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## Land-Grabbing Mafias in the Brazilian Amazon

A key question that I kept returning to during fieldwork was, “Are there different sections within the Brazilian agribusiness sector?” This question refers to some parts of the agriculture and ranching sector being more “modern” while others were more “primitive.” The division here also reaches beyond just the technology applied in the practice of agriculture, as it extends into the sociopolitical arena, with the latter taking care of the dirty work of violent expulsions and the prior attempting to retain the public image of rule of law and rights respect for the international audiences. The answers to this question varied over the course of my interviews, with some interviewees arguing that yes, there are different facets, while others asserted that the relations of these groups are more intimate and closer than they would appear, as they rely on each other and are overlapping. The land grabbing by the primitive, latter group depends on the push of soybean plantations and ranches deeper into the Amazon for the land buyers, while the deforesting and violent actions and illegalities of the latter group suit the goals of the so-called modern agribusiness to gain access to cheap land and privatize state- and smallholder-occupied lands for large capitalists.

A significant part of the problem is the institutionalization of illegal land grabbing, ensured through legal loopholes and ambiguities. Over 60 percent of deforestation activities in the Amazon are linked to multiple forms of illegal acts: illegal logging, grilagem, and illegal forms of agriculture and ranching, which are connected and advance synchronically (Waisbich et al., 2022). The invasion and appropriation of public lands in the Amazon are crimes that precede the other illegal activities. Waisbich et al. (2022) argue that it is difficult to separately analyze the distinct deforesting economies or to combat these crimes individually. They call for a more comprehensive and integrated approach to assess the profound causes of environmental crimes and their links with other types of illicit actions. The attack on human, territorial, and environmental rights defenders is systematic and seems to be a necessity for deforestation to advance, since resistance can

be effective in halting deforesting investments on many frontiers and by several means (Kröger, 2020c). Since 2009, of the more than 300 registered murders of environmental defenders in the Amazon, only 14 cases were brought to court, and only 1 resulted in a judgment. None of the over 40 cases of attacks and threats that did not lead to death were judged. It is typical of the police to refuse to register threats or nonlethal attacks. According to Human Rights Watch (2019), this lack of effective action shows the impunity reigning in the region, the systematic failure of Brazil to investigate and make the illegal loggers and *grileiros* responsible for their violence in the Amazon. The situation has worsened dramatically since the 2016 coup against Dilma Rousseff, and especially after Bolsonaro's 2018 election. In 2020 and 2022, under the Bolsonaro regime, the yearly rates of cases of violence against Brazil's rural populations were the highest since 1985 (Comissão Pastoral da Terra, 2023). The Bolsonaro regime was built on the power and support of extractivist regionally dominant political economies (RDPEs) and provided them with national- and international-level discursive support and governmental backup, by making the actions of environmental authorities and activists from "outside" much harder. According to Brito et al. (2021), the current Brazilian federal- and state-level land laws are inadequate and have even boosted deforestation and illegal land grabbing. They identify six key processes through which the current land laws increase Amazon deforestation: (1) continued permission of public land occupations; (2) giving private land titles for deforested or mostly forested areas; (3) nonexistent requirements for environmental recuperation before handing out titles; (4) lack of monitoring of environmental obligations after titling; (5) subsidies for titled properties' price without guarantees for sustainable land use; and (6) acts by public land institutes that do not follow legal priorities. Land mafias thrive in this institutional context. To redeem these ills, Brito et al. (2021) recommend the following changes to land regularization policies: (1) establish a time limit for occupation of public lands and prohibit offering titles in areas where environmental laws are broken; (2) demand market prices for public lands that are sold and focus on sustainable uses; (3) forbid the titling of recently deforested estates and demand environmental law conformity before and after titling; (4) establish concessions without rights for deforestation for mostly forested estates; and (5) conduct ample consultation before privatizing public lands.

These measures, when properly applied, would likely be enough to strongly curb the possibilities of land mafias to deforest. This is because a key problem is the recurring legalization of illegally grabbed lands by the Congress and executive power, which are both in the hands of the powerful Rural Caucus. For example, in 2017, President Michel Temer sanctioned Provisional Measure 759/2016, which evolved into Law 13,465 that favored land grabbing and speculation. This allowed large land grabbers to get titles for their illegal claims for

negligible amounts that were well below market values and regularized the illegal sale of settlement lands (Carrero et al., 2020). The law also allowed greater possibilities for illegal land grabbing, for example, by increasing the size of rural estates allowed for regularization from 1,500 to 2,500 hectares (Sauer, 2019). This eased the creation of *latifundios* and increased deforestation through grilagem (Observatório do Clima, 2017). Bolsonaro further opened new law projects for allowing grilagem. It is precisely this political setting that allowed for legalizing illegal land grabs, which in turn made ranching in forest frontiers “highly profitable” (Carrero et al., 2020: 980). Worryingly, this has opened new frontiers, for example in the Arc of Deforestation, which is now expanding to the south of Amazonas state. Furthermore, there are novelties in the expansion drivers as the criminal aspects gain more strength. Carrero et al. (2020) found that now the key actors at the local level are wealthy people and groups, who launder money by buying settlement lots illegally. This setting encourages the mafia-like dynamics that I observed in several parts of Pará, such as the Santarém region (Kröger, 2024). Worryingly, these land mafia dynamics seem to be rapidly penetrating deeper into the sociopolitical fabric of Brazil.

