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Brazil's Upcoming "Mega-Events" Human Rights Legacy

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Brazil's Upcoming "Mega-Events" Human Rights Legacy

Abstract

Preparations for the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games are well underway in Brazil, with local government officials in Rio de Janeiro trumpeting the "major success" of initiatives intended to address notoriously high levels of violent crime.

In an attempt to head off widespread concerns, which preceded South Africa's hosting of the 2010 World Cup, the apparent success of initiatives such as the Police Pacification Units (PPUs) cracking down on insecurity in Rio's shantytowns (many, such as Rocinha, close to popular tourist areas and venues for Olympic events) has been loudly hailed by local politicians and duly reported by the international media.

Keywords

Human rights, Brazil, World Cup, Olympics, Rio de Janeiro, Police, Pacification, Violence, Police violence, Poverty

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Brazil's Upcoming "Mega-Events" Human Rights Legacy

by Thomas Pegram

Preparations for the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games are well underway in Brazil, with local government officials in Rio de Janeiro [trumpeting the "major success" of initiatives](#) intended to address notoriously high levels of violent crime.

In an attempt to head off [widespread concerns](#), which preceded South Africa's hosting of the 2010 World Cup, the [apparent success](#) of initiatives such as the Police Pacification Units (PPUs) cracking down on insecurity in Rio's shantytowns (many, such as Rocinha, close to popular tourist areas and venues for Olympic events) has been loudly hailed by local politicians and duly reported by the [international media](#).

The Chinese 2008 Olympics served as a catalyst for [international human rights mobilization](#), leading to calls by prominent politicians for the games to be [boycotted](#).

Criticism of Brazil's human rights record by activist organizations has been [far more muted](#). International media reporting on the impact of Rio's beefed up security policy, such as this month's [Roundtable article](#), conspicuously fail to mention human rights at all.

To a large extent, this reflects a lack of equivalence between an authoritarian dictatorship and a constitutional democracy where, according to [Freedom House](#), civil liberties and political rights are broadly respected. Such a claim, however, masks a more complex lived-reality of rights violations. Indeed, Freedom House data sits uneasily alongside human rights indicators such as the Political Terror Scale, where Brazil is the [worst performer in South America](#) after Colombia, sharing equal pegging with China and Russia.

Brazil's democratic regime faces [profound rights challenges](#), witnessed in a [homicide rate of 27.0](#) per 100,000 people in 2009 ([South Africa: 33.8, US: 5.0](#)). The [Sangari Institute](#) starkly notes that 192,804 homicides in Brazil between 2004 and 2007 compare with 169,574 people killed in twelve major conflicts over the same period.

At the local level, in Rio de Janeiro the homicide rate in 2009 was [31.8 per 100,000 people](#), a marked improvement on a high of 51.0 in 2000. That said, [observers have recently cautioned](#) against taking official homicide data at face value, noting a recent dramatic rise in violent deaths due to "unknown causes."

The [2010 report on Brazil](#) by former UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, Philip Alston, documents pervasive impunity, as well as widespread killings by on-duty police and by off-duty police participating in death squads and militias. The report reserves particular criticism for police practices in Rio de Janeiro, where for every 100 homicides in 2008, the Rio police killed 19.89 people. (Sao Paulo police killed 8.46. By comparison, the rates in South Africa and the US were 2.58 and 2.62 respectively)

To grapple with the causes of massive violations of rights at the hands of state officials within an ostensibly democratic regime is to delve into Brazil's [troubled legacy of dictatorship](#). High levels of violent crimes, coupled with historical disrespect for civil rights and a culture of official impunity, have [reinforced a deep public ambivalence toward human rights](#).

Alongside very serious violations of political and civil rights, Brazil also confronts structural human rights violations of an economic and social nature, including access to [clean water and sanitation](#).

In the run up to the Games, criticism has focused on the impact of alleged displacement and evictions on the right to [adequate housing](#). The right to adequate housing is protected by the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\)](#), which Brazil ratified in 1992.

Brazil is not alone here. The Olympics have been blamed for the [forcible removal of two million people](#) over twenty years, with China accounting for [three quarters of that total](#). The [legacy effects of the Olympics in Barcelona, Atlanta, and Sydney](#) (and [possibly London](#)) have more often than not been the displacement of the urban poor, leaving a trail of community breakdown, racial tensions, and loss of affordable housing in their wake.

In the spirit of Professor Conor O'Gearty's observation that human rights is ["a visibility project: its driving focus is to get us to see the people around us...it is concerned with the outsider, with the marginalised, and with the powerless..."](#), the upcoming "mega-events" in Brazil provide an important opportunity to pressure the Brazilian state to act on what are complex human rights challenges.

What will be the rights impact of the PPU's and urban redevelopment? Is this a sincere attempt by the Rio de Janeiro authorities to seek long-term solutions to deeply entrenched rights issues that invariably affect the poorest, most socially and economically vulnerable in the city?

On the housing front, the omens are not good. Local government officials have been criticized for [a lack of public consultation](#) on major infrastructure projects that are in progress as part of an \$18 billion ["Plan for Accelerating Growth"](#) in host cities for the World Cup and Olympics. According to one report, an estimated 150-170,000 people have already been subject to forced removals, with inadequate compensation or suitable alternative housing, to ["\[c\]lear the ground to make way for big, money-making real estate projects."](#)

As for the PPU's, initial results suggest that this initiative can have a positive impact. In the nineteen (out of 130) gang-controlled favelas where PPU's have been established, they have proven [popular, with violent incidents declining dramatically](#).

The promise of PPU's lies in their potential to transform relations between the police and local communities in Rio and elsewhere. In contrast to the lethal methods employed by the [elite special unit battalions](#) to neutralize the power of the drug traffickers, the PPU's offer a very different approach to law enforcement, one that relies on capturing and holding territory through a "permanent" police presence (police do not currently live within the communities).

If sustained, the PPU's might *begin* to normalize new terms of engagement between the police, drug gangs, and local residents. The PPU's may have been conjured up as a clever ploy for local and international media consumption. Certainly, what is a tentative move in the right direction faces a range of formidable obstacles in terms of resources, institutional resistance, and pervasive mistrust, among others.

However, if the PPU's prove popular, if they achieve modest but real results on the ground, it may become difficult for Brazilian politicians and security officials to later defy demands and expectations for their continuation, even after the Games have packed up and left town. Never underestimate the potential for unintended consequences.

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