

The curtain rises on Rio 2016 and Brazil's surreal political crisis

Paulo Pinheiro

Outside the grandiose stadiums, there are millions of Brazilians unhappy with political power games. Let's hope their voices are heard during the Games

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The staging of the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro was meant to be the crowning moment of Brazil's evolution into one of the most powerful and successful young democracies in the southern hemisphere. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from reality: instead of being an occasion for national celebration, the Games have turned into a nightmare with a recent survey revealing that half the population wishes they were not happening, as the protesters who tried to extinguish the Olympic flame this week demonstrated.

Over the next few weeks, in addition to the usual pictures of Copacabana beach and predictable complaints about the Olympic construction projects, violence and traffic, the world will hear about the surreal political crisis that is dividing and embittering the country.

The combination of Brazil's economic progress and gradually improving human rights situation was often presented as a positive example for other developing countries. For more than two decades, power changed hands via open and fair elections and - despite some ideological differences - a modernising agenda was adopted by all the of last three elected presidents, with issues such as racism, inequality and violence finally receiving the attention they deserve.

Last year the tide suddenly changed as the delicate balance of conservative and progressive forces in federal politics shifted radically with the opening of the impeachment process against the president, Dilma Rousseff. The consolidation of democracy is still a distant - indeed receding - reality for Brazil. Not only is the ongoing impeachment trial of Rousseff an obvious charade, but evidence emerging from the ongoing investigations into the Petrobras scandal has also confirmed that the coalition that seized power included several corrupt parliamentarians who conspired to oust her with the clear intent of perverting the course of justice in order to save their own skins.

Rousseff herself is not accused of corruption, but of budget manipulation - behaviour which would, under normal circumstances, scarcely count as a crime. As a measure of the level of criminality of the new ruling coalition that engineered Rousseff's suspension, one only needs to note that its leader in the congress is suspected of attempted murder, among other crimes.

Of course, the impeachment was not simply a back-room agreement among crooks. The fact is that Brazil's conservative political elite skilfully managed to take full advantage of an economic crisis, and the increasing resentment of the middle class towards Rousseff's government, to seize power by finding an excuse to expel a left-leaning elected president who threatened their self-perpetuating agenda.

The bitter lesson of recent events in Brazil is that it is virtually impossible to rule the country without the clear blessing of the rich. Rousseff's election as president in 2014 was an unacceptable accident in the view of almost all Brazil's economic elite. Her current suspension, pushed through by business federations and a legislature that resembled a circus, demonstrates that the country's elite is prepared to sacrifice the political and institutional gains of two decades of democratic rule in order to regain full control of the state. In fact, the rightwing parties that had failed to win four successive elections have seized the opportunity provided by the fall of Rousseff to implement their austerity programme without the inconvenience of putting their plans to the electorate.

The relative improvement of economic indicators such as the value of Brazil's currency and the improving mood of its stock market indicate that some quick economic rewards may come the way of the ruling elite. The International Monetary Fund has even signalled a slight improvement in its gloomy economic forecast for Brazil in 2017. Yet, it is hard to see how this optimism can be sustained given that unions, civil society organisations and other forces representing the vast majority of the country's poor are hardly likely to sit back passively and celebrate the liberal shock desired by markets and some technocrats.

The crisis will most probably not rear its head in front of the TV cameras inside the Olympic stadiums over the next weeks, as only the wealthiest segment of the population, which supports the impeachment, can afford tickets to the world's premier sporting event.

Yet, outside the grandiose stadiums it is likely that at least some of those many millions of people who feel they have been marginalised by the recent political power grab will take the opportunity to focus the world's attention on their grievances. One can only hope that at least their right to protest will be fully honoured, and that the Brazilian police will, for once, decide not to resort to their usual violent repressive tactics in the full glare of the global spotlight.

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