

Own goals

Staging big sports events is a game for sheikhs and oligarchs, argues Michael Reid

“GOOOOL! NEYMAAAR!” That is the sound that 198m Brazilians will want to hear on the evening of July 13th, when the World Cup final is played in Rio de Janeiro’s Maracanã stadium. They will hope that home advantage and their young star forward, Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior, will help Brazil win the trophy for a record sixth time, though they will fear being pipped by Germany or, worse, arch-rivals Argentina. (The too-clever-by-half money is on Belgium, whose talented team will be overwhelmed by the occasion.)

One of the 79,000 fans in the Maracanã will be inwardly cheering for a second outcome: Dilma Rousseff, Brazil’s president, will hope to get through the tournament without being jeered. In 2007, when Brazil bid to stage the cup for the first time since 1950 (the year it lost to Uruguay in the final, a national humiliation), the economy was riding a commodity boom. Now it is stagnant and the country’s mood has changed. The \$3.2 billion spent on building or refurbishing 12 stadiums, fitted to the expensive standards of FIFA, world football’s discredited governing body, seemed like a provocation. Germany did the job for half the cost in 2006. The Confederations Cup, a warm-up tournament held in June 2013, became a target of the largest mass protests in Brazil in a generation, with demonstrators demanding “FIFA-standard” hospitals, schools and public transport, and anarchists clashing with riot police outside the stadiums.

Ms Rousseff has tried to quiet discontent by hiring thousands of Cuban doctors and holding down bus fares. A strong performance by the national team under Felipe Scolari, a resilient manager, may cheer the public mood. But it would be surprising if the tournament passes entirely without protests. Even a Brazilian victory might have little bearing on October’s presidential election, in which Ms Rousseff will seek a second term.

Ever since the 1964 Tokyo Olympics heralded Japan’s post-war recovery, leaders have seen staging big sports events as a way to announce their prowess to the world. That view was but-

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finished by successful Olympics in Seoul (1988), Barcelona (1992) and Beijing in 2008 (China’s “coming-out party”). But as Brazil’s experience will show, in an era of austerity and social media hosting sports events has become a risky business, as likely to damage reputations as to boost them.

President Vladimir Putin will find this out in January at the winter Olympics in Sochi, whose \$50 billion price-tag makes them the most expensive in history; Vancouver spent only \$6 billion in 2010. Far from signalling Russia’s renaissance, Sochi will be seen as a monument to corruption; media coverage will be dominated by protests against Russia’s intolerance of gays (unless Mr Putin deflects criticism by pulling off an unlikely peace deal in Syria). The Asian games, starting in September in Incheon, will provide a platform for animal-rightsists to protest over Koreans’ fondness for eating dogs.

The most recent Commonwealth games, held in Delhi in 2010, were memorable only for unfinished facilities, disgruntled athletes and tummy bugs. Nevertheless Alex Salmond, Scotland’s first minister, will hope that the sight of victorious athletes draped in the blue and white Saltire at the Commonwealth games starting in Glasgow on July 23rd will fire Scots up to vote for independence from the United Kingdom in a referendum two months later. These games will doubtless be impeccably staged—Britain learnt a lot from the successful London Olympics of 2012. Even so, they will be of no help to Mr Salmond. Scottish athletes know that the United Kingdom is a bigger market in which to build a brand.

Citius, altius... spare us

The truth, to be whispered into democratic politicians’ ears before they contemplate bidding to stage a modern circus, is that sporting success almost never has any impact on the ballot box. Voters know that they are choosing people to make trains run on time, not to win gold medals or score goals. This cold reality is already sinking in. The three contenders to hold the 2020 Olympics (eventually awarded to Tokyo) was the smallest field since the 1980s. Vienna will not bid for 2028; in a referendum in March 2013, 72% voted against.

That leaves sheikhs, dictators and oligarchs as the most promising candidates to stage these jamborees. But then the risk is to the sports themselves. FIFA insanely awarded the 2022 World Cup to Qatar, a scrap of urban desert where summer temperatures can reach 50°C (122°F). It will move the tournament to mid-winter, and face compensation claims from domestic leagues and television companies. At least in 2014 the football will be in *o país do futebol*—the football country. ■

