

Rio Olympics: Reviving the methods of dictatorship

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Last Friday, during the opening of the 2016 Summer Olympics in Río de Janeiro, leading sports figures, dressed in white, escorted the five-ringed multicolored Olympic flag to its flagpole to the applause of the public. Moments before the flag was raised, a transition took place and each escort gave up his or her place to a Brazilian soldier, dressed for combat and in camouflage.

The militarization of the Olympics is highly symbolic of the transformation of sporting events around world, and goes hand in hand with attacks on democratic rights and the preparation of police, security and armed forces to control workers and youth.

Hours ahead of the opening ceremony, access to the vicinity of Maracanã football stadium was tightly controlled with fences and police, and limited only to ticket holders.

Outside, two demonstrations took place, north and south of the stadium. Protesters handed out leaflets denouncing the removal and exclusion of some 70,000 residents and the military occupation of the city. One leaflet was labeled “*Jogos da Exclusão*” (The Exclusion Games) and mapped those zones from which citizens had been removed and in which there were high concentrations of troops.

According to a report in the online publication “Intercept Brazil,” at the Praça Saens Peña square, near the Maracanã stadium, the police began to intimidate protesters even before the protest began. They created perimeters and singled out, seemingly at random, individuals to be harassed and searched.

Other security personnel, in what appeared to be a well-rehearsed operation, shielded these individuals from view. According to the Intercept reporter: “The arrival of high numbers of members of the security forces created a climate of tension” and provocation.

In addition to protesting police repression, the hundreds of demonstrators in Río and also in São Paulo condemned the money spent on the Olympics and on the police operations, while teachers and other public employees are not getting paid, the transit infrastructure deteriorates and public health and housing are starved from lack of funds.

The Praça de Saens Peña march, with helicopters overhead, was stopped by mounted police, which redirected the protest away from Maracanã. A group of demonstrators that eluded the police were run down and assaulted.

None of this is entirely new. Two years ago, during the football (soccer) World Cup Games, Río de Janeiro also took on the appearance of an occupied city (during the World Cup final game, protesters were fenced in attacked by police, and detained for several hours).

The so-called “People’s Olympics” in London in 2012 presented a city under military lockdown. In between there have been a number of international events, soccer cups, baseball world series, visits from Pope Francis, etc., together presenting a veritable chronicle of growing police and military occupation. By way of comparison, the 100,000 troops in Río are roughly double the number of troops that “locked down” London in 2012.

One element stands out, however. In each of these Olympics, the US intelligence apparatus closely collaborated with their British and Brazilian counterparts in their vast security preparations.

In a statement the day before the opening celebrations, human rights organizations had appealed to the government for the protection of democratic rights: “With the eyes of the world on this country and this city, it is important that guaranteed rights not be treated as a dead letter, but that they be respected on the

streets.”

Yet the opening days of the Summer Olympic Games indicated that the authorities have zero tolerance for even minimal forms of protest (people holding signs protesting current “interim president” Michel Temer have been expelled from stadiums) and have brought back memories for many of the methods employed during the 21 years of dictatorship (1964-1985), when democratic rights were under constant attack and bloody police repression was an everyday affair. Democratic rights, in Brazil and elsewhere, are fast becoming “a dead letter.”

While these games take place under conditions of political crisis, (the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff of the Workers Party (PT), the corruption scandal involving the Petrobras Oil company and construction kickbacks for the Olympics themselves), special legislation limiting and punishing protests during the games was prepared several months ago and reflects a political consensus.

The General Law of the Olympics bans the use of banners or posters that contain “offensive messages” or for the purpose of protest or parody. It also authorizes the police and military, and not the courts, to make a determination of who is or is not a terrorist, and thus to round up, “rough up,” and detain protesters with impunity, under the guise of fighting terrorism.

The repression has also been endorsed by the Rio Olympics Committee, which indicated that it is necessary to preserve the “clean” stadiums that the corporate sponsors, including General Electric, Dow Chemical, Samsung, McDonalds, Coca-Cola and others, have paid for.

The Olympic Games, followed by the Paralympics, are scheduled to end on September 18. Popular protests will continue until then, and beyond.



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