There are particular people and groups involved in the illegal and violent grabbing of land using rural terror, threats, and hired guns. These land mafias have been called by many names, including “rural militias,” a term used by Human Rights Watch (2019) to refer to groups organized by large farmholders and others who are involved in illegal logging to protect their illegal businesses. These organized groups serve as a type of private security corps, which uses violence and intimidation to safeguard their criminal operations. These farmholders and loggers are essentially criminal networks that have major impacts on deforestation and a strong influence on local politics through their economic clout. Essentially, they are comparable with urban militias. They hire armed men, including from IBAMA and police officers, who then use the cars, weapons, and uniforms of the police. They threaten and attack inhabitants who oppose their criminal activities, as documented by Human Rights Watch.

### **Deforesting Mafias in Southwestern Pará**

In November 2019, I did field research along the BR-163, traveling by car from Cuiabá to Santarém with a reporter from Finland’s national broadcasting company, Yleisradio Oy, a driver, and a fixer. This was a quite intense period to be on the road as it was during the Bolsonaro era and at a time when many forest fires were being purposely lit, especially in the towns and rural areas we were visiting. We saw many fires as we proceeded, lit by land grabbers to claim these lands, to start producing soybeans after a period with pasture. With flames reaching the



Figure 3.1 Fighting against the fires being set in the Amazon. Santarém, Brazil, November 2023. Photo by author.

recently paved roadsides, we stopped to film the fires and ask the locals what was happening (see Figure 3.1).

In one such area, between Novo Progresso and Itaituba, we stopped to film a new forest fire. Our driver was nervous that we asked to stop, as he had passed the same route earlier with other film crews. Pointing to the fire, he said, “It is not advisable to stay close to these things for a long time.” I asked why. “The people are ignorant.... It can result in problems for us. I believe that [you can stay for] ten, twenty minutes maximum. Because, in the last few days, people are reacting in a way that, here is the shotgun law, in Pará.” I asked if this was illegal. Our driver, who had also worked as a gold digger and a soybean truck driver in the region for a long time, pointed to the fire and answered, “It’s illegal, but that’s their admission,” referring to the fire and us recording it as the proof of the crime. “To avoid a future problem, evidence, a person is thus capable of shooting us at the spot,” our driver explained. They are most worried about the local press putting the video on the evening news, which could create immediate problems for them. He continued, “Let’s leave before someone takes photos of our car and that makes things more complicated for us.”

A bit earlier in 2019 a group of reporters had been forced to stay in their hotel in Novo Progresso, rounded up by gunmen, and then escorted away from the town by outside federal forces. Several people on the road also explained to us that if the police arrived, they were likely to blame us for starting the fires because we wanted to film them. At the time, and still, a common belief/framing among the pro-Bolsonaro

people, including police and soybean farmers, is that NGOs and foreigners lit the fires in the Amazon. I asked our driver, who often saw these fires while driving the region, about the dynamics of using fire. “The first year they cut the forest ... this felling must have taken about thirty days to dry. Then, if no one [the authorities] comes to notify ... then he sets fire. [After a] few more days, they plant the area. If someone comes to notify, they don’t work it anymore, but stop.” I asked how a fire setter then becomes the *dono* (the de facto owner/controller of the area) “Because no one showed up to say [don’t set a fire] they become dono ... then he produces a little bit on the land to claim ownership.” At this moment, the fire was getting closer to our car and I asked the driver to move us further away from the flames. Our driver was getting even more worried now, asking us to leave, but our fixer, an experienced guide who was setting up the interviews for the reporter, said he would manage the situation if someone came. The driver was worried the land grabbers could arrive, with guns, which he had witnessed, and responded to the fixer:

For a guy to shoot at you, they come at the right time, and that’s it. That’s the end. I already saw this.... We from the big cities, we can have arguments [dialogue] with each other, but the people from here are  *muito chucas*  [super rude], you cannot even imagine, especially when they are armed. When we stopped to film there [referring to a previous time he traveled with a Japanese film crew, filming a tractor pulling down trees], the “guys” came on top of us, man. They would not let us film, no.

