

1. Chaotic activities of a decided enemy of sustainability in Amazonia⁴⁰⁹

The extremely right-wing populist President Jair Bolsonaro, a former low-ranking officer in the Brazilian Armed Forces, took office in 2019. He came to power with the support of large sections of the corporate elite, a combination of right-wing and conservative circles, which shared his distrust of previous governments discredited by corruption scandals. Bolsonaro's radical discourse was accepted by these groups as necessary. The rapidly increasing number of evangelicals in Brazil (about one-third of the population), among which are also ultra-conservative groups ("with God to power"), supported his aims to play a decisive role in domestic politics, to strengthen internal security in the country and to conquer the rural area in a biblical sense.

Bolsonaro had no international experience. With his seizure of power, Brazilian democracy felt strongly endangered (Stuenkel 2021; Birle and Speck 2022). Due to his right-wing extremist views⁴¹⁰ and his gruff appearance, the tabloid press called him "tropical Trump" in a comparison to the US ex-president, who was a kind of role model for Bolsonaro.

His plan to abolish the Ministry of the Environment as an independent ministry was widely met with incomprehension by the Brazilian public and was not realised due to considerable protests. In addition, leaders of large landowners had convinced the president not to extinguish the ministry because this could cause restrictions on Brazilian exports. Nevertheless, the environmental portfolio lost the Brazilian Forest Service to the Ministry of Agriculture, led from 2019 to March 2022 by the well-known hardliner Tereza Cristina Dias, representative of the agribusiness lobby.

Bolsonaro's strategy was to weaken environmental licensing. He appointed Ricardo Salles as Minister of the Environment, a "ruralist" and ex-environment secretary of the state of São Paulo, where he radically dismantled the agency. Salles announced the revision of all conservation units in the country. It was apparently his strategy to threaten experienced managers in the environmental sector who represented other views of the problems. He did this with inspectors of the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBio)⁴¹¹ and administrative officials. Environmentalist

409 This chapter is based on Kohlhepp (2020a; 2021b).

410 The "bbb-slogans" ("boi, bala e biblia": beef, bullet and bible) of Bolsonaro and his supporters were frequently cited (cf. Lapper 2021).

411 The Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation is named after the environmental activist Chico Mendes from Acre, a rubber tapper and trade union leader. His aim was to preserve the Amazonian rain forest and he advocated for the human rights of Brazilian peasants and Indigenous

Adalberto Eberhard resigned as president of the institute. Salles appointed police officers from São Paulo in place of biodiversity experts. None of the substitutes had the level of expertise of the predecessors. ICMBio managed almost 10% of the Brazilian territory (Trigueiro 2019).

It was absolutely scandalous that the Minister of the Environment used the distraction of the press during the catastrophic consequences of the completely neglected organisation of measures against Covid-19 in Brazil (lacking vaccine import etc.) in order to pass “infralegal reforms” to push ahead with the deregulation of environmental legislation – in a way hidden from the public (he himself mentioned it during the infamous cabinet meeting of April 22, 2020 that reverberated around the world). With this attitude, he disqualified himself (Kohlhepp 2020a; 2021b).

Salles’ idea, “adopt a Park,” was aimed at private investors, funds, banks, and large corporations who had expressed their criticism of the government’s Amazonian policy, which so much undermined the image of Brazil. They should compensate for the lack of state resources. This was reminiscent of corresponding roll calls for “financing for the conservation of tropical rain forests” during the military dictatorship. Financing of projects already happened indirectly – with constraints – within the Amazon Fund. However, neither domestic investors nor foreigners – discredited by the president – thought of abundant investments in the current precarious Amazonian environmental policy.⁴¹² 132 protected areas in Amazonia for which the costs were to be covered were offered by Salles without asking the inhabitants of these mostly inhabited areas.

According to Brazilian environmental experts and former heads of IBAMA, President Bolsonaro was waging an “ideological war” against all those engaged in trying to prevent the destruction of Amazonia.⁴¹³ By request from the president, Salles publicly criticised inspectors who destroyed equipment used by criminals to remove illegal wood from a conservation unit in Pará, despite a federal decree authorising this procedure in certain situations (Trigueiro 2019). Later, the president prohibited the destruction of machines for illegal deforestation of the timber mafia.

