

The Similarities Between the Arab Spring and the 2013 Protests in Brazil

As Semelhanças entre a Primavera Árabe e os Protestos de 2013 no Brasil

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Abstract: The study to be done in the course of this article aims to analyze the influence of the Arab Spring on the manifestations that occurred in Brazil in 2013, culminating in the impeachment of the then President of the Republic. As a result, there is still the scope to identify the correlation between the attitudes adopted by protesters in the Arab world and in Brazil. Methodologically, the research is classified as inductive, of scientific and explicative character, with a qualitative approach and is characterized as an observational case study. The research instrument was only bibliographic analysis.

Keywords: Middle East and Northern Africa. Arab Spring. 2013 Protests in Brazil.

Resumo: O estudo a ser desenvolvido no decorrer do presente artigo tem por objetivo preponderante analisar a influência da Primavera Árabe sobre as manifestações ocorridas no Brasil, em 2013, que culminaram com o *Impeachment* da então Presidente da República. Como resultado, tem-se ainda o escopo de identificar a correlação entre as atitudes adotadas pelos manifestantes no mundo árabe e no Brasil. Metodologicamente, a pesquisa é classificada como indutiva, de caráter científico e explicativo, com abordagem qualitativa e se caracteriza como um estudo de caso observacional. O instrumento de pesquisa foi exclusivamente a análise bibliográfica.

Palavras-chave: Oriente Médio e Norte da África. Primavera Árabe. Protestos de 2013 no Brasil.

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1 Introduction

A wave of demonstrations struck the Arab world at the end of 2010. Initiated in Tunisia, it reached the rest of North Africa until it reached the Middle East. This phenomenon, which became known as the “Arab Spring”, had important geopolitical implications not only because the scene coincides with a politically unstable location, but also because of the economic issue, given that 40% of the planet’s oil is produced in this region. In addition, the Arab Spring influenced demonstrations that occurred later in several places around the world, including in Brazil.

A wave of demonstrations, which began in Porto Alegre and São Paulo in June 2013, spread rapidly across all Brazilian states. These were considered the largest demonstrations since the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello in 1992. In São Paulo, demonstrations began against the increase of bus tickets from three reais to three reais and twenty cents, called by MPL (Movimento Passe Livre, or Free Fare Movement, in English). Soon after, the initial claim was overcome and began to incorporate demands from various social segments, going through old agendas such as agrarian and political reforms, or new ones, such as those opposed to the World Cup in Brazil in 2014. The protagonism of the country in the Latin American political scenario and the regional weight makes it important to analyze this phenomenon.

This article analyzes the similarities and influences of the Arab Spring on the demonstrations that have occurred in Brazil since 2013. From the analysis of the political events in the Middle East and Brazil, we will try to understand if, and how, they relate, which are the similarities and differences between them and the way political and non-political actors organize themselves in contemporary times. If, a few decades ago, political parties, trade unions, student organizations, among others, functioned as an engine to catabolize demands and present demands, in these two waves of demonstrations occurring in the Arab world and in Latin America, other actors present themselves as protagonists. This is exactly what we intend to analyze.

2 The Arab Spring

The so-called Arab Spring broke out at the end of 2010, beginning with the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. In terms of nomenclature, the term Arab Spring was used to refer to the Prague Spring, in which Czechoslovakia underwent a period of political liberalization during the period of its domination by the Soviet Union after World War II (ABUSHARIF, 2014, p. 8).

On December 17, 2011, Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, set himself on fire after local police confiscated the fruits he sold. This was the historical fuse for the beginning of the popular demonstrations that took place in the Arab world, and in less than a month after the event, then-Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who was in power since 1987, resigned and fled to Saudi Arabia (JALLAD, 2016, p. 153).

Unlike other protests, these popular demonstrations, which spread to the countries of Middle East and North Africa (MENA), took over the streets and ignored the repression suffered. After the fall of the president of Tunisia other presidents also lost their positions, as for example Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Qaddafi in Libya.

