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Corresponding author: Rodrigo Machado Vilani; Email: rodrigo.vilani@unirio.br

The first acts of Brazil's new president: Lula's new Amazon institutionalization

Rodrigo Machado Vilani¹, Lucas Ferrante² and Philip M Fearnside³

¹Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil; ²Departamento de Biologia, Universidade Federal do Amazonas (UFAM), Manaus, AM, Brazil and ³National Institute for Research in Amazonia (INPA), Manaus, AM, Brazil

Brief introduction

When Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva ('Lula') took office as Brazil's president in January 2023, he initiated a series of measures to reverse the damage that his predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, had done to Amazonia's environment and indigenous peoples and to the Brazilian government's agencies and policies that affect them. Lula faces challenges both from the legacy of Bolsonaro and from contradictions within his own administration. His first acts have potential benefits in inaugurating a new Amazon institutionalization to address some of the causes of the region's environmental and social problems. There has been a notable change in political discourse, but containing damaging trends will also require political changes. The Brazilian government has primary responsibility for containing environmental destruction and must devote the necessary political capital and financial resources to do so. Nevertheless, international assistance and influence will also be needed, including environmental criteria on imports of Brazilian commodities (a key tool for convincing Brazil's powerful agribusiness sector to support environmental controls).

Bolsonaro's setbacks

Throughout the 2019–2022 Bolsonaro administration, illegal Amazon deforestation and mining were stimulated both by Bolsonaro's rhetoric and by his many anti-environmental decrees. Brazil's federal government tolerated and even encouraged illegal activities, which reached record levels (Ferrante & Fearnside 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2022a, Deutsch 2021, Vilani et al. 2022).

Lula's promising policies

President Lula has established a new Amazonian institutionalization that is represented by the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change, the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples and the National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples (FUNAI), under the command of three female leaders – Marina Silva, Sônia Guajajara and Joenia Wapichana – who have long been engaged in struggles to challenge the appropriation of Amazonian territory. This addresses a longstanding need for including the demands, voices, histories and land-management practices of traditional peoples in decision-making processes (Acselrad 2004, Zhou & Oliveira 2010).

Upon his inauguration, Lula revoked a long series of his predecessor's decrees and replaced them with new decrees to restore the effectiveness of environmental controls, assure representation of traditional peoples and establish a new institutionalization. Details of these changes are given in the Supplementary Material (Section S1). The new ministries and other changes highlight constitutional prerogatives such as the recognition, guarantee and promotion of the rights of indigenous peoples, the demarcation of indigenous territories, the preservation, conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems, biodiversity and forests, the protection and restoration of native vegetation, access to land by traditional communities, agrarian reform and land-tenure regularization. Note, however, that both investments in restoration and land-tenure regularization can have indirect effects that are damaging to the environment (Fearnside 2023a). The decree creating the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples made the new ministry responsible for international agreements concerning indigenous peoples and explicitly mentioned International Labour Organization Convention 169 (Brazil PR 2023: Annex I, Chapter 1, Article 1, § vi). If Convention 169's requirement for prior consultation with indigenous peoples is complied with, it would represent a great improvement to both human rights and the environment in the Amazon (e.g., Ferrante et al. 2020, Ferrante & Fearnside 2021a).

Lula's current contradictions

Lula's own past record and recent statements indicate areas of concern for the current administration's future positions (Supplementary Material, Section S2). These include

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statements during his 2022 campaign vehemently defending his building the Madeira River dams and initiating the Belo Monte Dam, his support for legalizing illegal land claims on government land and his support for the BR-319 (Manaus–Porto Velho) highway project, provided only that state and local governments have a commitment to ‘preservation’ (Fearnside 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d). The environmental damage would be enormous if the plans for BR-319 and its side roads were to come to fruition (Fearnside 2022). The initial list of priority infrastructure projects for the Lula administration’s first 100 days, released on 18 January 2023, did not include BR-319, but after pressure from politicians from the state of Amazonas the list was amended 2 weeks later to include this notorious highway project (Brasil 2023).

The ministers appointed by Lula in his current administration include ruralists (large landholders and their representatives) such as Carlos Fávaro, the current minister of agriculture who, prior to his appointment, was the senator serving as rapporteur for PLS 510/2020 – a bill that would induce land grabbing and deforestation (Carrero et al. 2022). Fávaro was also part of the agriculture policy portion of Lula’s transition team, which also included Evandro Gussi, the president and chief executive officer of the Union of the Sugarcane and Bioenergy Industry (UNICA), who has long defended opening the Amazon to sugarcane plantations (Ferrante 2022). Lula’s administration has maintained Bolsonaro’s pesticide release policy and, in the first quarter of 2023, authorizations were granted for the use of more than 100 new agricultural chemicals (Pedlowski 2023).