Some of Brazil’s former ministers of the environment, who were taking a stand against the Bolsonaro government’s environmental policies, had held intensive discussions with PPG7’s International Advisory Group (IAG) in the 1990s on the emerging problems of implementing projects under the programme. Now, former Minister Marina Silva called Bolsonaro’s environment minister an “environmental opponent.”⁴¹⁴

peoples. Chico Mendes was assassinated by a rancher in 1988 (cf. MMA 2017). The mission of the Chico Mendes Institute is to protect the Brazilian natural heritage and promote the environmental development. The ICMBio is an autarchy under a special scheme. It was created in 2007 and is linked to the Ministry of Environment and member of the National Environmental System (SISNAMA). The institute is in charge of performing the action of the National System of Protected Areas.

412 Only a few large companies, such as Coca Cola, Carrefour, and Heineken, hoping for favourable market conditions, offered to take over the environmental costs of some territories.

413 The expression “ideological war” was employed by Adriana Ramos, advisor to the Socio-Environmental Institute (ISA), in 2019 (cf. Kohlhepp 2020a, 432).

414 Marina Silva had resigned in 2008 during Lula da Silva’s presidency under pressure from agribusiness, construction companies and power plant lobby. In the new government of Lula da Silva, in office since January 2023, she accepted again the appointment as Minister of the Environment. Cf. chapter IV.2.

The protests of former Brazilian environment ministers,⁴¹⁵ belonging to different governments and political parties with different ideological currents, against the counterproductive activities of the new government in environmental policy, were accompanied by a multitude of other protests, such as

- protests of the Academia Brasileira de Ciências (ABC) against discrediting science and scientists and the cutdown of CNPq, CAPES and university budgets,
- protests of the governors of Amazonian States against refusal of EU help,
- protests of Indigenous groups against invasions of mining and timber companies into Indigenous territories,
- protests of NGOs and other members of the civil society against denial of climate change, accelerating deforestation, and the irresponsible regional policy in Amazonia,
- protests of donors against the highly problematic action of environment minister Salles concerning administration and reorganisation of the Amazon Fund.

In some European countries (France, Ireland, Austria, etc.) there were protests against the ratification of the EU-Mercosur agreement in view of the radical environmental policies of the Bolsonaro government.

In a way, fire clearance in Amazonia has been officially supported by promoting aggressive agribusiness, logging and cattle ranching activities.

Pronouncements⁴¹⁶ and actions of President Bolsonaro and ministers of his government resulted in a long list of superficial and irresponsible comments, such as statements

- against rain forest protection and implementation of Indigenous territories,
- against national and international NGOs (“communist infiltration”),
- against environmentalists by mentioning strange conspiracy theories,
- against the movement of the landless (MST),
- against scientific evaluation of deforestation by the prestigious INPE,
- against activities of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) and the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) with the consequence of budget cutdown and dismissal of controllers,
- against punishment of illegal activities at the pioneer front and against fines for environmental crimes,
- against proposals of support for fire control by EU member countries,
- against previous administration of the Amazon Fund and against use of donations of Norway and Germany for rain forest protection projects of NGOs and local communities.

415 José Sarney Filho, Carlos Minc, Izabella Teixeira, Marina Silva, Rubens Ricúpero and José Carlos Carvalho participated in a special meeting and formulated a protest note: “social and environmental governance in Brazil is being dismantled in an affront to the Constitution” and “is the real risk of uncontrolled increase in deforestation of the Amazon” (Trigueiro 2019).

416 Ferrante and Fearnside (2019), especially supplementary material.

Politically, the ministry of environment had lost strength, power, and prestige (Trigueiro 2019).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, President Bolsonaro gave useless advice on dubious drugs and exercised a disastrous crisis management, even calling Covid-19 a “small flu” (*gripezinha*). By the end of 2022, over 700 000 people have died of Covid-19 in Brazil.

National and international criticism of the environment and Amazonia policies of the Bolsonaro government increased the aggressiveness of the political actors and the far-right party members. A new dimension of emotion had reached politics. Bolsonaro “strongly embodies the phenomenon of wrath” and “voters who hope for an improvement in economic and security policy, got attracted to this rage” (Maihold 2019a, n. p.).