At this moment, a man arrived, whom the driver said must be the dono, “Call him [the driver asked me to fetch the reporter], let’s get going, since if two or three more arrive ... WhatsApp has already been used to notify the large farmers.” However, we stayed on and started talking to the man, who told us he had been living there since 1974 and had a 364-hectare farm, mostly ranchland, on the other side of the road. He explained that the fire on the other side of the road had been lit by a person from Itaituba, who returned to the city, letting the fire do its work of burning until exhaustion to clear the land. He argued that some clearcutters would need to be investigated, those who “deforest too much,” but not the ones like him who “only fells [*sic*] 2 or 3 hectares per year,” but “those felling 500 hectares is perverse, it’s too much ... since they do not even need it.” After this talk, we also interviewed others living close by and then continued driving, leaving the fire and land grabbers on the roadside (see Figure 3.2).

This episode was telling of the atmosphere and feeling of fear, threats, and killings amid which Amazonians live. While this time we did not have trouble, there was anxiety. This is because there are “land mafias” operating in many parts of rural Brazil, especially in the deforesting frontiers. After filming that fire next to the BR-163, we traveled to the soybean port of Miritituba by the Tapajós River to film the huge exporting facilities from the river, and also the truck lines and the vessels on shore. These crossed the river to the city of Itaituba, continuing from this gold





Figure 3.2 Illegal grabbing and burning of an area of forest by the BR-163 that would subsequently be cleared. Pará, between Moraes de Almeida and Itaituba, November 25, 2019. Photo by author.

mining, ranching, and deforestation hub west along the Transamazônica Highway. We drove a couple of hours west on Transamazônica and parked on the shore of Tapajós. A small boat on the Tapajós River, steered by a Munduruku Indigenous man, arrived to pick us up for a visit to their *aldeia* (a village; a term often used for Indigenous villages in Brazil). We wanted to see what was happening on the other side of the national parks, large conservation areas, and Indigenous lands that were being invaded from the side of BR-163 where we witnessed several fires.

In the Munduruku *aldeia*, we were invited on a patrolling trip up the Jamanxim River with the Cacique (as Indigenous chiefs are called in Brazil), a drone driver, and two others from the Sawré Muybu village, where we were staying. Soon, we encountered a recent logging road and saw illegal gold-mining barges excavating the riverbanks for gold (see Figure 3.3).

This process results in leaked mercury, mud, and silt getting into the water, which contaminates the clear waters of the Tapajós, turning them muddy. In addition to the damage from the gold mining, the forest river was choked with boatloads of men shipping acai palm hearts illegally from the Mundurukus' forest. We stopped by the logging road entrance. The Cacique explained that it is difficult to



Figure 3.3 The Munduruku search patrol encountered and tried to break an illegal wood barge on the Jamanxim River, November 2019. Photo by author.

negotiate with the illegal loggers and miners, which is the reason they normally come with a larger group and in traditional warlike attire, “even if we go to [just] discuss with them, suddenly they can receive us with violence.” I asked whether he had ever been threatened: “I have already suffered from threats. We go to the city [Itaituba] and do not know if we will return. The ‘guys’ come with a helmet, no one know who that person is.” From the small boat, we also saw areas that had been deforested on Indigenous lands by the Jamanxim River, which the Cacique explained have been captured by *grileiros*, who are selling the lots.

After the visit to the Munduruku lands, we talked to the environmental officers in Itaituba. They explained the illegal lotting phenomenon, which is common in the Amazon. They referred to the president of the Municipal Council of Jacareacanga, whom they said is given incentives to expand ranching in the region by “bringing people to occupy here. People arrived, demarcated a large area, made small lots for sale.” In this sense, leading politicians seem to be operating the initial land-grabbing schemes, bringing in others who bring arms, fire, cows, fences, and create false title deeds, selling these to still others. The ICMBio officers explained that these dynamics are already established along the BR-163, while in Transamazônica the phenomenon of “people grabbing land illegally (*grilagem*)”

is more recent. This grilagem is done through the cartórios, notary offices that are public concessions:

[The grileiros] just makes a contract, which I can do also now on the computer, saying that I am selling to you, you are buying from me, and bring this to cartório to register. But there is no documentation that there was a detachment of that area, which is public, for a private [owner], the state did not concede that area to anyone to be sold, it continues to be state land. But there are private people who sell these areas independently of the legality. This happened also in these areas that were opened and deforested now, people arrived to buy and sell, or it was just one person that clearcut everything, also this exists. After deforesting 1000 hectares, he says that all is his, he does not necessarily turn this into lots and sell but says “here all is mine.” But we have people who come here to our office [ICMBio] to get information, saying: “look, I want to buy a farm.” So, he comes here to see where this farm is and it is in the middle of a conservation unit, and we say, “this is public land, you cannot buy this area.” This person is using it in bad faith.

