *Os sentidos do lulismo: reforma gradual e pacto conservador*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2012.

Published in Books&Ideas, 19<sup>th</sup> June 2014. ©[booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net)