

Right-Wing Populists and the Global Climate Agenda

Danielle Hanna Rached

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The rise of right-wing populist leaders, governments and political parties around the world has impacted environmental policy in general and the climate agenda particularly. Brazil is a notable example. Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has hit record levels since the arrival of the far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, in 2019. For 2022, it is estimated that [15,391 km²](#) of forest will be cleared, which would be the largest amount of deforestation in Brazil in 16 years. Such irreparable damage to the world's largest rainforest is not the mere outcome of neglect or incompetence, but of the active implementation of a distorted environmental agenda focused on: (i) [destroying](#), emptying, capturing or defunding environmental protection agencies and (ii) persecuting [social movements](#), such as those formed by indigenous peoples, environmental defenders and the scientific community.

In this brief commentary, we aim to contribute to an emerging literature that studies the relation between far-right populist rhetoric and actions on climate change policy. The idea is to analyse whether Jair Bolsonaro brings new tactics to the playbook of autocratic leaders, and if so which types. While political dynamics in Hungary, Poland and the USA have all been studied to establish the links between populist politics and climate inaction, there is still room to broaden the view to countries of the Global South.

For that, we contextualize two social groups directly affected by the Brazilian president's policies in the Amazon: indigenous groups and the scientific community. The first has been targeted through an increase in the contestation of indigenous land rights while the second has been targeted via the takeover and dismantling of institutions that work to oversee, study, and manage deforestation rates. We also demonstrate how [knowledge](#) production has been employed by Bolsonaro's government to create its own "truth" about deforestation data in the Amazon. Globally, contemporary climate change policy (especially after the Paris Agreement) emphasizes the role of science in shaping the transition of key economic sectors. In the case of Brazil, land use is directly related to deforestation and the expansion of agricultural frontiers in the Amazon. Protected areas (e.g. Indigenous Territories) and the scientific institutions and mechanisms that identify deforestation rates are a threat to Bolsonaro's climate policy agenda.

Far-right populist politics and the climate change agenda

The academic literature has only recently begun to understand how right-wing populist politics relate to climate change. [Lockwood](#) outlines a twofold explanation.

The first is an interest-based explanation according to which climate scepticism is associated with the political and economic marginalization of some groups. These groups are formed by those who have suffered the most from the economic effects of globalization, the “left behind”. However, Lockwood finds limits to this interest-based argument. For example, the fact that populist parties have flourished in Europe despite the relative level of economic protection afforded by many countries to the “left behind”. The second explanation is based on ideology. According to the ideological argument, hostility towards climate policy is explained as “collateral damage”: a product of the common features of traditional right-wing populist discourse, such as the diffusion of nationalistic values combined with anti-elitism and anti-cosmopolitanism. Under this line of reasoning, climate policy is a perfect target for populists: it is inherently science-based and cosmopolitan. Despite being a convincing explanation, the question remains whether Brazil would easily fit into it or whether Brazil requires a special adaptation.

Contestation of indigenous lands

Climate change is not openly dismissed by the government of Jair Bolsonaro. Rather, it is trivialized and portrayed as a “trojan horse” used by the Left to advance their agenda. The former foreign minister declared it to be “a Marxist [plot](#),” while the former environmental minister referred to it as a “secondary [issue](#).” The ultimate objective of the Bolsonaro government is to question any social group or climate change policy that clashes with interests of its political base (pro-gun, pro-agribusiness, “law and order”, etc.). In this regard, the Amazon has become an arena of contestation for Bolsonaro’s political and economic legitimacy.

The 1988 constitutional right of indigenous peoples to the land they have “traditionally occupied” (article 231) is one of the main fronts of attack by the current government. Guided by an outdated military version of the development model for the Amazon and boosted by the powerful agribusiness sector, Bolsonaro is interested in pushing the agricultural and extractivist frontier deeper into the Amazon.

When it comes to rhetoric, Bolsonaro actively advocates for the commercial exploitation of indigenous lands. During his weekly live broadcasts on Youtube and Facebook, he stated: „[The indigenous](#) peoples have changed (...) more and more (they) are human beings just like us. So, let’s make them integrate into society and really be the owners of their indigenous land (...)“. He defended the opening up of indigenous lands to [mining](#) by stating that “[t]he indigenous person can’t remain in his land as if he were a prehistoric creature”.