Logically, the events that took place in the Arab world did not emerge from one day to the next, but rather were consequences of a long process, which possibly began at the end of the First World War, when the geographical and political boundaries of North Africa and the Middle East were designated by Great Britain and France (ELLISON, 2015, p. 8).

In fact, the demonstrations in Cairo and in several other Egyptian cities gained momentum with the victory of the Tunisian people over their government, thus, with the massive participation of the population, with workers, women and many young people, the struggle for better living conditions intensified in the country. It is important to note that the struggle of the Egyptian people had already taken place a long time ago, as the country became known for the various strikes that took place there (ZDANOWSKI, 2014, p. 82-83). However, demonstrations such as those that occurred in 2011 had never been seen. Finally, three weeks after

the occupation of Tahrir Square, there was the fall of President Hosni Mubarak (ABUSHARIF, 2014, p. 3).

As a sequence of demonstrations, demonstrations began in Bahrain, a Shia majority country, three days after the fall of Hosni Mubarak. Among the demands stands out the short-term one, which required the immediate departure of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, of Sunni origin. This time the story was different, as Saudi Arabia, which holds the largest Sunni Arab power in the Arab world, intervened militarily in Bahrain, fighting demonstrators and supporting the maintenance of the government (ULRICHSEN, 2013, p. 3-7).

The Saudi military intervention in Bahrain made clear two situations, namely, the split between Sunnis and Shiites in search of power, be it economic, political, religious, etc., and Saudi Arabia's fear that the demonstrations would reach the Saudi population, just as it happened with the Egyptian people as a result of the Tunisian demonstrations. What is known is that the repression of the protesters occurred in a violent manner, causing many wounded and dead, however, the international media chose not to propagate the news, since Saudi Arabia is a great ally of the United States, thus revealing a geopolitical issue which goes beyond simply fighting for democracy or improving the quality of life (NURUZZAMAN, 2013, p. 365).

At the same time, the Jordanians, who also sought better living conditions, rose up and, as a kind of standard among all demonstrations, demanded a change in government leadership, which for the most part had been in power for years. The Jordanian monarchy, represented by King Abdullah II, did not repress the demonstrators, but chose to carry out various reforms in the state (NIETHAMMER, 2012, p. 15).

In Sana'a, capital of Yemen, and in several other cities in the country, protesters took to the streets demanding better living conditions. The protests, supported by a large part of the population, remained active for several months, even though they were constantly repressed by the State. Lastly, Sunni-majority Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh signed an agreement with Saudi Arabia to transfer power after 33 years in office. It is important to note that the agreement was mediated by numerous Arab

countries, but with a major clash between Iran, the most powerful country among Shiites, and Saudi Arabia, the most powerful country among Sunnis (GLOSEMEYER, 2012, p. 27-28).¹

In Rabat, capital of Morocco, and in several other cities in the country, protesters took to the streets demanding a real democracy on 20 February, 2011. In that sense, the King of Morocco, Muhammad VI, promoted a referendum in order to “reduce” his powers, however, even after the massive approval of the referendum by the Moroccans, they realized that the changes were not significant. Nevertheless, the king subsequently took measures to give greater freedom and democracy to the population, thus remaining in power since 1999 (BANK, 2012, p. 31-32).

In Algeria, a large part of the population went to the streets mainly claiming a change in the economy of the country, due to the large percentage of unemployment. In response, the government abandoned the state of emergency imposed in 1992, the year in which the Coup d'état occurred in the country, and thus adopted measures that gave greater political freedom to the population (ZOUBIR, 2016).

Following the other demonstrations, the Libyan people also claimed various rights, but, acting differently, opted for an armed struggle, and thus, using military equipment such as weapons, tanks and even uniforms, the “rebels” sought the immediate exit of the Libyan Head of State, Muammar Qaddafi. Almost without exit, Qaddafi tried to make an agreement with the African Union, however, not only the “rebels” do not accept the agreement, as well as, NATO, with endorsement of the UN, began to act militarily in the Libyan territory. NATO's action, of course, had geopolitical interests, because until then, Muammar Qaddafi was not treated as a dictator by Western countries, but rather as an ally. Thus, in the name of upholding the human rights of the Libyan people, NATO promoted several attacks, which killed thousands of people and destroyed part of the country's infrastructure (ZDANOWSKI, 2014, p. 86-87).