What the official meant by bad faith is in reference to land grabbers using the information of where public land is located to target these areas for land grabbing, as they are perceived as “free” areas for them to appropriate, since the inspection of irregularities is so sporadic. As politicians seem to be running similar schemes in many places, we also asked federal officials in Itaituba about the city mayor, Valmir Climaco, who is one of the largest landholders in the area and has been reported to be among the top 10 deforesters in Brazil. His holdings include large ranches, gold mines, and other decades-old deforesting operations. These officials, whose names and positions I will not reveal to protect them from the potential of negative repercussions, explained that “the mayor already admitted that he did a lot of illegal work here. He is a *madeireiro* [logger], he has a sawmill.” They also explained how a FUNAI team (FUNAI is a government body that carries out policies related to Indigenous peoples) arrived in the area to study Indigenous lands inside a conservation area where there were already illegal farms: “One of the farms was of the mayor ... then there was a declaration [by him] ... ‘these people [from FUNAI] need to be received with a bullet,’ so the Prosecution Service filed an action of administrative improbity [against the mayor].” We managed to also interview the mayor himself, although only after hours of waiting and repeated pleas at his office. We visited one of his rural houses and some of his ranches along the Transamazônica Highway. I had a discussion with him, and then after he had left, I continued with his farm manager, especially talking about his ranching business. Interestingly, the farm manager gave quite different answers than the mayor, for example saying they had deforested as recently as 2019, which was the same year as we were speaking, while the mayor insisted that they have not engaged in those practices for years. Based on my prior experience with interviewing and doing field research on the personnel of pulp, mining, plantations, and other rural enterprises, this kind of discrepancy between directors/owners and middle-level



managers and technicians is very common, with often more reliable information coming from the field operation personnel. The mayor stated that “the ox gives me most profit.” I asked what the size of his property was, to which he answered, “40 thousand hectares in total. I have three *garimpos* [illegal gold-mining sites]. I produce 60 kilograms of gold per month.” However, these figures should be taken with a grain of salt, as in other parts of the interview he gave different figures and his farm manager later contradicted many of his claims. However, whatever the exact figures, it is safe to say that his operations are extensive. In addition, there is an indication that they could be nefarious beyond just the land grabbing; for example, an airplane with 500 kilograms of cocaine was found on his property by the police, but he swore he did not know anything about it or where it had come from. In any case, these kinds of mayor-ranchers, who brag about their violent pasts and are seen to still actively make threats, yet win elections and continue without punishments, are emblems of the kind of ranching, logging, gold, and land mafia-type people and groups who operate in the Amazon.

I also interviewed federal, civil, environmental, and other police officers, chiefs, detectives, prosecutors, and responsible government, state, and judicial officials operating in the deforestation areas; for example, in different parts of the BR-163 and in Brasília, among other places. In Novo Progresso, prior to talking with Mayor Valmir Climaco, I talked with Conrado Wolfring, a civil police chief who served for a long time in many of the most problematic clearcutting hotspots in Pará. Wolfring explained to me “That mayor of Itaituba, Valmir, he made fortunes with devastation. And worst, already for two times there was an airplane with drugs on his farm. And he defends the erroneous things, so it becomes difficult....” Wolfring explained how Climaco made these fortunes quickly, “many people told that he ordered to kill to capture land. This is common here, a guy sees a beautiful land and orders to kill, goes there, kills the guy and he is the dono now, saying: ‘I am the dono now.’”

These land mafia-type dynamics are common in Pará’s deforesting frontiers. Wolfring explained these dynamics in Novo Progresso to me in detail, at the civil police quarters where he showed me also the small and stuffy jail where he had a few dozen inmates. The entrance to the cell system was not pleasant and was guarded by a ferocious German Shepherd police dog. During our time together, we drove around town in his patrol car, talking about the local dynamics. Several hours later, he got a call that somebody had committed a suicide by hanging; he asked if I wanted to join him to check the scene. He said deaths in different forms had become a daily task for him, a routinized part of his work. When I asked about the causes of deforestation, he explained:

In this region [along the BR-163 and the Transamazônica in Pará] all the land is of the union, and all was conquered by *grilagem*. They [the *grileiros*] occupy violently. We have rich people in the region who are rich as they killed a lot of people, to take their lands ...

there were many deaths and still are due to land. So, people come wanting to grab land by force, due to the lack of presence of police in all places.

In terms of illegal deforestation, the police chief explained why it is hard to police these practices, “Unfortunately the deforestation is very large. We have a lot of illegal wood leaving from the region, and a lot of [police] information [is leaked] via radio, the criminal organization has communication by radio and knows all the movements of IBAMA before they arrive.”

In this setting, there are not enough police to protect the environmentalist or human rights advocates who are currently operating or want to operate in the region. It is not only activists who are killed and threatened, but also police officials who are just trying to do their work. Often police who are too active investigating deforestation are in danger themselves as the mafia has even infiltrated the ranks of the police. Wolfring explained that for the police to be able to give protection

is difficult as our police has a low effect, and we also have corruption inside the police. There are police officials giving information to them, doing wrong things, it is not possible to trust in all. So, we have people inside the police involved in the wrong things and who earn with this – and this needs to be combated.

