

Looking to the future for Brazilian democracy

February 24, 2014

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We are living in fascinating times for democracy in Brazil and Latin America. Across the continent, democracies, though still relatively young, are increasingly taking root and taken for granted. Yet the nature, quality, and culture of these democracies are still very much in formation. It is possible that, in the coming decades, several Latin American countries will experiment with new forms of democracy that will inspire other countries in the region and the world. This is a phenomenon worth paying attention to.

In Brazil, more than a quarter century after the adoption of the Citizen Constitution after the end of the military dictatorship in 1988, the generation now graduating from universities was born in a democracy. These individuals and the larger population today have wide access to new means of communication, new channels for social participation, and new models of organizing. In 2013, former senator Marina Silva applied to run in the 2014 elections through a new political party called “The Network” (her petition was denied). In the same year, a breathtaking series of public demonstrations took place. Hundreds of thousands of people protested to express their dissatisfaction with the performance of government on issues of public transport, education, and health as well as with government priorities and corruption in relation to the 2014 World Cup. In a country that has tended, at least in the past three decades, to have a complacent civic culture, these demonstrations led some observers to comment that a “giant had awoken”. Brazilians increasingly want to know and claim their rights.

The protests caught not only government off-guard. Many leaders of civil society organizations (CSOs) were surprised by the speed with which this multi-centric movement of people transcended from the virtual realm to the physical realm in the space of a few days with the help of new and old media. I spoke to a senior civil society leader in the middle of the protests who said to me, “If anyone claims to know what’s going on here, who do they think they are?”

There are several other dimensions to the current transitions in citizen-state relations in Brazil. Over the past 5-10 years, Brazilian CSOs have seen a shift in their relationship with funders and with government. Sparked by pressure from civil society, the Brazilian federal government is in the process of redefining the legal framework around how it relates to, funds, and contracts with CSOs to create more clarity and security in these relationships. At the same time, with Brazil becoming recognized as an “emerging economy”, international aid has been reduced or reprioritized, despite the persistence of many social problems in the country. With this changed classification, Brazil is expected to become an international donor rather than a recipient of aid. This shift has had a heavy impact on rights-based organizations that were largely dependent on international donors. At the same time, Brazilian domestic funders, primarily corporate ones, have not been ready to sufficiently fund causes considered controversial, such as those dealing with race, gender, gay rights, violence, drugs, and disabilities. As a result, a number of rights-based organizations are closing their doors.

In light of this reality, Reos in Brazil is increasingly becoming involved with scenarios and social labs that relate to the topic of democracy. In 2013, we entered into partnership with the D3 Articulation for Democracy, Dialogue and Rights to co-convene a transformative scenario process on the future of civil society in Brazil. The process, which was labeled “Civil Society 2023”, engaged a wide diversity of players from CSOs, social movements, governmental agencies, the

private sector, and universities. The group developed four scenarios that they named after well-known children's games to reflect the archetypal dynamics they contain. The four scenarios illustrate the risks and opportunities present in the current reality of civil society and citizen-state relations.

In the scenario, “**O Mestre Mandou**” (“**Master’s Orders**”), civil society and government are strongly dominated by market forces, and the government is highly technocratic. Organizations opposed to market domination are seen as anti-patriotic, and only those that manage to establish themselves as service providers to the government and companies survive. In “**Passa Anel**” (“**Pass the Ring**”), the government and media adopt the discourse of inclusion and human rights, but their actions don’t reflect their words. Civil society organizations find it difficult to know who the “enemy” is. Everyone is speaking their language and the mechanisms for social participation appear to be in place, but the problems aren’t being alleviated and actual influence of citizens on public policy is low. In “**Amarelinha**” (“**Hopscotch**”), Brazilian society takes a neoconservative turn. Political leaders emerge through the democratic process who, in the name of protecting family and property, create setbacks for human rights. Organizations that defend minority rights are increasingly excluded from government partnerships. At the same time, human rights organizations create innovative action strategies based on new information technologies, network models, and social technologies—an approach that reinvigorates their struggle. In “**Ciranda**” (a **Brazilian circle dance**), civil society, the private sector, government, and citizens cooperate interdependently. Citizens manage to participate in the definition, monitoring, and evaluation of public policies. CSOs invest significantly in communication; new technologies effectively enable social participation; and the new generation manages to create an inter-generational synergy with members of the “old guard”, unifying innovation and instantaneous communication with historic grounding and political savvy.

All four of the Civil Society 2023 scenarios are democratic in nature. But they demonstrate the variety of possible faces of Brazilian democracy in the future. They also provide a language to recognize what is going on, and a reminder that other futures are possible and that we create our future through the ways in which we respond to what is happening. Given the large diversity of realities that are present in Brazil today, it is likely that all four scenarios will co-exist in some form in the future.

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