



Mega Sports Events in Rio de Janeiro: Between Elite Control and Mass Contestation

By Einar Braathen¹



In an analysis published in March 2013, my conclusion was: “in terms of politics of urban development, it is an open question whether Rio becomes a city of negative or positive exception. However, I am convinced that the Olympic Games in 2016 will be increasingly contested, socially and politically. In that sense, Rio might establish itself as a city of exception in the history of mega sports-events” (Braathen, 2013).

More than a year later, and with the 2014 FIFA World Cup behind us, what is the status of these three different scenarios?

The *contestation* scenario was overwhelmingly supported by a truly alternative and spontaneous ‘mega-event’ in June 2013: the largest street demonstrations in the history of Brazil and Rio. Ten million people were out on the streets in 450 cities during the FIFA Confederations Cup (the ‘trial’ world cup), in protests against lavish and corrupt spending on mega sports events to the detriment of spending on public education, health, transport and housing (Maricato et al., 2013). However, it is still unclear which of the two other scenarios will prevail.

A positive exception?

That the *positive exception* scenario is still a possibility is suggested by the progressive policies initiated at federal, state and municipal levels in Brazil particularly since 2003

to address social inequality and housing precariousness. The federal social housing program My House My Life (*Minha Casa Minha Vida*) has been matched by a local program in Rio de Janeiro, *Morar Carioca*, aimed at upgrading all the favelas of Rio by 2020 as the ‘social legacy’ of the Olympic Games. This scenario is also supported by legal and institutional provisions ensuring participatory democracy and the civil, social, economic and cultural rights of the citizens. This way, the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro could provide a bold contrast to the 2008 games in Beijing and show a new path for the global south in handling mega events.

This scenario received a boost from the June 2013 protests. President Dilma Rousseff responded to the ‘voice of the street’ (the mass demonstrations) by solemnly recognizing it as a legitimate and democratic call from the people for radical political, social and urban reforms. In two televised speeches at the end of June, followed by policy initiatives published in early July, the federal government promised constitutional reforms to do away with the power of money in politics. It promised vast public spending to improve collective transport in the cities. And 75 % of the booming oil revenues of the country were to be earmarked for public education and health sectors. At the municipal level, the hike in bus tariffs was cancelled. In Rio, the mayor promised to put an end to forced evictions. There were to be ‘close consultations’ with the communities affected by urban development projects to address their queries. The plan to remove a public school and swimming park neighbouring the Maracanã Stadium, probably to build a car park and a shopping centre, was put on hold. (Braathen et al., 2013).

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A negative exception?

The *negative exception* scenario is grounded on an on-going observation of Rio de Janeiro's development since the 1990s, the result of strategic planning processes that have taken place outside the control of democratic institutions. In conjunction with local and international business interests, the aim has been to make Rio a 'global city' based on mega events attracting tourists and international investors (Mascarenhas et al., 2011). The bid to organize the Summer Olympic Games 2016, crowned with success in 2008 and accompanied by the hosting of the 2014 FIFA World Cup, strengthened the 'coalition' supporting mega events. Securitization became Rio's main public policy: a 'pacification program' was directed towards those favelas located near the tourist and sports venues, and which were largely controlled by drug traffickers. Infrastructure projects, justified by the mega sports events, have led to the forced (and usually illegal) eviction of 18 000 families, according to Amnesty International's office in Rio.

A rapid rise in property prices and house rent have caused market-based eviction of hundreds of thousands of poor people from the central areas of the city. They have been forced to move to new favelas or, if they are lucky, to government-supported social housing complexes located at the far edges of the city. The result is increasing socio-spatial segregation and increased portions of people living outside the law, denied their constitutional rights. This outcome is coined 'the city of exception' by the Brazilian scholar Carlos Vainer (2011). In an international comparative perspective, however, this kind of negative and 'exceptional' urban restructuring tends to be the rule rather than the exception, as suggested by Swyngedouw et al. (2002) and confirmed by Kennedy et al. (2014).

The run-up to the FIFA World Cup strengthened to a large extent this negative exception scenario. In the largest cities of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, there were demonstrations against the FIFA-way World Cup almost every week since January 2014, but they were all carefully surveyed and many were violently suppressed by the military

police. The same applied to the numerous demonstrations initiated during the World Cup itself, starting on June 12th. The national, state and municipal legislatures had made new laws forbidding demonstrators to wear masks, making it mandatory for them to inform the police 48 hours ahead of the protest, and increasing the possible punishment for destroying private or public property during demonstrations to absurd levels, making street disorder the equivalent of 'terrorism' (Amnesty International Brazil 2014).

People's contestations

However, the mood of the people and the country has shifted since June 2013. A sense of 'insurgent citizenship' (Holston 2007) can be observed for instance in a growing number of labour strikes, local protests against police violence, and street demonstrations of various types reiterating the demands made in June 2013 (Braathen et al., 2014).

The devastating defeat of the Brazilian national team in the 2014 football World Cup – losing 1-7 against Germany in the semi-finals – had a sobering effect on public opinion in Brazil. The elite efforts to use the World Cup to regain control and strengthen 'law and order' seem to have failed. People again are questioning the positive cost-benefit balance declared by the government. The main legacy of the World Cup is first class football stadiums that the common people cannot afford to attend and improved airports that they may never use. FIFA leaves behind a bill to Brazilian taxpayers of more than 10 billion USD, while it cashes in 5 billion USD in tax-free net profits.

It remains to be seen whether increased contestations will make Brazil a positive or negative exception in the history of mega sports events. The Olympic Games in Rio in 2016 may provide more evidence. Nevertheless, if the Brazilians have raised awareness and made the rest of the world (even) more mindful about FIFA, the International Olympic Committee and their arrangements, then something significant has come out of these mega events.

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