Previously Wolfring had worked in the town of Placas, along the Transamazônica Highway, where he uncovered a major deforestation and mafia-like organization. He shared that when politicians intervened in his work, “I went with IBAMA to combat a *madeireiro* there in Placas, and the politician said to me to not mess [with the illegal logger], the mayor talked to me, people from the police also talked to me not to mess [with the illegal logger]. The pressure is large.” He also knew of several other cases where his colleagues, who had tried to retain the rule of law in the region, had been reprimanded and then moved to another municipality. He was also forced to move from Placas to Novo Progresso after uncovering the deforestation. He explained that “there are many *grande* people involved in erroneous things. A millionaire *fazendeiro*, who was buying stolen machinery, became so influential that the delegate of Castelo dos Sonhos said to me: ‘If I arrest him, I do not know if I will stay here, I can be transferred.’”

Another general issue the police face is there are too few police officers and they are not well equipped enough. For example, in Novo Progresso there were only two police cars, each with three police officers. These two cars were expected to patrol 400 kilometers along the BR-163. There were only six civil police officials for this huge forest and land expanse, which is one of the places in Brazil with the most criminal activity. In the absence of the state’s monopoly on violence – considered by Max Weber as one key requisite to define when a state exists – and rule of law, crime continues to flourish. It has been shown time and again that the current police forces and actions are insufficient to quell the killings and other crimes.

### Crime and Impunity in the Amazon

I have discussed this setting of illegality and the establishment of land mafias in detail, as the ranching-grabbing system is increasingly linked to illegal trade, drug trafficking, and money laundering. Interviews with law enforcement officials made clear how these activities explain a large part of the dynamic with pasture creation by fire, gold mining, and linked businesses. For example, the local police are almost powerless against the illegalities in the south of Pará by *grandes* (big men): “They launder money, a lot of money.” Wolfring explained that they kill and bury the corpses on the captured land. He related how the big mafia bosses “Stay in the countryside, at times they stay in the city. Sometimes they are from other states and come here to devastate, who already have a farm in Mato Grosso, come here.” He said that the peasants and smallholders do not act in this way, they do not destroy, but rather the trees they cut are to support their own subsistence agriculture. In other words, while the peasants do deforest in a limited way, they are not the key cause of the deforesting RDPE. In the land mafias in this region, colonists from southern Brazil, with origins in Europe, especially Eastern Europe, whom the police chief called *polacos brancos* (white Polish people) are key actors:

Last year there was a sound of gunfire [coming from a place in Novo Progresso], and a few *polacos brancos* ... said “police cannot come here.” They would not let police there. There was even an airplane runway, a drug plantation there. There was a large police force acting, killings ... they [*polacos brancos*] said even that it is dangerous [for the police to enter], but all remained the same [after the large police force entering, despite threats]. After 2 or 3 were killed, things calmed, but did not change, the guy who is there is a *bandido* [criminal], *bandidagem* [criminal actions] continues at large, he has a stolen threadmill machine ...

The machine the police chief referred to is a piece of very expensive equipment, which can make a fortune quite quickly for those who steal it. While these thefts are investigated by the civil police, they also are combating the network of criminal activities around deforestation. In the episode related, even though outside police forces were brought in, and some people were killed in the shootings, the result was only a slight calming of the activity. The criminals were not captured and the stolen machine were not recovered. Wolfring explained that a key reason for the situation is that, due to corruption and mafia infiltration, the state and the mafia are becoming enmeshed to a substantial degree:

There are wrong people involved [in the mafias], there are government people, they do not let you do your police work, they impede you. At times, even our chiefs of the police do not want you to get involved, do not let us do our work, do not want us to arrest a *madeireiro*, and all, as he does not like this ... as he is receiving ...

There is widespread political pressure as the politicians themselves can be key mafia members: “The *madeireiros* buy people involved in politics, they have

influence, and they try to elect a mayor for them to be able to do whatever they want.”

This situation, with land mafias dominating the political, social, and territorial aspects of deforesting frontiers, has affected the land, the environment, and human rights activists. In 2019, Dona Ivete Bastos, the president of the Rural Workers’ Union (STTR) in Santarém, explained to me the situation is created by the state’s failure to offer security. She had personally received death threats several times and was under police protection:

Those who receive threats leave the struggle. There are some who die in the struggle, and others who flee. There are leaders who do not want to participate anymore. Recently our *companheiros* [activist fellows] in Pará fell and the organized crime has been a shame. The killing of leaders, rural workers of family agriculture.... Most of those imprisoned are *pistoleiros*, the *mandantes* [those ordering the killings] remain free. In 2017 there happened many massacres in this region and despite a lot of denunciation, the involvement of the military police, it is not enough. I was threatened since I defended one side, the side of rural farmers and family agriculture. We are facing the people of *grande latifundio* [big landholders], of soya, the *madeiros* ... the big businessmen who were already here and were grabbing land illegally. They became very irritated, did these massacres, burned houses, expelled workers, and despite this did not want that anyone denounces them.

