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Rio Tries Counterinsurgency

ROBERT MUGGAH AND ALBERT SOUZA MULLI

Brazil’s tourist-jammed cities are some of the most violent on the planet. A considerable number of the country’s 43,000 annual murders occur on the streets of São Paulo, Recife, and Rio de Janeiro. And Brazilian cities are not alone in what might be called a bad neighborhood. The fact is that most major Latin American and Caribbean cities are today plagued by an epidemic of violence. With more than 20 murders per 100,000 people, the regional homicide rate is roughly three times the global average. Many of the larger urban centers—from Caracas and Ciudad Juárez to Kingston and Port-of-Spain—register the highest rates of lethal violence in the world.

Most specialists agree that a noxious mix of narcotics trafficking and gang activity has fueled the violence and victimization. Indeed, with drug-related violence sharply escalating across North America, Western Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and Central and Southern Asia, what happens in Brazil is now everyone’s business.

Over the past three decades Latin American and Caribbean governments have launched spectacularly violent campaigns to reclaim their fragile cities. With firm backing from political and commercial elites, interventions have been framed as law and order initiatives, though they frequently deploy defense assets.

The heavy-handed responses are in large part an inheritance from years of dictatorship that left intact military organizations formerly used to fight left-wing insurgents. Instead of containing and taking out rebels or terrorists, governments have shifted their focus to drug traffickers, organized

criminals, and transnational gangs. To aid such efforts, the United States has provided its southern neighbors with multi-billion-dollar security packages consisting of military hardware, training, and intelligence.

Yet many of these heavy-handed interventions have failed. In some cases they have made the violence even more intractable. One of the reasons for this failure is that most campaigns have tended to target the symptoms rather than the causes of urban violence.

It is no secret that the transshipment and trafficking of drugs by cartels and gangs are contributing to soaring insecurity, especially in South America, Central America, and Mexico. And there are great expectations for US-funded security packages such as Mexico’s Mérida initiative and others in Central America and the Caribbean. Even so, the political and economic character of cities and their institutions—and the dynamics of urbanization more generally—may offer a more productive entry-point to reversing urban violence.

A closer inspection of Latin American and Caribbean urban areas reveals deep socioeconomic fissures and stratification. Cities have evolved so that they exclude the marginal and cater to the privileged. Social scientists describe the emergence of an “architecture of fear” that contributed to an “urbanization of poverty” before and after democracy swept through many of the countries in the region.

UNGOVERNED SPACES

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil’s second-largest city behind São Paulo, is often singled out for its spectacular levels of violence. For more than a century, migrants moving to the city from the country’s northeast were systematically excluded from formal labor markets. Unable or often unwilling to return to rural life, they frequently were confined to informal slums and shantytowns at the urban

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periphery. Rather than confront these newly poor, the federal, state, and municipal governments chose to avert their eyes.

A metaphor is widely used to describe the progressive social and economic segregation of Rio, one of Latin America's most unequal cities. Residents are often described as living either on the "asphalt" or in the "hills." The asphalt is where the wealthy reside—formal residential areas spread across the city's south and north zones. The hills are where the informal slums are precariously perched, more than a thousand communities and 1.2 million people strong. Unlike most other cities, these *favelas* (shantytowns) are not just on the outskirts; one finds them also in the veritable heart of the city—physical testaments of unchecked urban growth.

Rio's poorer settlements and slums are what some in the urban planning and defense sectors characterize as "ungoverned spaces." These expanded from the mid-twentieth century onward to house the city's informal reserve labor force. The government, though it on occasion forcibly relocated settlers, for all intents and purposes abandoned them to their fate. The state largely ignored the favelas: Taxes were rarely collected, land deeds were seldom issued, and basic public services were nonexistent. Real estate values plummeted as a result, and residents were stigmatized.

This is not to suggest the residents were passive. To the contrary, slum dwellers were actively involved in pro-democracy movements and engaged in complex political patronage networks with elected officials and administrators. They routinely resisted government or industry-led encroachment. Even so, for much of the past three decades, Rio's asphalt dwellers considered favelas as "no go" areas to be avoided.

