

Some Brazilians choose protests over World Cup



A riot policeman secures his helmet during a demonstration by Black Bloc in downtown Rio de Janeiro. / Lianne Milton for USA TODAY

by Alan Gomez, USA TODAY



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RIO DE JANEIRO - When the Brazilian national team kicks off the 2014 World Cup on Thursday as tournament host for the first time in 64 years, the match will mark the culmination of years of planning, construction and nervous anticipation for soccer-crazed Brazilians, who hope to claim a record sixth title.

But when the first match starts, Maria Loudes de Carmo says, she'll turn off her television, sit her three children down and read them a book about revolution. During other matches, she'll show them a documentary about the country's poor who are forced to live in abandoned buildings as she once did.

Then she will join thousands of other Brazilians who will spend the 32 days of the tournament protesting in the streets rather than cheering on their team.

"We don't have good health care, we don't have good public education, and we don't have enough public housing, so our priority should not be the World Cup," said de Carmo, 39, who sells clothes in Rio de Janeiro's business district.

Brazilians treat soccer as a virtual religion and revere stars from the iconic Pelé to Neymar, who will lead the

2014 squad.

Yet, the World Cup also is producing an outpouring of anger over the **\$11.3 billion** the government plans to spend on the tournament when the once-booming economy has slowed, major cities are choked by traffic gridlock, public hospitals and schools remain underfunded and millions of Brazilians live in extreme poverty.

"We are like the Romans - we spend everything on wine and sport," said Luiz Pellegrini, 60, an artist from S o Paulo.

Though the World Cup has become the focus of the protests to get the attention of 18,000 international journalists covering the tournament, the protesters are upset about much more.

Last June, more than **a million people** in dozens of cities around the country took to the streets to protest an increase in ticket prices for public transportation. In recent months, **teachers went on strike** in Rio de Janeiro, **bus drivers went on strike** in S o Paulo and **police officers went on strike** in 14 Brazilian states. This week, security forces **used tear gas** to break up a strike of subway workers in S o Paulo.

The government says the criticism has been misguided.

Thomas Traumann, spokesman for President Dilma Rousseff, said the majority of the billions the government has spent to prepare for the World Cup has gone to airports, seaports, public transportation projects and other infrastructure improvements that will benefit all Brazilians long after the World Cup is over.

Traumann said the demonstrations have grown calmer and smaller; there hasn't been a demonstration of more than 10,000 people since the protests June 2013. "Does that mean there won't be protests during the World Cup? No. We are quite sure there will be," he said. "But our information tells us that there won't be massive protests."

Even so, the government isn't taking any chances. It has to secure 12 host cities that are very far apart, given the huge size of Brazil. (A flight from the northernmost World Cup host city of Manaus to the southernmost host city of Porto Alegre takes more than six hours.) Rousseff has mobilized nearly 57,000 military personnel.

That has been another cause of tension. More than 1,000 people, surrounded by police in riot gear, protested outside Rio's City Hall on May 30, singing, "We want an end to the military police."

The protesters stopped traffic that night at the peak of rush hour by walking through one of the busiest streets in the city. While walking along, history teacher Renata Tavares said such protests were merely warm-ups for what will come during the World Cup. "It's going to grow," she said. "They'll get bigger."

Two issues are the main source of the protesters' anger:

The first is the staggering income inequality that permeates the nation of 200 million. The **country's income inequality** is the 17th highest in the world, as measured by the CIA's *World Factbook*.

The other is what experts see as an unrealistic expectation that Brazil's economic miracle of past years will continue unhindered.

For the past decade, Brazil's overall economy exploded. Countries such as China gobbled up the minerals, agriculture and other products coming out of Brazil, which insulated the country from the recent global economic crisis and helped propel more than 40 million Brazilians into the middle class.

That led to what **Marcelo Neri**, a Brazilian economist who is Rousseff's minister of strategic affairs, described as the "aspiration effect." Now that Brazilians have more money, they demand more from the government.

That helps explain why some Brazilians, such as Suraia El-kaddoum, won't watch a single World Cup match. The 58-year-old has been on strike with her fellow teachers since May 12 as they fight for changes to their contract.

"It's not a question of how much money was spent on the games," she said. "Our problem was that the money was spent and wasn't discussed with us. This model does not involve the poor sector of the society. It only

involves the businesspeople."

For most Brazilians, however, soccer is still king.

Maria Regina de Oliveira lives in one of the poorest slums in Brazil, a "favela" called Rocinha. Her home is steps away from one of the open ditches that flow with raw sewage. The walkway outside her tiny home is draped with yellow and green streamers, tiny Brazilian flags hanging from them.

"We have problems, yes. But we're a cheerful people," said de Oliveira, 45, a mother of two who works in a hospital nearby. "The protests are ugly. They give a bad image of our country. There are much better things to do."

Ocimar Santos, 47, who runs a community website in Rocinha, agrees with de Oliveira. "Once the games begin, the national pride is going to take over, the love for the country is going to take over," he said, "and people are going to be drinking and cheering."

Contributing: Sam Cowie in Rio de Janeiro

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