
"The National Interest": Neofascism in the Amazon Rainforest

While it was easy to see the smoke from the forest fires in Brazil, it was much harder to see what was behind the Brazilian government's smokescreen: actions that will lead the rainforest to a swift death, destroying territories, livelihoods and the diverse cultures of peoples who depend on the forest.

Fascism emerged as an ideology last century in Europe. Among other things, it was characterized by a presumed national interest, authoritarianism and the violent repression of its opponents. These elements also apply to the actions of the Brazilian government led by former military officer, Jair Bolsonaro, in his first year of office. Brazil gained worldwide visibility in August 2019 due to the forest fires. While it was easy to see the smoke in the mass media coverage, it was much harder to see what was behind **the smokescreen created by the Brazilian government: a series of actions that will lead the Amazon rainforest to a swift death, destroying territories, livelihoods and the diverse cultures of peoples and populations who depend on the rainforest.**

"Our Amazon"

On August 23, 2019, during the height of the fires in the Amazon, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro made a statement on radio and television networks. He began by talking about "our Amazon," and said that "the Amazon forests are an essential part of our history, our territory, and everything that makes us feel Brazilian." He also said that "forest protection is our duty" and that we are "aware of our sovereignty" (1).

In that period, some prominent world leaders expressed concern about the situation in the Amazon, and especially in Brazil—which contains the largest area of the Amazon region. The Brazilian government complained about these countries' alleged attempts to intervene in "our Amazon." Bolsonaro said: "Who has their eye on the Amazon? What do they want there?" When the president of France announced the help of G7 countries to fight the fires, the Brazilian government did not accept it (2).

This posture is not new. The last military regime in Brazil (1964-1985), which inspired Bolsonaro, invented the false narrative that international companies and NGOs from industrialized nations were conspiring to appropriate the Amazon region. With the motto, "integrate so as not to relinquish," **the military carried out an authoritarian process of destructive occupation of the Amazon region.** It was supposedly a Brazilian occupation; however, foreign investors also profited from the destruction and extraction in the Amazon (3). **Roads were opened up, transporting logging companies, landowners, national and international entrepreneurs and settlers from other regions of Brazil—to a region that was at that time considered to be "unpopulated," despite the presence of indigenous peoples and quilombola and river-dwelling communities.**

This process continued in the post-military dictatorship governments, including in the governments of the Workers' Party (2003-2016), which carried out construction of **the Belo Monte mega-dam.** The third largest hydroelectric plant in the world, Belo Monte was designed—though never built—during the

military dictatorship. Indigenous peoples and social organizations in the region widely fought against the construction of Belo Monte, but their voices were ignored. It was also during the governments of the Workers' Party (PT, by its Portuguese acronym), that a **new forest code** was approved, which—among other things—condoned the deforestation that had taken place until 2008. This code permits deforestation beyond the allowed limits, as long as it is “offset” by preserving forests in other regions of the same biome. This encouraged **the legitimization of illegal occupations and a new wave of “grillaje” (land grabbing) of forest lands**, through the implementation of the so-called Rural Environmental Registry (*Cadastro Ambiental Rural*, CAR) (4). Meanwhile, one must consider that in the PT governments, there was more investment in state agencies to oversee, investigate and penalize deforestation, which led to a significant decrease in deforestation from 2004-2010.

It is also important to remember that long before the 2018 elections, Bolsonaro had found **support for his candidacy among large landowners and companies that exploit the “riches” of the Amazon**. In exchange for this support, Bolsonaro promised them impunity; he also promised that he would fight against everything that had to do with “the left,” “environmentalists,” “NGOs,” “human rights” and “the landless,” and that he would not demarcate any more indigenous land. This explains “The Day of Fire” during the peak of the forest fire crisis, when landowners in Pará—the state with the highest deforestation rate—set fire to a forest together to “celebrate” that they could do so with impunity. Another certain sign of impunity is that between August 2018 and July 2019 there was **a large increase—by 84%—in the deforestation of areas that the federal government should be protecting: conservation areas and indigenous lands (5)**.

Yet so far, “the protection of forests,” and respecting the autonomy and agency of communities who depend on them, has not been a priority for any of the Brazilian governments. In presidential cabinets, the voices of big capital interests and large landowners have always been louder. The indigenous and *quilombola* territories that exist today, as well as the legalized extractive reserves—which forest-dependent peoples and communities can collectively use—are the **result of much struggle, organization, mobilization and pressure on the part of these peoples and communities**.

The Alleged Threats

During the height of the fires, and without presenting evidence, Bolsonaro began to suggest that—in addition to indigenous peoples—**NGOs were behind all of it**: “(...) we took money away from the NGOs, transfers from abroad; 40% was going to NGOs; they don't have any more. So these people are feeling the lack of money. I'm not confirming it, but it's possible that these 'NGO people' are carrying out a criminal activity to bring attention against me, and against the Brazilian government” (6). The “transfers from abroad” referred to the resources of the Amazon Fund, supported by the governments of Germany and Norway to support actions to reduce deforestation in the Amazon.