Owing in part to the lack of state presence, gangs and drug traffickers gradually moved into these slums. During the 1980s and 1990s they rapidly consolidated their control over supply and distribution networks. High up on the pyramid were drug barons who, in place of the government, acted as the shantytowns' de facto chief executive officers, mediators, judges, juries, and executioners. With the rapid influx of cocaine and crack from neighboring countries, Rio's favelas doubled as drug retail outlets (*bocas de fumo*). Predictably,

turf wars erupted between rival factions—foremost among them the Red Command (*Comando Vermelho*), the Pure Third Command (*Terceiro Comando Puro*), and Friends of Friends (*Amigos dos Amigos*).

As these heavily armed groups consolidated networks and expanded into new markets, innocent bystanders were routinely caught up in crossfire. For their part, politicians and businessmen began recruiting militias from the ranks of off-duty police, firefighters, and prison officers to take the fight to the traffickers. Rio's infamous military police—the Special Police Operations Battalion, or BOPE (*Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais*)—launched aggressive incursions, complete with armored vehicles known colloquially as "big skulls" (*caveirões*).

With the military police and private militias now involved, along with the drug trafficking industry, Rio's favelas experienced an explosion of flagrant violence that reached a peak in the mid-1990s. Corrupt police were frequently complicit in assisting the very traffickers they claimed to

be fighting. In some cases officers warned traffickers in advance of police raids or sold them high-caliber weaponry and rounds of ammunition. Policing itself became ever more intense and savage—with growing

numbers of officers mimicking the murderous tactics of their drug-trafficking opponents.

Over the past three decades, Rio's police personnel were implicated in thousands of "resistance" or extrajudicial killings of civilians, sometimes in spectacularly gruesome ways. Between 1990 and 2008, tens of thousands of people were murdered in the city's drug wars. And while the city's overall homicide rate declined from more than 60 per 100,000 to 39 per 100,000 between 1991 and 2010, Rio still registered one of the highest murder rates in the country.

ENTER THE PACIFIERS

Since Brazil's democratization in the mid-1980s, the issue of urban violence has dominated the public policy agenda. The corporate and political elite in particular has been preoccupied with rising levels of insecurity and the implications for both their businesses and their families. Until recently, state-led responses to insecurity have tended to be heavy-handed and were seldom sustained. How-

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ever, at the grassroots level, faith-based groups, nongovernmental organizations, private firms, and foundations have experimented with more innovative and developmental approaches to addressing the risks and manifestations of armed violence. A recent report commissioned by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development counted thousands of such initiatives launched in Brazil over the past two decades. And since 2007, the country has seen dramatic changes in federal and municipal authorities' approach to containing urban insecurity.

This shift in approach can be attributed in part to Brazil's successful bid to host the two single biggest parties on earth: the World Cup in 2014 and the summer Olympics in 2016. With an anticipated economic dividend of at least \$65 billion, the country's elite had a major incentive to rethink its "security problem" and present a gentler face to the world. After Brazil won the Olympic bid in 2009, one report claimed that hundreds of thousands of jobs would be created and for every dollar spent on preparing for the games, three more would be made every year until 2027.

Another factor contributing to Brazil's change of course was the launch in 2007 of the so-called National Program for Public Security with Citizenship, or PRONASCI (*Programa Nacional de Segurança Pública com Cidadania*), designed to promote "citizen security" across the country. PRONASCI promised at least \$3.5 billion for more than 150 municipal governments to support innovative public security policies. The favorable policy climate was helped along by the fact that for the first time three levels of government—federal, state, and municipal—were politically aligned and intent on stabilizing Rio.

Faced with these dramatically different economic and political circumstances, Rio de Janeiro state's governor, Sergio Cabral, in 2008 announced a "pacification" initiative. The governor's objective was to bring the state into the favelas, in some cases for the first time. In the sanitized language of public policy, the plan featured three distinct phases: a *tactical intervention* carried out by BOPE to recoup areas illegally held by armed groups; a *stabilization* phase designed to secure and calm these zones; and a *consolidation* period involving the permanent deployment of specially trained "Paci-

fication Police Units" (*Unidade de Policia Pacificadora*, or UPP) to prepare the community for public and private services and welfare projects.

Instead of conducting quick in-and-out raids that often left neighborhoods in ruins, the police were now entering favelas to stay. Practically speaking, the military police would "occupy" favelas for 100 to 150 days before a similarly sized UPP force would relieve them of their duties and settle into active patrolling and administration of basic services.