¹ The main division in the Islamic religion occurs between Shiites and Sunnis, who disagree over who should succeed Muhammad, the founding prophet of the Muslim religion in 632. For Shiites, the post should belong to a descendant of Muhammad, while for the Sunnis, the new leader should be elected.

In Syria, the social demonstrations that began in a peaceful way have taken on other contours in the course of history. The protests, which sought greater freedom for the Syrian people, began on January 26, 2011, however, on March 15 the situation deteriorated and the demonstrations became an armed revolt. While Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government claims to be defending the country from armed terrorists seeking to destabilize the country, opponents, sometimes called "rebels", claim to be fighting for the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad for a subsequent re-democratization of the country (ZDANOWSKI, 2014, p. 85-86).

Inevitably, the geopolitical question of the Syrian War can not be disregarded, given that the armed conflicts that ensued there are due to numerous factors, such as the division of the country between Sunnis and Shiites – since the Syrian President is Alawite (deriving from Shi'ism) and the country is mostly Sunni – issues of strategic support of major powers in the Middle East – President Bashar al-Assad retains Russian support while the "rebels" have support from the United States and other European countries – besides other factors of enormous relevance.

Unlike in Libya, the UN Security Council did not authorize attacks in Syria in order to defend or remove President Bashar al-Assad, since there is a large division of the permanent member states of the Council, which makes it impossible to act militarily in the country. As a result, the country currently has more than 500,000 dead, more than 7 million refugees in other countries, and more than 6 million internally displaced persons (BALANCHE, 2018, p. 18).

Although demonstrations in the Arab world have occurred sequentially and in very near periods, trying to reduce Arab countries and its people to a single form is somewhat pretentious and erroneous. There is a great religious, cultural, political and social difference among the Arabs, which makes it impossible to understand the Arab Spring as a unique phenomenon. Although Arab society has an almost inseparable relationship, each country has its own perception of the world. In general, one can even say that the objectives of the demonstrations in all countries

were to improve living conditions, but each manifestation started differently and with its own objectives.

In broad terms, it was seen that authoritarian regimes in many Arab countries were incapable of promoting the participation of a large part of the population in public life, since they resorted to numerous maneuvers that sought to effect their maintenance in power. In a sequential manner, corruption has become the *modus operandi* of several governments, and as a result of a greater ease in obtaining certain information, soon such cases were discovered and information shared globally (PERTHES, 2012, p. 67-68).

The social manifestations occurred with a large presence of young people – mainly in Egypt – who are more intimate with the internet and new technologies. Quickly, through Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and other digital platforms, information and demands from society were being propagated. With practically no way out because of the speed with which information was passed on, some countries, such as Egypt and Tunisia, stopped internet access to the population (STEPANOVA, 2011, p. 2).

The interaction of the Arab world was present in the Arab Spring mainly due to the libertarian ideals disseminated through the internet. That is, the information related to the fuse of the Arab Spring crossed the world in a short time. Of course, this means of communication only facilitated the communication of the demonstrators, not being able to be the element that caused the demonstrations. Also in this sense, it should be highlighted that the internet has promoted the ease of starting demonstrations, since the devastating situation – economic, political, social crisis – where several countries were located was not new for several years (GOODWIN, 2011, p. 453).

It is important to note that although there was no clear leadership in the demonstrations, there were groups of political coalitions that encouraged the decisions to be made in the course of the protests. In Egypt's case, for example, much of the fighting force that forced the departure of President Hosni Mubarak came from a workers' struggle, that is, there was no organized movement, but a union of people suffering from the same socioeconomic problems and that they thus possessed the

same ideal. Nonetheless, traditional political forces joined forces with the movement, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which, in a sense, sought to politicize the movement and thus fight against the maintenance of government and take its place.

