

2 September 2014

## Land and Conflict in Brazil

Does concentrated land ownership lead to rural conflict and insurgency? Although inequality may seem like a recipe for unrest, Michael Albertus reminds us that there is an important variable to consider — the ability of large landowners to organize themselves and then suppress discontent.

By Michael Albertus for ISN

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There is a massive, albeit slow and grinding, conflict playing out in the Brazilian countryside. In the last 20 years there have been nearly 8,000 land invasions in rural areas staged by several million individuals. At the same time, more than 1,000 peasants and rural organizers have been assassinated in land-related disputes. In many circumstances, as with the famous case of Chico Mendes, landowners or the militias they fund and organize are directly responsible.

To staunch the unrest, Brazil's National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform has transferred nearly 70 million hectares of land, an area equivalent to the size of Texas, to 800,000 families that have petitioned for land. Most of this land has been expropriated, with compensation, from private owners. The remainder has come in the form of grants of public lands.

What is the root of this rural unrest? Apart from the fact that Brazil's demand-driven land reform creates incentives for additional rural conflict and land threats in the form of land invasions, many of those involved point to a more pernicious underlying factor: Brazil's highly lopsided structure of landholding. They have a point. At the time of democratization in 1985 the Gini coefficient of landholding was 0.86 (where 1 is perfect inequality and 0 perfect equality), one of the highest in the world. In 2006 the Gini coefficient was exactly the same. This highly skewed distribution of landholding, which Brazil shares in common with its Latin American neighbors, has roots in the creation of massive estates and trusts during colonization which were never systematically dismantled.

Scholars have long debated the role of land inequality in fuelling rural unrest. On the one hand, because access to land is the cornerstone of rural life, a skewed distribution of landholdings can fuel rural grievances and unrest. Yet on the other hand, the rural grievances and landlessness associated with land inequality often fail to translate into collective action among peasants given the steep barriers to organization in sparsely populated rural areas where landowners dominate many aspects of rural life and the rural workforce.

Statistical attempts to establish a relationship between landholding inequality and political violence have yielded inconclusive results, reflecting these counteracting effects. Whereas Bruce Russett's [seminal work](#) uncovered a positive link between land inequality and unrest, other scholars have found

[little systematic relationship](#).

### **The critical factor: landowner organization?**

In a [current study](#) on this relationship in Brazil, I develop a novel answer as to why a straightforward relationship between land inequality and rural conflict is elusive. I argue that the relationship between land inequality and unrest is a conditional one that depends on when inequality activates collective action among landowners rather than the landless. While rural smallholders and the landless face stiff headwinds to collective action, high land inequality typically does enable large landowners to act collectively. A small, wealthy landowning class is conducive to social coherence: landed families disproportionately intermarry, collaborate in business, and are in contact at exclusive social events.

The ability of large landowners to organize mediates the relationship between landholding inequality and rural unrest expressed in one of its most prevalent forms: land invasions. Land invasions in Brazil are typically well-organized and pre-planned incursions into large, unproductive estates by landless or land-poor agrarian workers. I consequently find that ad hoc invasions in municipalities with high landholding inequality are difficult for large landowners to protect against. There is thus a positive link between landholding inequality and isolated land invasions.

But because land reform allocation in Brazil is largely a demand-driven process, as in [neighboring Colombia](#) and [Venezuela](#) but in contrast to reforms such as in [Peru](#) or [Mexico](#), land grants result from invasions and therefore incentivize them. This yields substantial spillover effects whereby successful land reforms in a region lead to further land invasions in neighboring areas. These broader threats are more easily perceived and defended against. When the impulse among landowners to organize to repel invasions is triggered by nearby reforms that threaten to spill over into land invasions on their property, the link between land inequality and higher conflict flips: large landowners in highly unequal municipalities can effectively coordinate to repel an imminent threat of land invasions.

Common tactics to repel invasions include organized violence and intimidation, leveraging influence with the police or judiciary to break up squatter settlements and make land invasions more costly and difficult, campaigns of disinformation about the effects of land reform, and suppression of electoral support for the party most supportive of land reform (the Workers' Party, or PT). In one particularly egregious recent case, the son of Senator Ivo Cassol used a helicopter of the state government to shoot at a settlement of 200 families squatting on land near his property in Alta Floresta.

Two pieces of evidence help to demonstrate that landowner organization is the key mechanism repelling land invasions when regional reforms threaten to spill over into neighboring unrest. First, when landowners in municipalities under threat of land invasion have generated business and personal ties to members of the powerful congressional bloc representing rural interests (the *bancada ruralista*), a powerful sign of dense landowner business and kinship networks, they are systematically more likely to elide land invasions. Second, unequal municipalities that face a high land invasion threat are likely to lose vote share for the PT, the party most closely affiliated with land reform. This latter effect is likely due to the ability of landowners to [avail clientelism](#) in suppressing and swaying potential PT votes.

The findings from Brazil have implications for the developing world more broadly. Countries such as in Colombia, India, the Philippines, South Africa, Venezuela, and numerous other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America are characterized by highly skewed distributions of land ownership, and are plagued by rural unrest in forms such as organized land invasions, land squatting, protests, and rural assassinations. While there are strong incentives for the rural poor in many of these countries to attempt to seize underproductive land in unequal regions, large landowners typically have the wherewithal to block evident threats by leveraging political

connections, ties to local police, and private resources. This dangerous cocktail is a recipe for unrest, and may call for [land reform](#) if a lasting solution is to be found.

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[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

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