HEARTS AND MINDS

There are uncanny similarities between Rio's pacification strategy and ongoing counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Indeed, it is almost as if the Brazilian approach were lifted from the pages of US General David Petraeus's 2006 counterinsurgency (COIN) field manual. At the center of COIN is the objective to "clear, hold, and build" insurgent-held areas and win the "hearts and minds" of the population. Locals must regard the intervening force as "legitimate," or at least more trustworthy than existing informal power brokers.

The key benchmarks of effective counterinsurgency are the creation of a secure physical and psychological environment, the consolidation of control by the public authorities, and the formation of popular legitimacy. While the United States and its allies have applied such strategies to mixed effect against Afghanistan's Taliban and other insurgent groups, the Brazilian authorities' gamble is that analogous strategies might loosen the grip of drug barons in Rio's urban slums.

A critical precondition to the success of Rio's pacification program is that the government be seen as an able and exclusive preserve of authority. This requires a break with the past: The authorities must rule by consent rather than force. Governor Cabral himself publicly observes that there can be peace in Rio only if the state recaptures territory and has the sole monopoly over the use of violence.

After decades of legislated neglect, systemic corruption, and extrajudicial killings, favela residents have reason to be suspicious of the government's motives. And yet, while many observers are cynical about the motives underlying pacification,

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public support for the strategy appears to be gradually growing. The military also senses that the light at the end of the tunnel is getting brighter. The then-commander of the UPP in a favela called Santa Marta observed that “the police have already conquered ‘the hill’ and must now conquer the population. . . . [W]e need to build this legitimacy with a legitimate state presence.”

Although it would be premature to describe the pacification strategy as a success, there are some indications that it is working. Since the first operation in Santa Marta in 2008, more than 18 favelas have been “pacified.” Most of those selected for operations have been near tourist areas or massive stadium and port regeneration projects. The last major pacification operation of 2010, in the Rocinha favela, ended in the capture of a notorious drug faction leader without a single shot being fired.

In the meantime, Rio’s state and municipal governments have launched a charm offensive to lure investors to the city. Eike Batista, an energy and infrastructure entrepreneur and one of the world’s wealthiest men, describes the UPP as “a fantastic concept . . . a model for Brazil and maybe even the world.” Many other industrialists agree, cooing how security is good for business. Some elites are actively investing in the program—in Batista’s case, more than \$50 million.

For their part, the UPP units have intensified their public relations campaigns, hoping to send out a message that the changes being witnessed in the pacified zones are real. They also want to remind Rio’s citizens that UPP officers are themselves newly recruited, thus symbolically representing a break from the past. As anticipated in Petraeus’s manual, these same officers have become “social workers, civil engineers, schoolteachers, nurses, and boy scouts.”

Proponents hope the pacification program can correct some of the past failures of urban planning. Rio’s mayor, Eduardo Paes, emphasizes the importance of first creating a sense of “normality” in favelas before major infrastructure development is possible. This means flooding areas considered “abnormal” and characterized by high levels of informality and illegality with vocational training, job schemes, and progressive social policies. Once all of Rio’s people (*Cariocas* as they are called) acknowledge the state’s presence, Paes argues, they will become formal members of the city.

For now, the public response has been overwhelmingly positive, with the majority of non-

occupied favela residents reportedly eager for the UPP to arrive. More than \$470 million has been ploughed into the program to date. As a measure of his confidence in the agenda, the mayor has promised an additional \$1.28 billion in infrastructure improvements in 2012.

CRACKS IN THE PROGRAM

The news is not all good. Some cracks are starting to emerge in the pacification strategy. A recurring criticism is that the program does too little, too slowly. A case in point is the number of UPP deployments to date. Just under 3 percent of the city’s favelas have been targeted—most of them in comparatively accessible areas that abut wealthy neighborhoods. Not only are the remaining hot spots more remote, but many exhibit more intractable levels of violence and chronically high rates of poverty.

Some worry that the pacification program is not providing sufficient alternatives for young men who form the majority of the low and middle ranks of the armed gangs. Special initiatives are needed to get young people back in school before they return to crime. There are concerns, too, that the police are unable to recruit fast enough to meet the demands of pacification. Observing how pacification has narrowly targeted favelas adjacent to affluent neighborhoods in the city’s south and central zones, some researchers dismiss the program as a cosmetic exercise to tart up the city in advance of the World Cup and Olympics.