3 Protests in Brazil in 2013

One can distinguish three phases in the demonstrations in Brazil in 2013. Initially, the demonstrations were mostly composed of young students who organized to protest against the increase of bus tickets in the city of São Paulo. The first protests were called by the MPL (Movimento Passe Livre, or Free Fare Movement, in English), recruiting people mainly through social networks. This movement, which was founded in 2005 in Porto Alegre, during the World Social Forum, has since come with a history of mobilizations against the adjustments in the prices of public transport in several Brazilian capitals. Although the Movimento Passe Livre (MPL) has become the icon of demonstrations in Brazil, since it expressed a new political way of acting, the group already had national articulation since the year 2000, with political ideas defined in a consensual way by its participants. The guidelines of the Movimento Passe Livre (MPL) were not limited to the value of bus passes, although such a struggle has gained strategic relevance in the political world. According to Ilse Scherer-Warren (2014, p. 418), “this movement has referred more broadly to the rights of citizens with regard to urban mobility in general, which should be considered as a fundamental right, such as the right to education, health, etc.”² In this way, they proposed the loss of the mercantile character of collective transportation, based on the ideals of systemic transformation, just as occurred, and still occurs, with other student movements.

The 6,7% increase in bus fare price in the capital of São Paulo, despite being below inflation in the period (bus fares, for example, cost R\$ 3.00 since January 2011) was the of the demonstrations. Before the

² Free translation. “[...] esse movimento tem se referido mais amplamente aos direitos do cidadão no que diz respeito à mobilidade urbana de uma forma geral, a qual deveria ser considerada como um direito fundamental, tal como o direito à educação, à saúde etc.”

announcement of the new tariff, Mayor Fernando Haddad said that he made “an effort for the lowest possible adjustment.” On the day MPL met on Paulista Avenue, President Dilma Rouseff’s popularity experienced its first drop since 2011 (year of her tenure). Her approval dropped significantly by eight percentage points. The same survey noted an overall increase in Brazilian pessimism. Three weeks later, the political situation is further aggravated (COELHO; BORBA, 2016). According to a Datafolha survey released by the Folha de São Paulo newspaper on June 29, 2013, the president’s popularity plunged by 21 percentage points (BANDEIRA, 2013). In March, before the protests, respondents who considered the Dilma government good and great were 65%. In the first week of June, the beginning of the demonstrations, this percentage fell to 57% and at the end of the same month it reached 30%.

The second phase of this wave of protests widened both the movement’s demands agenda and the number of demonstrators who took to the streets. The aim of the protesters stops being just the price of public transport and to be more ephemeral: from combating corruption to demilitarizing the police, to the quality of public services, etc., and so the agenda becomes absolutely broad. The sheer breadth of the demands reveals the diversity of the social segments that occupied the streets in 2013. There were nationalists and anarchists dividing the streets with people affiliated with political parties and nonpartisan and even anti-party groups. In the words of Celi Regina Jardim Pinto (2017, p. 130), “[...] if there is a characteristic capable of defining the street demonstrations of 2013 in Brazil, it is the diversity of people who participated in them and that is revealed in a flagrant discursive fragmentation”³. The streets were taken by demonstrators of the Movimento Passe Livre, a group with ideals close to the PT; by “Black Blocs”, with violent actions, that called themselves anarchists; and by demonstrators of the most varied social strata, demanding better wages, the end corruption. In addition, small groups also went to the streets, requiring, even, the military intervention, which demonstrates the varied character of the demonstrations.

³ Free translation. “[...] se há uma característica capaz de definir as manifestações de rua de 2013 no Brasil é a diversidade de pessoas que delas participavam e que se revela em uma flagrante fragmentação discursiva”.