In concrete terms, Bolsonaro fulfilled his election campaign promise not to demarcate indigenous lands. The consequences of this action were felt when Brazil’s Indigenous Foundation (FUNAI), a government agency denounced as a ‘crony’ during his presidency, issued a [regulation](#) that ensures the certification of property for land grabbers on indigenous lands that had not yet been officially demarcated. This official ‘invitation to invade’ has led to a palpable loss of indigenous lands in Brazil over the last 2 years, equivalent to two times the size of the city of [São Paulo](#).

The process of contesting indigenous lands is also supported by the conservative National Congress. For example, [bill 490/07](#) assesses the adoption of a timeframe criterion as a requirement for the demarcation of indigenous lands. Such a criterion, if approved, would create another obstacle for, if not completely prevent, indigenous peoples from claiming their rights to the land. Under this regulation, they would have to prove that they were physically present on the land at the time of the promulgation of the Brazilian Federal Constitution – October 5, 1988.

Along with Bolsonaro's discourse and policies comes an intensification of different types of violence against indigenous peoples. In its latest report ([2021](#)), the Indigenous Missionary Council (Cimi) accounted for 305 cases of “possessory invasions, illegal exploitation of resources and damage to property”, an increase of 200% in such cases since 2018. Cimi also reported 355 cases of “violence against the person”, which ranges from murder to ethnic-cultural racism to discrimination and sexual violence, the highest number since 2013.

Contestation of established scientific legitimacy and the production of competing knowledge

From very early on in his government (2019), Bolsonaro accused the head of the National Space Agency (INPE), the physicist [Ricardo Galvão](#), of spreading lies and fired him after the release of data that showed an upward trend in deforestation. Since the 1970's, INPE has been the scientific agency responsible for running and administrating the Amazon monitoring systems and data production about deforestation. After the dismissal of Galvao, control of the INPE was handed over to the military. This led to the forced resignation of key INPE personnel, followed by a slashing of INPE's 2021 budget. The contestation of scientific legitimacy by creating alternative “gateways” of knowledge production has become Bolsonaro's way of controlling the narrative and the “truth” about Amazon deforestation.

The contestation of established scientific knowledge and data, illustrated here by the demoralization and deflation of INPE's functions, is accompanied by the production of competing scientific knowledge, an action that is not commonly associated with populist politics in relation to the environmental/climate agenda. The acquisition of a new monitoring system for the Amazon and a new satellite to monitor deforestation in the region highlights how contestation over the management of specific knowledge infrastructures is a key component of the populist playbook in the Brazilian context.

In July 2019, the Ministry of Environment negotiated an agreement of R\$ 49.7 million with a geoprocessing company, Santiago & Cintra Consultoria, for access to high-resolution satellite images. The contract is currently under investigation in the Court of Auditors of the Union. Recent research has shown that the INPE-DETER system is 30 times cheaper and three times more effective than the one hired by Bolsonaro's government.

In addition to this new geoprocessing system hired from a private company, in 2020 the [Brazilian Ministry of Defence acquired](#) a radar satellite worth \$33.8 million USD from a Finnish company. It declared, without much explanation, that the satellite

would monitor deforestation in the Amazon region and support the armed forces in combating environmental crimes. The lack of competition around the acquisition and the lack of transparency around the terms of the contract were justified with national security claims. Once again, scientists [contested](#) the declared purpose of the acquisition: “what the military wants is to take over the monitoring of the Amazon and hide the data alleging ‘national security’”.

Conclusion

In response to the question posed in the introduction, it is now apparent that Bolsonaro and his government bring unique elements to the populist’s climate agenda playbook.

First and foremost, discussing climate change in Brazil is directly connected to the protection of the Amazon. The indigenous peoples’ constitutional right to their land and the scientific community’s production of data on deforestation rates constitute two unique threats to Bolsonaro’s populist rhetoric in the Amazon and consequently to the economic interests of his political base.

Second, [as one of the authors has already demonstrated in another co-published work](#), the Bolsonaro government’s statements on deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon cannot be viewed as evidence of mere neglect or incompetence, but of a comprehensive effort to produce its own scientific knowledge, its own “truth regime” to counter-attack the established monitoring systems on the ground. In our view, that is one additional tactic that was not accounted for in Lockwood’s original analysis.

After four years of Bolsonaro’s administration, the emerging body of literature that explores the relation between right-wing populist discourse and climate change hostility gains another chapter with a view from the ‘global south’.