In November 2019, some **NGOs were targeted by a police action in the Amazonian state of Pará**. Four firefighter volunteers from Alter do Chão, trained to fight forest fires, were sent to pretrial detention. The accusation, based on the federal government's insinuation, was that the volunteers were setting fire to justify a call for international support to fight the fires, and that they would have diverted these resources (7).

The neofascist government of Bolsonaro even accused film actor Leonardo DiCaprio of funding the NGOs that were investigated. DiCaprio has a foundation to support the protection of nature, but he denied the accusation. Regarding the NGOs investigated, he said that “Even though they deserve support, we do not fund the organizations cited” (8).

While Bolsonaro accuses NGOs, the **historical process of “grillaje” (land grabbing) in Brazil is intensifying**. Now, the land usurpers (*grileiros*) are much more armed, because one of the Bolsonaro government’s first actions was to sign a **decree facilitating the possession of up to four weapons per person**. In a manifesto in support of one of the NGOs accused of burning forests, over 200 organizations state: “We want the police to investigate and catch the *grileiros*, the land speculators, the gangs that invade and steal public lands and forests, using fire as a strategy to clean the area. And those working to defend the forests should not be accused without evidence” (9). In this context, it goes without saying that **violence against peoples in the Amazon is increasing**. As of September 2019, the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI, by its Portuguese acronym) recorded 160 cases of land invasions that affected 153 indigenous territories, mostly in the Amazon; and more indigenous leaders were murdered (10).

A law that passed this year in Pará State (129/2019) is further aggravating the situation: **the law encourages illegal deforestation, facilitates the regularization of public lands for private uses, and makes it possible to validate titles to lands that have been grabbed** (11). The federal government is taking similar measures, even allowing logging companies’ invasions in protected areas to go unpunished (12). The federal government is also looking into ways to facilitate the export of native wood, which is currently prohibited (13).

The Alleged Solutions

In his speech at the inaugural ceremony of the UN General Assembly in September 2019, Bolsonaro also accused NGOs of being behind a conspiracy to “make sure our indians remain true cavemen.” Despite saying that he recognizes that “each peoples or tribe, with its chief” has “its culture, traditions, customs and mainly its worldview,” Bolsonaro apparently knows what indians want, when he says: “Indians don’t want to be poor landowners on rich lands.” As a solution, he suggests that “We are ready—in partnership and adding value—to sustainably use our full potential.” In other words, he suggests maintaining **the same extractive economic model, but led by national actors** rather than “foreign economic and political interests” (14).

It should be noted that the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI, by its Portuguese acronym), the **state agency to protect indigenous peoples and demarcate indigenous lands, is turning into an agency in defense of agribusiness and mining interests within indigenous lands** (15). In order to open up indigenous lands that have already been demarcated, the federal government intends to modify the Constitution. If that happens, there are **4,332 exploration requests for potential mineral extraction on indigenous lands in the Brazilian Amazon that could be approved**. One must not forget that the global mining sector is dominated by transnational, not Brazilian, companies (16).

Regarding forest conservation as a way to stop forest destruction, the government constantly repeats that Brazil is a model of conservation—even though in 2019 it **broke the record for deforestation for the last decade**. So, the day before the 2019 UN Climate Conference, the Minister of Environment, Ricardo Salles, said: “We should be entitled to at least around US \$10 billion per year.” This is the amount that the government would charge so-called rich countries for supposedly taking measures to maintain forests as carbon sinks (17). Regarding criticism about the increase in deforestation, Salles promised a “new strategy” (18). But so far nobody knows what that new strategy would be.

In conclusion, while Bolsonaro states that “forest protection is our duty,” **in practice it is completely different**. It is enough to remember that when Bolsonaro formed his government, he wanted to do away with the Ministry of the Environment. And when, after strong pressure forced him to back down,

he made deep cuts in the Ministry's budget—thereby reducing its ability to control deforestation. A March 2019 decree, for example, cut \$187 million Reals from its budget (more than US\$45 million) (19).

The objective is clear: **open up the Brazilian Amazon as quickly as possible to extraction and destruction, and “integrate” indigenous and non-indigenous peoples into the consumer society**, so that they abandon their subsistence economies that depend on forests and can serve as cheap manual labor for the projects that are planned to be implemented.