This phase is marked by the intense participation of the so-called “new middle class”. A survey by Ibope, on June 20, 2013, held in the capitals of seven states and in Brasília, released by the television program “Fantástico” (VEJA, 2013), offers important data about who was on the streets at this stage of the demonstration: the mass was also composed of men and women; (63% of them were between 14 and 29 years old); 92% had completed high school, were in university or had completed higher education (the latter accounted for 43% of respondents). This layer of society coincides with what is conventionally called the “new middle class”. According to Luis Fernando de Oliveira Saraiva (2015, p. 52), “taking as one of the main effects of the decrease of income inequality in Brazil, in a process of increase of the per capita income more significant among the poorest, the Brazilian “new middle class”- or class C – would be what would represent the most recent transformations of our country”⁴. At least this is understood by the economist Marcelo Neri, responsible for important and controversial studies conducted by the Center for Social Policies (CPS) of the Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV). Their studies have indicated that about 29 million people entered the so-called “new middle class” between 2003 and 2009, totaling approximately 50,5% of the Brazilian population, while in the same period, classes D and E were reduced from 96,2 million to 73,2 million people. With an absolute household income of between R\$ 1,064 and R\$ 4,561.003 and per capita between R\$ 214 and R\$ 923, the “new middle class” accounted for more than 46,24% of the purchasing power of Brazilians, surpassing AB classes, which accounted for 44,12% of the total. This was the profile of those who participated in the largest number of demonstrations in Brazil in 2013, especially in the second phase, the one that had the most intense participation from the point of view of popular adhesion. The country had taken millions of citizens out of poverty in the years leading up to this period. It had, therefore, been successful in creating a new middle class composed of more demanding and conscious Brazilians. The protests that

⁴ Free translation. “Tomada como um dos principais efeitos da diminuição da desigualdade de renda no Brasil, em um processo de aumento da renda per capita mais significativo entre os mais pobres, a ‘nova classe média’ brasileira – ou classe C – seria aquilo que mais representaria as transformações recentes de nosso país”.

followed were a reflection of this fact. They were dissatisfied Brazilians with the rise of prices, allocation of public resources and corruption in politics.

A third phase can also be identified in this process. These were demonstrations that took advantage of the bankruptcy of banks, cars and public or private buildings. Starring the so-called “Black Blocs”, hooded figures and marked by strong repression. This phase is characterized by violence as a mechanism to repress demonstrations. According to El Pais newspaper, “during these last years, one of the main milestones of these violations, if not the main one, was the police crackdown on June 13, 2013 against protestors protesting against the increase in public transport fares in São Paulo” (MARQUES; RIELLI, 2016). The episode, which was then completing three years, was the trigger for the beginning of one of the largest popular demonstrations ever seen in Brazil. According to the article presented by the Research Group on Urban Law at the Faculty of Law of the FMP, coordinated by Professor Bethany de Moraes Alfonsin (2015, p. 75), “The state response was not delayed and there were episodes of extreme violence by the local police in suppressing the advance of the masses”⁵. Initially, the most violent incidents were widely publicized by the sensational media, which sought to delegitimize the popular initiative, and thus slow down the rally. Thus, the isolated violent actions were propagated as a whole, stating that the various groups of demonstrators were in favor of acts of vandalism against public and private patrimony.

Another important aspect to be pointed out in the 2013 demonstrations in Brazil was the widespread use of social networks and the internet as an instrument for mobilizing the masses. The use of social networks during the demonstrations also occurred as a mechanism for demonstrating intolerance. “The aesthetic and verbal expressions were of partisanship, non-partisanship and anti-partisanship, whose explanations were reproduced in social networks, often demonstrating reciprocal

⁵ Free translation. “A resposta estatal não tardou e contou com episódios de extrema violência por parte das polícias locais ao reprimir o avanço das massas”.

intolerances” (SCHERER-WARREN, 2014, p. 418)⁶. But it was not used just that way. The internet has also proved to be a privileged place for the youngest members of Brazilian society to discuss issues related to their daily life, as a mechanism for building and accumulating a critical vision and as an organizational tool. Ilse Scherer-Warren analyzes the role of virtual networks from a critical viewpoint and compares them to face-to-face networks. For the author (SCHERER-WARREN, 2014, p. 420), “[...] virtual networks disseminate, convene and express positions, but almost never allow the deepening of the political debate, although in some situations, it is within subnetworks that interact with other subnets that conflicting messages heat up the debate”⁷.