This situation makes resistance dangerous and increasingly difficult, as leaders leave or are killed. This situation was amplified during the Bolsonaro government, which caused resistance movements like Brazil’s Landless Movement (MST) to strategically avoid open land occupations to protect the activists in its cadres. Dona Ivete was shocked by the situation in November 2019, under Bolsonaro:

This government is opening now [possibilities for illegalities and deforestation], the police also already killed many leaders at the behest of *latifundio*. And now, they put a law that a police who kills will be relieved, saying it was legitimate defense. Now each *fazendeiro* can have eight arms to face the worker, and the Bolsonaro government also made a law to take *posseiros* [“squatters” or peasants who possess land rights but not documents]<sup>1</sup> off land by the National Force.

The climate was so tense that even the people making documentaries about these struggles were threatened, such as a couple from Brasília making a documentary with Dona Ivete in the Santarém region: “This couple who made this documentary with me are in Brasília already for months, and it is message after message that they receive saying they will kill them by any means.” The documentary reveals the

<sup>1</sup> According to Welch (2009: 150), “The term *posseiro* ... is used to distinguish those who possess but do not own or have title to land, and it is used exclusively to describe those who are smallholders and thus precariously located in the political economy. (A large landholder without title is a *grileiro*, another negative term that is used exclusively by advocates of agrarian reform.) The more aggressive agricultural capitalism, expanding into less densely populated areas, the more *posseiros* had to be cleared away.”

illegality of land claims in the region and how public institutions are not properly doing their inspection work: “Look, most of them are doing a Cadastro Ambiental Rural [CAR], the INCRA [National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária)] also legalizes, the IBAMA pretends not to see these things. They buy an area, destroy all.” The reference here to IBAMA and INCRA was true especially during the Bolsonaro regime, when their officials were de facto forbidden to try to interfere in the crimes in Amazon. In the longer timeframe, as Police Chief Wolfring explained, IBAMA “is fining all the time, but does not catch all the cases, only about 10 percent or 20 percent. A lot of people are devastating, there are many people who made a fortune with wood, they are deforesting many areas.” Even if the criminals are caught, “they do not stay for long in the prison, these people have a lot of money.”

Besides the impunity described, another problem that creates this situation in which land mafias can thrive is linked to weak documentation, which falls under what the state should be handling. It would be more difficult to get documents in *grilagem* that would stand under scrutiny if the various types of land records were systematically united by the state, which would be possible according to professor and lawyer Girolamo Treccani, who is a leading expert on *grilagem* (interviewed by me in November 2023, Belém). Yet, the government does not do enough in the process of documenting properties and communal areas. Wolfring, the police chief, also agreed that the issue could be resolved by a shift in political will, “Because by *grilagem* it is difficult to get documents, people do not have documents, they only have [their] *posse* [usage rights], only have contract of buying and selling, and the government is also absent, it could hasten this, to have the documentation.”

Next, I will discuss in more detail the national-scale origins and linkages of land mafias and rural paramilitaries in Brazil, especially their links to the top levels of political power in the capital. This explains how an RDPE of land mafias who are actively and openly grabbing land has spread from southern Brazil to the Amazon since the 1980s. These cases illustrate the dynamics by which federal-level changes can expand RDPE systems to the national scale and to other parts of the same jurisdiction, polity, and political system.

### **Agribusiness Roots and Links of Land Mafias in Brazil**

The rise of land mafias can be seen as revolving around the creation of the União Democrática Ruralista (UDR [Democratic Association of Ruralists]). Another organization with an even bigger role is the Rural Caucus and its Ministers of Agriculture such as Blairo Maggi, Tereza Cristina, and others. It should be noted that, unlike the members of UDR and other rural paramilitary forces, these ministers and others at the ministerial level are not normally directly linked to the most



extreme forms of cruelty; however, they are given nicknames such as “queen of the chainsaw” and “queen of poison.” UDR’s director, Nabhan Garcia, can be analyzed as an emblem in this violent land-grabbing process as he is a key ideologue and someone who creates institutional ties by connecting large landholders with politicians and *pistoleiros*. The Bolsonaro regime named Garcia the director of a new institute for land tenure affairs. Garcia was the key interlocutor between the Bolsonaro election campaign and the rural elites, a role which secured him the new state director position (Maciel & Pires, 2022). This “gang of Nabhan,” as several of my informants described this political-paramilitary group, characterizes the ways in which illegal and violent land grabbers operate in Brazil. Garcia first gained support among *latifundio* for forming paramilitary groups for them in order to enact organized violence against the rural poor between the 1960s and 1980s, when the dictatorship, backed by the United States, was hunting down the activists, Indigenous peoples, and peasants who wanted to defend their lands. An expert informant explained the history and workings of this “gang of Nabhan” to me in November 2019 in Brasília:

Nabhan was a protagonist of a large process of land grabbing in Pontal do Paranapanema, which was the agricultural frontier in the Brazilian sector in the 1960s. So, what is happening today in the Amazon happened in Paraná and Southwest of São Paulo in the 1960s, this entry of capital and appropriation of public land. So Nabhan is a grand “player” [in the political economy of land grabbing and rural issues].

