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Brazil: An Environmental Power

1 What to expect of the incoming Lula government's environmental policy

The environment and climate change were issues at the heart of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva's victorious campaign in October last year. They were also traits that marked a clear distinction between him and the defeated incumbent president Jair Bolsonaro. The storming of the Supreme Federal Court, the National Congress and the Presidential Palace by supporters of Bolsonaro on 8 January 2023 illustrates the two biggest challenges for the new government's environmental agenda: agribusiness and the military.

During Lula's first two tenures (2003-2006, 2007-2010), environmental policy was a priority. Under Minister of the Environment Marina Silva, improved legislation, enforcement, and a soy moratorium helped to [reduce deforestation](#) in Brazil by [70 percent from 2005-2012](#) as compared with the preceding 10 years. She also oversaw the implementation of a [transparency regime](#) that opened access to deforestation data for civil society actors.

The incoming government's goal of supplanting the disastrous legacy of the previous far-right government will be a daunting task. The key for the environmental agenda will be to break up the counter-activism – that is, modes of environmental activism and governance used to legitimize deforestation as the inevitable price to pay for development – that took hold during the Bolsonaro years. The agribusiness' stranglehold on Brazilian politics and the armed forces' ideological and administrative re-engagement in the Amazon will not be easily dislodged.

As Lula starts his third term as president of Brazil, the Amazon looms large. The savannization of the Amazon is already taking place, with [one recent report](#) stating that “If the current trend of deforestation continues, the Amazon as we know it today would not reach

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2025.” In his [inaugural address to Congress](#), Lula held up a vision for Brazil as an “environmental power”. He went on to announce [a series of executive orders](#) aimed at reversing some of the decisions of the Bolsonaro government that expanded access to weapons, intensified deforestation and hampered transparency – most of which had been issued during the first year and a half of the Covid-19 pandemic, when Bolsonaro’s government took advantage of the unstable situation to continue “passing the buck” of acts that loosened environmental norms.

Under Lula, environmental policy will now be carried out by two ministries: the renamed Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change, and the new Ministry of Indigenous Peoples. Former Environment Minister Silva and Lula reconciled during the presidential campaign following years of estrangement between the former allies. Silva, who worked closely with the late rubber tapper activist Chico Mendes in the 1980s and was the first rubber tapper ever elected to the Senate, was appointed to lead the Ministry of the Environment in 2003. [She resigned during Lula’s second term in 2008](#) over disagreements regarding the government’s leniency towards infrastructure development and agribusiness interests in the Amazon. On 1 January, Silva was nominated to lead the new Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. Sonia Guajajara, a Brazilian indigenous activist and environmentalist, was appointed as the first Minister of Indigenous Peoples. Joênia Wapichana, who in 2018 became the [first indigenous woman elected to Brazil’s Congress](#), was appointed to head the National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples (Funai), and physicist Ricardo Galvão, who had been fired by Bolsonaro as director of Inpe (National Institute for Space Research), is expected to be announced as the new president of CNPq (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development). These nominations indicate that Lula has re-centered the environmental agenda.

The political strength of agribusiness is most visible in the Brazilian Congress, where the ruralist caucus, often disparagingly referred to as the Ox Caucus, has huge influence over policy-making and oversight. In order to carry out a legislative agenda favourable to rural landowners and the agribusiness sector more broadly, they use their political clout to colonize Brazilian state institutions and implement policies that [directly threaten land rights](#), labour rights, public health, indigenous rights and the environment. The Ox Caucus was a loyal supporter of Bolsonaro, who reciprocated with extremely friendly policies. But the strength of extractivist and agribusiness interests within Brazil’s institutional politics stems from the executive branch’s need to consolidate a parliamentary coalition to ensure that it can approve its legislative agenda as well as stave off impeachment attempts. The new minister of Agriculture, senator Carlos Fávaro, is a staunch agribusiness supporter.

According to anthropologist Piero Leiner, those who took part in the storming of the seat of the three branches of power in Brasília were driven by various motives, but had [a common goal](#) – evoking the armed forces as the saviour to pacify the rule of law. Leiner adds that [members of the military reserves and their relatives were involved in the putchist movement](#). The far-right [radicalization of security forces](#) reflects deep-seated authoritarian tendencies within Brazilian society. The agribusiness and the military – both key actors in the Brasília riots on January 8th – are a thorn in the side of the new Lula government.



The counter-activist base includes the agribusiness sector, which has been funding the far-right protesters camping outside the military barracks, and the security forces which have been enabling and participating in them. The Lula government won't be able to simply wish them away. At the same time there will be growing pressure from climate activists, indigenous communities and other traditional groups for climate action.

Lula's ambitious climate agenda is unlikely to be reconciled with the structural power of the agribusiness sector in Brazil or with his track record of developmentalist policies, which favour large infrastructure projects and the further entrenchment of the military. For economic growth to be decoupled from environmental degradation, these entrenched interests must be confronted rather than accommodated. Lula's political future, and the future of Brazil, require that he does away with his conciliatory ethos that seeks to placate environmental activists and counter-activists.