Some facts highlight the importance of networking for the construction of protests in Brazil in 2013. On June 20 of that year, the hashtag #VerásQueOFilhoTeuNãoFogeALuta remained for many hours as the most talked about topic on Twitter worldwide. On Facebook, more than 280 thousand people confirmed their presence at the official event of the São Paulo demonstration (IKEDA, 2013). In this way, the Internet is seen as an element with an important role in the mediation of manifestations, since the users interact with the facts in real time, they can exchange information with demonstrators in the same city or in different regions and manage to organize and mobilize a greater number of demonstrators (RODRIGUES, 2013). Thus, based on the analysis of the three moments of these protests, there are some evident characteristics in this wave of mobilization that took over the streets from north to south of Brazil: a) lack of individualized leadership, that is, demonstrations are called by diverse movements, different from each other, with pulverized leaderships; b) an extensive list of demands, which they believe to have originated in the protest against the increase of the price of public

⁶ Free translation. “As expressões estéticas e verbais foram de partidarismo, apartidarismo e antipartidarismo, cujas explicitações se reproduziram nas redes sociais, demonstrando, frequentemente, intolerâncias recíprocas”.

⁷ Free translation. “[...] as redes virtuais divulgam, convocam e expressam posicionamentos, mas quase nunca possibilitam o aprofundamento do debate político, ainda que, em algumas situações, é no interior de sub-redes que interagem com outras sub-redes que mensagens conflitivas aquecem o debate”.

transport in the capital of São Paulo, increase the motives of calling people to the streets; c) the lack of strategy, a result of the very extension of the vindicatory agenda, composed also of contradictory demands among themselves, and also result of the clear lack of leadership, which causes the multiplicity of strategies to depend on the group that organizes a certain demonstration or “sub-demonstration” organized within a broader one; d) the widespread use of social networks as a communication tool, which presents itself as a new and efficient instrument of mass mobilization and which seems to replace the traditional organizations that carried out street mobilizations in the two previous centuries; e) movement composed mostly by young people, at first, but incorporating the so-called “new middle class” and expanding the agenda of demands at a later time; f) dissatisfaction with political representativeness, manifested in the attempt to construct a nonpartisan and even anti-party movement.

4 Conclusion

The present study presents several historical variables that culminated in the popular demonstrations that took place in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East (Arab Spring), as well as in Brazil in 2013.

As explained above, there are numerous similarities between the Arab Spring and the protests in Brazil, and it may even be said that the Arab Spring influenced the demonstrations in Brazil, despite not having the power to promote such manifestations, but only to give them greater support. It was possible to verify in both manifestations the social anxiety for the overthrow of authoritarian and corrupt regimes, in their due proportions, and the incessant struggle for the improvement of the quality of life.

From a practical point of view, there were distinctions between the Arab Spring and protests in Brazil, such as the use of the army to suppress or support demonstrators. In the case of the countries of North Africa and the Middle East, where demonstrators received support from the army, the government was overthrown promptly, for example in Tunisia and Egypt. In the case of Libya, the fall of the government occurred only after NATO intervention. Already in Syria, where the army supports the government,

so far the war that began after the demonstrations continues to take place. In the case of Brazil, the demonstrations, although in its final phase had isolated acts of violence, can not be said to be similar to the measures taken in cases of military intervention.

The Arab Spring promoted acts of transnationality, which were initially restricted to the Arab world, but which subsequently reached the globe. Several measures adopted in the Arab Spring were, to a certain extent, replicated in demonstrations in Brazil. The mobilization generated by the widespread use of social networks, the lack of individualized leadership and the most diverse demands made by various social strata can be cited as direct influences of the “Arab model”.

It is important to highlight the globalization characteristic of the current world, as well as the power of new technologies. If before the interpretations of the world were created from the point of view of big newspapers, today, the citizen can produce and propagate its own content without the necessity of connection to the big corporations or movements.

Finally, it can be concluded that the similarities between the Arab Spring and the demonstrations in Brazil are not restricted and limited, but reach all countries. In this way, it becomes more assertive to talk about the influences that societies with similar social demands can promote each other, thus generating a reproduction of effective acts.

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