Current political resistance against Lula

Brazil’s National Congress is dominated by political forces contrary to Lula’s environmental agenda (Ferrante & Fearnside 2021b, ClimaInfo 2022a), as are Amazonian state governments (ClimaInfo 2022b), and, at the level of Amazonian municipalities (counties), support for Bolsonaro and his anti-environmental agenda is strongest precisely where the most deforestation is occurring (Peres et al. 2023). Overcoming the political contradictions in the coalition format of the Lula administration is fundamental to the success of the proposed institutional framework, for protecting the Amazon’s indigenous peoples and biodiversity and for combating climate change.

Conservative political forces will remain cohesive and aligned with the ruralist agenda of undermining environmental legislation, weakening social movements and appropriating constitutionally protected areas (Campos 2022, Milhorance 2022). These forces include the Agricultural Parliamentary Front and the Evangelical Parliamentary Front (Ferrante & Fearnside 2019).

Lula’s efforts to transform the approach to the environment and indigenous peoples in Amazonia can expect to encounter resistance due to the composition of right-wing state governments with pro-mining and agribusiness agendas (Supplementary Material, Section S3). Over half (55.5%) of the nine states in the Brazilian Amazon had governors classified by Bolognesi et al. (2023) as ‘right wing’, followed by the ‘extreme right’ (33.3%). Only one state (Maranhão) elected a governor from a party that is not in these categories. Particularly challenging is the state of Amazonas, which covers c. 30% of the total area of the Brazilian Amazon. Between August 2021 and July 2022, an area of 10 781 km² was deforested in the Brazilian Amazonia, 36% of which occurred in an area known as ‘AMACRO’ on the border between the three states whose initials comprise this acronym: Amazonas, Acre and Rondônia (Fig. 1). This deforestation is related to the expansion of

agribusiness, especially cattle ranching (IMAZON 2022). Amazonas and Rondônia have elected extreme right-wing governors who did not present an indigenous agenda or any planned action against illegal deforestation and fires. All three state governors in the AMACRO region were elected after campaigns that proposed promoting agribusiness. In Amazonas, the state government’s environmental agency is accused of facilitating the illegal extraction of over 45 000 truckloads of rainforest logs from Gleba João Bento, an area in the AMACRO region in the southern part of the state (Wenzel 2023). This wood was extracted between 2013 and 2021, much of it during the previous 2019–2022 term of recently re-elected governor Wilson Lima; 30% was extracted in 2020 alone (Wenzel 2023).

Record-breaking deforestation occurred in the Amazon in the first 3 months since President Lula’s inauguration (Poder360 2023). This increase is likely a reflection of the dismantling of environmental protection during the Bolsonaro administration (plus initial delays in filling key staff positions in the environmental agency) and the fact that more time is required to reverse the empowerment of agents such as land grabbers, loggers and gold miners (Ferrante et al. 2021a, Ferrante & Fearnside 2022a, Bustamante et al. 2023). More worrisome is the Lula administration’s neglecting of the impact of large developments (e.g., Highway BR-319; see Ferrante et al. 2021a) and deforestation generated by Brazilian commodities (Ferrante et al. 2021b, Ferrante & Fearnside 2022b). Resumption of environmental inspection alone is insufficient. There is an urgent need for the government to take concrete actions against large construction projects that cause increased deforestation, such as Highway BR-319 (Ferrante et al. 2021a, Bustamante et al. 2023).

Suggestions

It is essential for Lula’s administration to obtain internal support – both political and social – for the conservation of the Amazon and to obtain the collaboration of international entities, such as the United Nations, to help in curbing the ongoing violence in the Brazilian Amazon and in stopping the extermination of indigenous peoples. Seven elements could contribute to restructuring conservation actions in the Amazon: (1) complete the restoration of the Amazon Fund; (2) encourage all Amazonian states to create special secretariats for indigenous peoples; (3) reconsider large investment projects in mining and agribusiness; (4) revoke Bolsonaro’s anti-environmental measures; (5) establish a new institutionality with indigenous peoples and traditional communities as protagonists; (6) rebuild citizenship of the Amazonian peoples in favour of forest conservation; and (7) improve funding for the environmental and indigenous peoples ministries and associated policies.

A critical question is whether the efforts of Brazil’s federal government will be sufficient to change the internal political agenda and to counter the enormous economic and political strength of agribusiness and mining interests that underlie the environmental destruction that is still in progress (Supplementary Material, Section S3). International funding and other assistance are undoubtedly needed, along with provisions to assure that funds are used for halting Amazon deforestation and forest degradation (Pellicice & Castello 2021, Vilani et al. 2022). Other forms of international influence are also essential, including environmental restrictions by countries and companies that import Brazilian commodities that impact the Amazon forest and its peoples.



Figure 1. Record-breaking fires in August 2022 in Amazonia (*Amazônia Real*, 1 September 2022). Image reused with permission from Lima (2022).

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0376892923000139>.

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