

Brazil vs. the World Cup

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What could have provoked such massive protests against a soccer festival from the sport's most passionate fans?

On Sunday, June 30, as the Brazilian soccer team scored three goals against its Spanish rival in the finals of the most controversial Confederations Cup in history, thousands of Brazilians outside the renovated stadium in Maracanã endured the same tear gas bombs and rubber bullets (manufactured by the Brazilian "nonlethal" arms company Condor) that have been used in countries like Bahrain and Turkey to repress anti-government protesters.

Most Brazilians feel that the biggest football festival in the world, along with the foundation of their country, is being stolen from them.

Over the previous three weeks, more than 1.5 million Brazilians took to the streets in dozens of cities, in protests initially motivated by a hike in public transportation fares but that soon included demands such as the end of corruption, more investment in health and education, and a more consistent urban mobility policy. Brazil's governors, as well as President Dilma Rousseff and the Congress, were quick to respond to the voices on the streets. Fourteen cities canceled the increase in fares. A \$22 billion investment in urban mobility projects was announced. Congress passed a measure that directs all oil royalties collected by the state into public education and health. The Senate passed a proposal to turn corruption into a "heinous crime," with those found guilty not eligible for parole or amnesty. And the federal government proposed a referendum to change the way political campaigns are financed and to reduce the influence of corporations on government.

However, one issue was left out of these official responses, and it has become the elephant in the room: the 2014 World Cup.

The skyrocketing costs of the World Cup - to be hosted by twelve Brazilian cities - are putting the poor quality of public services into sharp relief. During the Confederations Cup, protesters in host cities walked up to the luxurious, newly renovated stadiums to try to infiltrate the police blockade around the two-kilometer "exclusion zone." Mandated by FIFA, the soccer world's governing body, the police opened up with "nonlethal" fire to enforce FIFA's strict rules against circulating in these areas. In many ways, the protests proved that FIFA secretary general Jerome Valcke spoke the truth at a press conference in April when he said, "Less democracy is sometimes better for organizing a World Cup." He also said he expected fewer problems in Russia in 2018 with President Vladimir Putin.

Inside the exclusion zones, which were granted to FIFA when it signed a contract with the government of Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva in 2007, FIFA not only controls the circulation of people but forbids the sale of products not authorized by the organization. According to the NGO Streetnet, 100,000 street vendors lost their income thanks to similar restrictions during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. In Brazil, popular committees have protested the prohibition on the sale of traditional foods, like Salvador's Afro-Brazilian deep-fried acarajés. Within the stadiums, security is provided by

private contractors paid for by the Brazilian government but chosen by FIFA.

Exceptional legislation includes a draft law that establishes the crime of “terrorism” for the first time since the creation of the 1988 Constitution, which marked the end of military abuses in the name of eradicating “terrorism?” under the country’s former dictatorship. The draft law, still to be voted on, establishes tough penalties for those who “promote generalized panic.” Such vague phrasing could allow for the criminalization of democratic protests like the ones now under way.

The overall budget for security for the World Cup is about \$900 million. Expenses include a \$22 million contract with Condor, supplier of arms (including tear gas bombs, pepper spray and rubber bullets) to the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Turkey. The contract includes 2,000 short-distance and 500 long-distance kits containing such arms?the ones that were heavily used against protesters in all six cities hosting the Confederations Cup - as well as 1,800 Taser guns and 8,300 light and sound grenades.

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The overall investment for the 2014 World Cup is set to be more than \$14 billion, only a little less than the annual national budget for education (\$17 billion). Such investments hugely benefit the construction companies, the main financiers of political campaigns. Since 2007, laws under the General Legislation of the World Cup have been speedily approved to guarantee FIFA’s interests. These exceptional laws allow states and municipalities to incur higher debt for the World Cup than under regular Brazilian law. The same laws allow a speedier process of environmental licensing and in some cases dispense with public bidding.

Lack of transparency and public consultation is the rule. In Fortaleza, capital of the northeastern Ceará state, a giant aquarium is being built without proper environmental licenses at a cost exceeding \$140 million - more than what was spent to address one of the worst droughts ever faced by that state. Social movements claim that 170,000 people are threatened with eviction or have already been removed from their homes, mainly in the impoverished favelas. The evictions are often violent, and the whole process lacks transparency and consultation with the local communities. In Morro da Providência, a 100-year-old slum in Rio de Janeiro, people found out that they were going to be evicted when, with no previous negotiation, their houses were marked with paint.

This all comes on top of the corruption scandals surrounding FIFA officials and the former head of the Brazilian Football Confederation, Ricardo Teixeira. After “winning” the 2014 World Cup for Brazil, Teixeira resigned last year, under several corruption allegations, and now lives a tranquil life in a \$7.4 million house in Miami.

Without ever hearing from the soccer-crazy population of Brazil, FIFA required stadium renovations that led to a reduction of their capacities - in some cases by 50 percent - and an expansion of VIP and sitting areas. In Maracanã, the renovation wiped out the popular areas where people once shared a common bench, danced and played the drums, and as a result ticket prices increased. Some 200,000 people were able to watch the final match of the 1950 World Cup in Maracanã; only 74,000 will be able to watch the final of the 2014 World Cup in the very same stadium.

Finally - as if this list is not long enough - FIFA’s rules have crushed the spirit of the lively soccer fans of Brazil. Playing drums and opening big flags is forbidden. It may be puzzling to the rest of the world that a country so passionate about soccer would appear to be protesting the sport. But that passion is precisely why Brazilians are so angry: they feel that the biggest soccer festival in the world is being stolen from them.

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