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A SHOCKWAVE FROM THE MECCA OF SOCCER, BRAZIL – A DRIVE TO UNDERSTAND THE NICS INDIVIDUALLY

Kotaro Horisaka

Soccer is perhaps among the first things that come to mind when thinking of Brazil. Brazilian athletes have frequently made their appearance as players in Japan's professional league (J-League), and some have even served as head coaches of Japanese soccer teams. It was in this nation with a rich history of soccer that an incident took place so rattling as to beg the question "why in the Mecca for soccer, Brazil?" Amidst the FIFA Confederations Cup – a cross-continental soccer competition – a month-long anti-corruption protest swept the country as though the protestors had taken their beloved sport hostage.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

While international sporting events such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup captivate audiences by showcasing the participants' incredible effort and athletic prowess, these events are also opportunities for the hosting nation to boast its prosperity. For Japan, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics served to project its prosperous growth onto the global stage. The rapid infrastructure development manifested not only in sporting venues but also in high-speed bullet trains and a web of highways was all driven by the impending Olympic Games. Taxi drivers traditionally known for their notoriously reckless driving, earning the name "Kamikaze," put an end to such driving, and it was also during this era that the spirit of faithful customer service or "omotenashi," which has since been introduced into the glossary of the hospitality industry, was established in Japan.

Brazil is slated to host the FIFA World Cup in 2014, just a year after the Confederations Cup, and in 2016 it may very well host South America's first Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Japan and Brazil have shared historic ties of mutual migration: from Japan to Brazil for almost seven decades since 1908 (though interrupted temporarily by the Second World War), and from Brazil to Japan since the late 1980s.

The hosting of these events only serves to bring Brazil closer to Japan. It is such a growing interest in Brazil that illuminates the backdrop against which Japanese firms' investments in Brazil have been increasing since the dawn of the 21st century. In particular, there has been a shift in areas of investment, from the traditional steel and natural resource industries to shopping, advertisement, and consumer goods industries – a trend in line with the growth of Brazil's society. In light of such a trend, new firms that have previously not had a record of success are beginning to increase their presence.

It was amidst such a period of growth that the demonstration movement took place. On TV screens, the Brazilian protest painted much the same image as the "Arab Spring" or the violent public outcry against economic austerity in certain parts of the Eurozone and Turkey. The protestors' pickets reading "Schools and Hospitals, not World Cups" seemed to project the Brazilians' outrage even against its beloved sport.

However, upon closely examining the individual complaints made by some one million protestors, it becomes clear that the demonstration was not a mere criticism of the government, but rather the eruption of the public's demands accompanying the democratization of Brazilian politics. Brazil moved away from military rule and ushered in an era of democratic rule in 1985. Since then, systemic reforms have been implemented while increased public awareness has contributed to the rise of living standards. However, political paralysis has led to a continued failure to muster an effective response to lagging infrastructure improvement – perhaps a focal point of the public's outrage. While the present public outcry may resemble that in other nations, the source of such discontent stems from issues unique to Brazil.

In the Confederations Cup, Brazil defeated Spain, a country often regarded as the king of soccer, and on July 24th, it triumphed over Paraguay in Copa Libertadores – a tournament organized by the South American Football Confederation. The Brazilian public has rejoiced over the consecutive victories of its national soccer team. One cannot conclusively say that the protests were organized intentionally to take place during a sporting event that turned the international spotlight on Brazil. However, it cannot be denied that the demonstration served to further drive the protestors' demand for reforms.✿

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