

The Olympic flame has been making its way around Brazilian cities in the last few weeks, sponsored by the country's major media group, its biggest private bank, a Japanese automaker and the [world's most famous soda company](#).

As it travelled around the country, a peculiar aspect of a usually excited population attracted more attention than the torch itself: there were countless attempts to [quench the flame](#) – a symbol representing the Olympic spirit.

Though it's neither unprecedented – similar acts have taken place in other host nations – nor a demonstration of proverbial Brazilian iconoclasm, these protests must be understood in the context of the growing global reaction to both the way these mega-events are organised and the entities promoting them (think International Olympic Committee and FIFA).

The business of sport is an increasingly profitable enterprise that sets up around big sums of money coming from advertising and the sale of broadcasting rights – or both. These organisations' humongous economic power translates to ominous political clout. And the resulting leverage allows them to meddle in the internal affairs of host countries and cities, and even to tackle and replace national legislation, thereby removing legal hurdles to their events.

An unhappy citizenry

Throughout 2013 and 2014, civil society unrest based on the rejection of mega sports events figured among top general claims during massive street demonstrations in Brazil. It wasn't hard to spot complaints about FIFA's and the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) interference in domestic affairs, or about the large amounts of public money used to host the World Cup and the Olympic Games.

Similar discontent appeared in other parts of the world. The citizens of Vienna, Austria, recently [expressed opposition](#) to the city's candidacy for hosting the 2028 Olympic Games in a referendum. They assessed that the potential benefits would not compensate the high cost of the event, driven by the IOC's demands.

Similarly, the Swedish parliament rejected the idea of Stockholm becoming a candidate to host the 2022 Olympic Games. This was based on the assessment that the city had more burning issues on which to focus, especially as eventual financial losses would have to be covered by public funding.

Such negative feedback from the citizens of democratic countries has led the two biggest international sporting entities to give preference to not-so-open countries, such as China, Russia or Qatar, to host their events. In these places, state control restricts expressions of civil society distress, while enabling legal changes without major parliamentary resistance.

And it seems so-called “emerging markets”, such as Brazil, which are eager to portray progress, can also make use of their more [corruption-prone](#) institutions to provide less contentious ground for such mega events.

In the case of the Rio Olympics, it seems that so far all the effort has thrilled no one but certain journalists, artists and sports commentators from television channels that belong to the major national media oligopoly. Amid an intense political and economic crisis, the population has generally been far from enthusiastic about the Games, despite sponsors’ promotional efforts.

Crisis upon crisis

In Rio de Janeiro, the national crisis overlaps state bankruptcy. The promised “Olympic legacy” has not only been questioned but viewed suspiciously by vast sectors of society.

Long years of never-ending public works have worsened the already chaotic *carioca* traffic. Promises of alternatives for public transportation have ended up in barely finished or partially delivered infrastructure.

The construction of housing units for national delegations, as well as of sporting arenas, have led to truculent, militarised eviction of [hundreds of families](#) who used to live around the Olympic Park – in Barra da Tijuca – and to the gentrification of the downtown zone under the banner of “urban renewal”.

Accusations of overbilling and the involvement of contractors and politicians have added fuel to the fires of dissatisfaction. The interim federal government sent emergency financial aid conditional on works assumed to be fundamental to the Olympics – not to the whole project – especially to security for the event.

Meanwhile, essential services to citizens such as health care and education are undermined, while state civil servants remain underpaid.

Suppressing dissent

In the area of public security, the routine of the city changed with the arrival of the National Public Security Force and Brazilian Armed Forces. They laid siege to the “favelas” (slums) and performed military exercises to control street demonstrations and prevent – or perhaps counter – potential terrorist attacks.

The legal framework for these security measures is widely based on the [Anti-Terrorism Act](#) enforced in March 2016. The legislation is ambiguous enough to blur the distinction between “terrorist acts” and expressions of social dissatisfaction.

Despite its declared intent to secure the right of public demonstration, it defines “acts of terrorism” as, for instance, the “sabotage [of] the functioning (...) of banking institutions and their servicing network”.

During the June 2013 street protests, banks were among the main targets of social upheaval. They were attacked as symbols of financial power, especially for their influence over public institutions and the Brazilian population. So the inclusion of protests against the banks as an “act of terrorism” provides a convenient grey area that allows not only the criminalisation but also the securitisation of the protests within a broader political context of an ongoing conservative coup.

The armed forces' presence, combined with allegations about the shortcomings of the military police's slums pacification program, may enable an authoritarian hijack of the Olympic Games. The current “state of calamity” in Rio can easily be legally transformed into a “state of defence”, which would lead to the permanent deployment of federal troops, as well as the suspension of

civil and political rights.

In the face of such a state of affairs, the Olympic torch, far from representing the Olympic spirit, has largely come to be seen – explicitly or not – as the symbol of a whole set of frustrations.

Introduced for the 1936 Games in Nazi Berlin, the torch has since gained at least one more stigma. Rather than being an icon of the “Olympic ideals” envisioned by the founder of the modern Games, Pierre de Coubertin, the torch has become a symbol of the interests of big corporations and a reminder of the intervention of a wasteful entity.

Enforced happiness

The multiple attempts to quench the Olympic flame in Brazil had not succeeded until July 27, when the torch was [kidnapped and extinguished](#) by a large group of protesters in Angra dos Reis, nearby Rio de Janeiro.

The mass media didn't report the incident, posting comments about the demonstration without mentioning the whole story. But the action was recorded by several cellphones and the images spread through social media.

Some days later, in August 2, the “torch tour” was once again disturbed by massive demonstrations in São Gonçalo and Niterói (two of the last stages before its arrival in Rio). Clashes between protesters and the military police were reported. There were unconfirmed rumours that the torch itself was stolen by the mob.

All in all, the “most welcome torch” remains so only in the official narrative of the Olympic Games. The symbol that was supposed to set up the mood for the event made its way around the country facing nothing but a blue mood. The (en)forced happiness of the television hosts is far from enough to give breath to the gloomy spark of the Rio Olympic Games.

Nevertheless, the torch remains a symbol – albeit one of defused dissatisfaction. Dragging around its mandatory Games happiness, the torch will finally come face-to-face with the floating

In no mood for games: the pale Olympic flame of Rio 2016

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garbage and foul smell of Guanabara Bay when it arrives in Rio on August 5 for the opening ceremony.

The bay should have been cleaned up for the Olympics, but this has still not yet truly begun.

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