I asked whether this “gang of Nabhan” could be identified as the group and sector of the political economy that specializes in *grilagem*. In 2019, I received an answer to this question during an interview on top of the Congress building in Brasília with two experts closely embedded with the parliament as consultants and ex-secretaries of ministries (A and B respectively):

A – Yes, [they are] specialized in the primitive appropriation of land and land resources, then of course livestock and such, but the first operation is the appropriation of public capital. They are after land. The Nabhan gang is there to carry out the great attack on the lands of the Indians.

B – of killing Indians. And– yeah, his business is the land. Different, for example, from the other soybean operators who are there in the commodity markets and watching prices on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange.

I then asked how the Nabhan gang works to achieve these goals – do they have connections with the political power in Brasília, which allow them to act like this?

A – certainly with political power but the function is also in the lobby area and has the spectrum of the field of threat and violence. And that is how he emerged as an important figure in this field of agrarian conflicts, territorial identifications by land of the sector of agriculture and livestock in the Mato Grosso do Sul. So, he appears in this field of disputes

for land there and has a history of aggression and violence against the Indigenous peoples of Mato Grosso do Sul, the Guarani, Unguiá, and the Caiová.

B – including the relationship with militias and financing for the acquisition of weapons, this type of operation. And now at this moment, although he is not the president of INCRA, he is a subsecretary of the land tenure institute, but at the end of the day, [in this position] he is the one who is putting the cards on the table, he who is playing the political game of nominations and positions within. So, we have had three presidents of INCRA so far [during less than one year of the Bolsonaro regime, by November 2019] and this change of presidents is largely due to the vision that Nabhan has on what a president in INCRA should do. So, in his view, the big issue is the land question, the issue of land titling, he thinks the process is slow, bureaucratic and what is at issue now is this issue of self-declaration for land regularization. He wants to drive this change through, and that would certainly be a drive for deforestation, if you use a little [comparing with the recent history of] the CAR registry in Brazil, which is self-declaratory, then if you input [even] a little of that CAR logic across the land domain region, then that's a mistake.

Brazil's CAR registry is a notorious example of how land grabbers utilize purportedly positive legal measures for environmental protection to extend their illicit land occupations and deforestation. According to an evaluation report of the public policy on environmental regularization presented to the Environment Commission (CMA) of Brazil's Senate, the CAR has been used to legitimize the illegal occupation of public lands (grilagem) throughout the country, especially in the Amazon region (Agência Senado, 2022). Overlapping records of non-destined public forests (FPND), Indigenous lands (TI), and conservation units (UC) revealed that, by the end of 2020, more than 14 million hectares of public lands were illegally registered as private property, with 2,789 CAR registrations superimposed on Indigenous lands, which totaled more than 380,500 hectares (Agência Senado, 2022). Carrero et al. (2022) found, in a large study on the current hotspot of Amazon deforestation, the frontier of the Southern Amazonas state, that 90.5 percent of the CAR land claims were noncompliant with Brazilian law and 45.8 percent were in protected areas.

The land-grabbing mafia has its roots in the long-standing methods of illegally dispossessing people during period where more state protection was given to peasants, thus increasing land conflicts: first during the 1930s–1960s in São Paulo's Pontal region, where landholdings had been mostly obtained “on the basis of frauds and the law of the strongest” (Fuhrmann, 2019). During this period, the land grabbers became accustomed to using violent methods to evict Indigenous and peasant populations from the state lands they were stealing, one of their *coronels* even using the motto, “Earth soaked in blood is good soil” (Fuhrmann, 2019). It is important to note here that the state has often tried to resist this grabbing of public lands and has several times tried to regain the stolen lands. In one of these periods, in the 1980s, when agrarian reform pressures were resurfacing after the dictatorship

period had ended, the land-grabbing group created the UDR to fight land reform laws and stop them from being executed by the state. During the 1980s and 1990s, the UDR helped to create and support new rural paramilitary organizations, which were based on the large Brazilian cities' drug trafficking, other illegal activities, and organized crime structures (Fuhrmann, 2019). Since then, these organizations have spread throughout Brazil – both the land-grabbing paramilitaries linked to large landholders and the organized criminal groups, the latter primarily a result of the dictatorship era and its legacy of a prison system that in essence maximizes the potential for creating organized criminal groups within the horrific conditions of overcrowded prisons. Brazil is the world leader in organized crime violence, with approximately 60,000 people violently killed each year due to these organized crime conflicts. The two most important gangs are the Comando Vermelho, originally from Rio de Janeiro, and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC [First Capital Command]) from São Paulo, both of which have brought governments to their knees and control large parts of the society and economy. However, there are also newer and even more violent groups. During the Bolsonaro era and especially since 2019, organized crime has expanded into the Amazon deforestation business (for the purposes of money laundering and portfolio diversification) and territorial control of drug-trafficking routes.

