

Letter from Rio: The Pope's visit and Brazil's mass upheavals

25 July 2013

The following was sent to the World Socialist Web Site on Tuesday, July 24, by a reader in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Exactly 20 years after the Candelária Cathedral massacre—a brutal act of mass murder perpetrated by the military police against dozens of homeless children whose sole “crime” was that of sleeping in front of this Cathedral on the night of July 23, 1993—Pope Francis has arrived in Brazil’s previous capital and most important “political thermometer,” the city of Rio de Janeiro.

The papal visit comes in the wake of the most massive demonstrations this country has seen in its history, a truly major event whose consequences and magnitude are still to be fully felt and evaluated by all players on the Brazilian political chessboard, shaking up allegiances and perspectives that seemed to be as solid as steel only a month before.

The federal and state governments, along with the entire Brazilian ruling establishment, are trying to recover their ideological and strategic grounds for action in the face of an unstoppable feeling of growing dissatisfaction among broad layers of the population.

The Pope’s arrival at this particular juncture—although serving also as a pretext for the most conservative media pundits to raise an irresponsible scare over potential “terrorist action”—is viewed basically as “providential” relief. Ruling circles fervently hope that it will aid in diverting the millions of protesters from their social demands and in establishing a different mood on the streets, which are increasingly being taken over by pilgrims and Catholic youth missionaries from all over the world.

Nevertheless, although on a more minor scale and more concentrated in Brazil’s major cities, street demonstrations and riots are still going on. They inexorably follow the same pattern: either spontaneous

or organized by the unions and social movements—like the July 11 “National Day of Struggle”—they usually begin in a very cheerful mood, only to beget an ever growing tension between the protesters and the police that worsens as a not so very large number of anarchists and provocateurs begins to mingle within the crowd with their masked faces.

The final result is always the same: police repression with its full apparatus of water cannon, rubber bullets, pepper spray and teargas, along with the random and irrational arrests of a few people, who are then generally released on bail.

Monday night, after the Pope’s inaugural speech at the Guanabara Palace, the seat of Rio’s state government in the south zone of Rio de Janeiro city—a local symbol of power that had already been surrounded by an angry mob ten days ago, as a “collateral effect” of the National Day of Struggle’s demonstrations—a puppet representing Rio de Janeiro’s governor Sergio Cabral was burned by the protesters, who appeared to be united only by their hatred of an otherwise completely pale and ordinary politician, hated precisely for his open mediocrity and venality.

It was a faint echo of the events of last Wednesday, July 17, when the same violent military police that has assaulted ordinary citizens in downtown streets refused to disperse and arrest the angry mob that gathered in front of the governor’s house, in the upscale neighborhood of Leblon, letting it proceed to carry out systematic burning and looting there and in neighboring Ipanema, among the most privileged areas of the city.

This is the kind of event that sparks suspicion and apprehension about the military and police authority’s true intentions, because the Brazilian political panorama is very muddled and deceitful by its very nature. This is a country where it’s very difficult to

find someone who states openly and “proudly” to be right-wing minded and conservative, making it even more difficult to understand and pinpoint the real issues and goals behind a given statement or position.

Thus, media pundits were able to change their opinion so shamelessly from utter condemnation of the protesters to a prudently biased support of their “cause” in a matter of days or even a few hours.

The fact remains that all of the banners and slogans that are traditionally raised in Brazil in times of political turmoil, by both the right and left, radical or moderate reformists alike, seem to be falling in a social vacuum.

As an eloquent example, one can point to the morning after the June 20 demonstration in which more than one million two hundred thousand people took over downtown Rio’s streets, when it was possible to see a very popular PSOL [Socialism and Freedom Party, a split-off from the ruling Workers Party—PT] local deputy talking to no more than ten people on Rio Branco Avenue (in the midst of downtown Rio), one of them being the national president of another pseudo-left wing party—the PSTU [the Morenoite United Socialist Workers Party].

The immediate consequence of this process, already hard felt by the Worker’s Party leadership, is the president’s loss of popularity in the latest electoral polls. They point to her winning next year’s general elections with only 30 percent of the first round votes, and a very thin margin in the second round. The margin improves slightly when the name of former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is substituted for that of Dilma, but right-wing politicians of the opposition parties are already celebrating the prospect of an electoral victory. At the same time, the right-wing factions that support the government—as is the case with the PMDB, the party of Rio’s governor—are beginning to bargain for more power and influence in the federal administration.

The government, meanwhile, is trying to dampen any popular expectations, imposing a new hike in interest rates (to 8.5 percent a month) and a new cut in the national budget of \$5 billion (10 billion reais). The ostensible aim of these measures is to tame a persistent inflation rate of about 6 percent a year and enhance an anemic growth rate that is optimistically expected to reach only 3 percent this year.

Left-wing supporters of the Worker’s Party still believe in the government’s ability to win the next elections and promote the illusion that its policies can be shifted in a left reformist direction. All of these pseudo-left organizations nourish hopes that they too can benefit from the PT’s electoral success.

Whatever may be the future tide of this year’s street demonstrations in Brazil, the lack of a genuine revolutionary workers’ organization, at this particular moment, is becoming more and more evident.

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