Moreover, a genuine risk exists that the pacification campaign could unintentionally impoverish the very people whom the government is fighting to win over. One of the challenges relates to service provision, a central plank of the UPP consolidation phase. In order to “normalize” ungoverned spaces, interventions seek to replace informally accessed services with formal public and private ones. Before pacification began, the city’s primary electricity provider (Light) complained of losing more than 70 percent of its revenue in favelas to pirated cables and illegal hookups. Following tactical engagements and stabilization by BOPE and the UPP, Light is now able to send its technicians and reconnect prospective clients to the grid. And yet the poor and underemployed residents of favelas frequently lack the resources to afford the utility’s new bills. Many locals are starting to feel the unexpected pain of so-called normalization.

For many favela residents, normalization has translated into unemployment and a dramatic

change of lifestyle. For all of its distorting effects in the formal economy, the drug trade supports a wide network of informal economic activity, from motorcycle taxis to armies of messengers and lookouts. Most of these occupations are held by males from 15 to 29 years old—precisely the population category most susceptible to joining gangs or being killed by them. But with the arrival of the military police and the UPP units, local economies are fundamentally disrupted, and the livelihoods of many young men and their families are dismantled. The challenge of identifying employment and educational alternatives for the city's poorest and least educated population is not lost on the proponents of pacification. But if left unaddressed, the grievances from the hills could jeopardize the entire project.

Early signs suggest pacification may be contributing to soaring real estate prices. Brazil's major cities already have been experiencing an unprecedented economic boom. With natural gas reserves newly discovered off the coast, Rio in particular has witnessed a surge in both construction and housing prices. Massive investments are being funneled into a resurrection of the city's port and docks. And now the pacification of favelas is ushering in a new wave of urban migration from the pavement to the hills.

After all, many of the favelas targeted so far for pacification are located above the city, facing one of the most extraordinary panoramic views in the world, and adjacent to Rio's wealthiest and most economically dynamic areas. Favelas have become easy targets for real estate speculation. With property prices quadrupling in some recently occupied favelas, many of the poor are being driven out from their houses in the hills to the periphery. Ultimately, rapid gentrification of the favelas risks squeezing the marginalized and reigniting more social unrest.

Accompanying the growth in intra-city migration has been an increase in inter-city and even inter-state migration. Politicians representing smaller municipalities that encircle Rio are raising their voices now about the relationship between pacification and violence. They are alarmed that some drug gangs are moving their operations to outlying areas, bringing with them the same violence that the city has suffered. Analysts too are

drawing attention to the "balloon effects" of pacification, as much of the drug trade appears to have moved to the south of the country, specifically Parana state. These dynamics have necessitated enhanced federal- and state-level engagement in what was ostensibly designed as an urban intervention.

Some critics of pacification have raised questions about how the arrival of police into favelas profoundly alters social relations, and not always for the better. Professor Luiz Antonio Machado of the Rio de Janeiro State University has observed that, after the UPP is installed in a community, the police not only fill the power vacuum left by departing drug dealers; they also set themselves up as the primary conduit for mediating social grievances. In what might be described as the "occupiers curse," they may trample on existing residential associations and local networks and undermine their own legitimacy.

If left unchecked, the UPP could even unintentionally erect mini "police states" within pacified communities, wherein the police end up monitoring and controlling all activities and interactions. Police engagement could end up marginalizing and weakening the authority of local actors and their ability to carry out dialogue with state institutions.

RECLAIMING THE HILLS

The most avid supporters of pacification are nonplussed. Because the program is new, they argue, it is unfair and even disingenuous to issue a report card just yet. According to its admirers, the benefits of pacification vastly outweigh the costs. Many acknowledge that they are still learning by doing, and that they will no doubt make mistakes. But the promise of reuniting Rio's pavement with its hills—even if it means paving some of them—is simply too enticing a possibility to deny.

Pacification is no panacea. Abuses committed by Rio's military police against favela residents and the poor more generally will not easily be forgotten. And there are open questions about the commitment to the intervention after the World Cup and Olympic fever wears off. Still, the pacification program offers a promising break from past practice. If it is carried off successfully, it may yet serve as a model to the region and the world. ■