The fact that Nabhan Garcia, the president of UDR, became the responsible state powerholder for protecting the rights and distributing land access to landless people in Brazil demonstrates the kind of paramilitary or mafia-like organizations' successful embedding and production – or even capturing – of the state. Thus, during the Bolsonaro era, land grabs could be seen as a product of differing varieties of mafia–state actor groupings and mafia members within the government. According to Fuhrmann (2019), henchmen are often recruited from other states of Brazil and are active and ex-military police and firemen. While these groups engage in blatantly illegal activities, for example, carrying and using automatic rifles, which is not generally allowed in Brazil, they frame landless movements such as the MST as “criminal organizations.” With these framings, the paramilitary groups attempt to portray the acts of proponents of the workers' class as illegal, while implying that their own actions are legal. When taking power in 2019, Garcia promised to “clear up land issues in Brazil.” With this state-legal backing, it is no wonder that all sorts of armed dispossession processes expanded rapidly across vast Brazilian territories, especially in the Amazon, where the use of arms was common even before the start of the Bolsonaro regime.

It is important to emphasize, based on my expert interviews, that while the operating logics and methods of these land mafias seem to have spread across Brazil, there are varying nodes or regional cores of illegal land grabbing that may not be explicitly connected to one organized economy or politics. Several people from

an expert organization studying these networks explained in an interview to me that the BR-163 seems to have one such “core,” but they did not think it is a national-scale mafia organization and, if there was, they did not know the exact size of the network or who was within its ranks. A research NGO coordinator from Brasília (whom I will not name due to security reasons) explained to me in March 2022 that it is difficult and dangerous to even attempt to do research on these mafias, due to threats and acts of violence against those prepared to bring their activities to light. Thus, there has not been much research on them:

We try there in the south of the Amazon [to do this research] – we have some ideas and hypotheses but there are people [of the NGO] who have been there for 10 or 15 years, so we know more or less who the [criminal] people are. But trying to want [to decipher] this network is a big effort, it’s no joke. It is complex, and in each place, there is a certain type of reciprocity that is not national. Currently, for the south of the Amazon you have a group, and the one from Pará is possibly another and in Rondônia another, they operate according to similar ideologies but not that the operations are connected. Mato Grosso do Sul also has another group that finances itself, they finance the movement themselves. So, I think there is a localized question despite expressing a similar idea. But not so that the operational logics of this ideal to materialize are given in an organized way at the national level. The question of these networks of illegality, I think there is a regional issue too: he may be operating in Pará to have his space for operationalization of illegality there, but it is not necessarily connected with the Rondônia gang or with the South of Amazon.

Another informant emphasized that even though the gang actions may not be nationally coordinated and planned, or even be connected to UDR explicitly, the characterization of this “sector” of Brazilian agribusiness as the “gang of Nabhan” is relevant. Her account of the recent expansion and consolidation of land mafias emphasizes the role of the class inequalities that have continued since colonial times:

I think that mainly the UDR issue, you have one thing that is the direction of the UDR, and it represents the archaic rural oligarchy of Brazil that has been in power in Brazil since Colonial Brazil. So, when you get the families of the hereditary captaincies, and it goes on making a connected line until today you find several descendants of these families who are still part of the rural oligarchy present in Brazil.

Besides this class relation, the mafias are also connected by cultural ideals, for example, the stereotypical strongmen images, like that of Nabhan Garcia.

I think it’s a cultural thing, the most archaic people look, for example, [Ronaldo] Caiado [a key UDR leader, Goiania state rural elite leader and governor, reelected in 2022] as an ideal cultural identification. So, they [the different mafias] have a very strong cultural identification even though they do not have an institutional relationship. So, the procedures are not institutionally directed, but they are the same as UDRs.

In this sense, the UDR is an important emblem, a connecting mechanism between the social, symbolic, and physical space expansions of an assortment

of extractivisms. This process of withering resistance during the Bolsonaro era, due to the strength of the driving forces of deforesting speculation, shows how, when a region is turned into a capture zone for an extractivist sector such as the plantation–ranching–land-speculation sector, there is relatively little space for resistance to be maintained effectively or without drawing major opposition and violence. This is a sign that a political-economic system has managed to become dominant in a region. Once this threshold is passed, the laws of post-frontier property consolidation take hold of the region and the accumulation of key capital (social, economic, cultural, and symbolic) is passed to the new “owners of power,” which leads to concentration of control and rising inequalities.

Thus far, I have mostly discussed the driving and pulling causes of deforestation by the ranching-grabbing RDPE. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the several enabling factors, including the role of moral economic changes in the Amazon societies, that allow the expansion of ranching capitalism, and the role of Brazilian state and government as enablers.