Resistance

Neofascism in forests is not only happening in Brazil. It also threatens peoples in other countries with tropical forests. We refer, for example, to what is happening in Papua, India and the Philippines. But there is also **a lot of resistance**, and that is how we want to finish this story. The following are some fragments from the Articulation of *Brazil's Indigenous Peoples'* (APIB, by its Portuguese acronym) response to Bolsonaro's speech at the UN in September 2019:

“Bolsonaro condemns himself and is an embarrassment to Brazil, by demonstrating a serious lack in understanding geopolitics, history and the socio-cultural reality of his country; by wanting to fight even imaginary enemies, and by making accusatory, unfounded, inaccurate, demagogic, deceitful and beyond fallacious statements, (...) mainly against us, native peoples. We owe nothing to him, his descendants or the elites who—through colonialist, devastating and genocidal practices—have been taking our territories and the natural goods that we have been protecting for millennia. On the contrary, Brazil's historical and social debt with us remains unpayable. That is why we do not deny our Brazilian identity, and that is precisely why we demand respect for our right to be a part of this country, ensuring the basis of our existence—our territories, what little we have left—our ethnic and cultural diversity, our ways of life, our worldview. (...)

Bolsonaro knows that his hate speech and his willingness to legalize criminal practices like *garimpo* [illegal mining], in addition to fully opening up protected areas (indigenous lands, quilombola and traditional communities' territories, and conservation units) to all kinds of invaders, as well as the expansion of agribusiness and large enterprises, were the fuel that started the fire. This is a fire of proportions never before seen in Brazil's recent history, mainly against the Amazonian and Cerrado [Brazilian savannah] biomes. Even so, he outrageously states in his speech that the Amazon remains virtually untouched, and that he has a “solemn commitment” to it. (...)

We call on our allied bases, organizations and social movements not to be intimidated and never to retreat in their defense of their basic rights—mainly our rights to life, and to the lands and territories that we traditionally occupy” (20).

Finally, it is yet to be known what positions governments of countries with strong interests in the Amazon's “riches” will take—mainly the United States, Canada, European nations, Japan and China. This also includes their interests in carbon credits in Amazonian forests, which they deceptively claim will offset their pollution. Because it is not only the government of Brazil creating a smokescreen; many governments also do so by appearing to be worried about the forest fires or Bolsonaro's policies. We know that, above all, they are seeking to **benefit their own economic and multinational interests through their foreign relations**.

Therefore, is it not time to look more closely at what is behind the smokescreens created by neofascist governments, in order to **build stronger and more solid alliances to combat the**

hatred, violence and destruction of forests that are obliterating the Amazon and many other forests and peoples in the world?

WRM Secretariat, wrm@wrm.org.uy

- (1) AF, [Checamos o pronunciamento de Bolsonaro sobre os incêndios na Amazônia](#), agosto de 2019
- (2) [The Group of Seven](#) (G7) is the group of the most industrialized countries of the world, composed of: Germany, Canada, United States, France, Italy, Japan and the United Kingdom—even though the European Union is also represented.
- (3) For example, the project of United States millionaire, Daniel Ludwig. [Read more in the article from the WRM Bulletin from November 2018](#).
- (4) [Read more about CAR here](#); "grillaje" is the illegal appropriation of lands by landowners and companies for various purposes, which in the Amazon is leading to more forest destruction.
- (5) Estadão Sustentabilidade, [Desmate em unidades federais protegidas sobre 84% e supera média de toda Amazônia](#), noviembre de 2019.
- (6) UOL, [Sem Prova, Bolsonaro acusa ONGs de estarem por trás de queimada na Amazônia](#), agosto de 2019
- (7) Revista fórum, [Polícia do Pará persegue ONGs sob acusação de incendiar Amazônia](#), noviembre de 2019
- (8) El País, [Leonardo DiCaprio rebate Bolsonaro e nega ter financiado ONGs investigadas](#), noviembre 2019
- (9) ClimaInfo, [Manifesto de apoio ao Projeto Saúde Alegria reúne mais de 100 organizações](#), noviembre de 2019
- (10) Publica, [Práticas de violência se multiplicaram em 2019](#), octubre de 2019
- (11) Brasil de Fato, [Nova lei de terras do Pará permite "requentar" títulos podres e favorece grileiros](#), junio de 2019
- (12) Confirma Noticia, [MP que regulariza propriedades rurais incentiva grilagem, dizem especialistas](#), diciembre de 2019
- (13) Revista Fórum, [Bolsonaro quer liberar exportação "in natura" de madeira da Amazônia](#), noviembre de 2019
- (14) El País, [O discurso de Bolsonaro na ONU, analisado e confrontado com dados](#), setiembre de 2019
- (15) Pública, [Funai pode ser mediadora de mineração em terra indígena](#), setiembre de 2019
- (16) Repórter Brasil, [Projeto de governo de ampliar mineração ameaça 30% das terras indígenas do país](#), octubre de 2019
- (17) Money Report, [Brasil cobrará US10 bilhões anuais a países ricos, diz Salles](#), noviembre de 2019
- (18) R7, [Ministro diz que apresentará plano para prevenção da Amazônia](#), agosto de 2019
- (19) Brasil de Fato, [Bolsonaro corta 95% do orçamento das ações destinadas a combater mudanças climáticas](#), mayo de 2019
- (20) APIB, [Repúdio contra o discurso anti-indígena de Bolsonaro na Assembleia Geral da ONU](#), setiembre de 2019