Members of the Brazilian Academy of Sciences (ABC), including former Science Minister José Israel Vargas, and hundreds of other researchers had vehemently opposed President Bolsonaro’s statements and insinuations by various ministers toward science and scientists, as well as the funding cuts, and had sharply criticised the lack of environmental and human rights policies of the federal government in Amazonia. Due to the hyper-critical attitude of the Bolsonaro government to science and its analytical findings, multi- and interdisciplinary bilateral research collaborations and the internationally recognised high qualification of Brazilian scientists were obviously negated in Brasília. NGOs, some of which played an essential role in the development of guidelines for environmental protection and the safeguarding of the Indigenous habitat with scientifically sound analyses, were regarded as an “enemy image” and as “politically infiltrated” by members of the government. International NGOs were discriminated against as “foreign agents.”

Supervisors of IBAMA and FUNAI were impeded in their activities or even bribed. Environmental licensing should be weakened or even be carried out without any impact analysis. This would further marginalise environmental impact assessment, which is already damaged by the lack of adequate participation of civil society (Ruaro *et al.* 2022).

NGOs or other members of the civil society (small farmers, priests, Indigenous people) were threatened by armed private militia (*pistoleiros*) of large-scale farmers and quite often their life was in danger.

President Bolsonaro’s sharp reaction to the offer of help formulated by French President Macron on the occasion of the huge forest fires showed incomprehension and mistrust (“No one donates without consideration”). With PPG7, Brazil’s reservation about its national sovereignty in Amazonia had been eliminated by explicitly not calling the Amazonian rain forests a “global good” at the time.⁴¹⁷ Macron had underestimated the traditional sensitivity of Brazilian governments to Amazonia with the phrase “our house is burning”.

The new National Council of Amazônia Legal, led by Vice President Hamilton Mourão, a retired general, and composed of ministers of the federal government but not by the governors of the Amazonian states and by no member of the civil society, assumed the coordination of government activities in “defence, protection and sustainable development of the Amazon.”

Since the beginning of his term, Bolsonaro had relied heavily on military personnel in his cabinet. At times, six ministers were former high-ranking military officers.

417 See chapter II.2.1.

More than 6000 officers occupied positions within the state apparatus during Bolsonaro's government. The army became increasingly politicised.

The National Environmental Force formed alongside the “elite force” for “environmental disasters” – which, according to critics from Amazonia, represented a veritable “militarisation” – certainly could not, from a socio-ecological point of view and for the benefit of the regional population, take on all those tasks that were neglected or “forgotten” by Minister Salles.

For President Bolsonaro, man-made climate change does not exist, and he detested the international discussion on this subject. He appointed Ernesto Araújo as Minister of Foreign Affairs (from January 2019 up to his resignation in March 2021) who considered global warming an “invention of Marxist ideology” (Fearnside 2019; Ferrante and Fearnside 2019; Maihold 2019a). Araújo was a career diplomat who did not have the experience to lead the prestigious Brazilian Foreign Ministry. He “belonged to the ideological, anti-globalist camp within Bolsonaro's cabinet” (Weiffen 2022, 56) and was an ardent supporter of Trump and, most problematically for Brazil, a fierce critic of China, making it difficult to import vaccines from there. Contrary to the diplomatic tradition of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Itamaraty, Araújo liked to attack all supposed opponents severely with obscure and insulting arguments. Multilateralism, regional integration projects and, above all, environmental protection were put on the back burner. In the spirit of the president, Araújo emphasised that international institutions use climate change as an excuse to restrict Brazil's sovereignty through regulations, thus endangering Brazil's international relations.

Brazil's commitments under the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement⁴¹⁸ were not taken seriously and had completely disappeared from the official environmental policy discussion in Brazil. Bolsonaro refused to host the 2019 Climate Change Conference (COP 25), the largest climate meeting in the world, in Brazil, which was eventually held in Chile. During the COP 26 in Glasgow (2021), Bolsonaro stressed in his official statement that Brazil would end illegal deforestation by 2030. However, he did not tell the truth by withholding the newest deforestation rates.

The question of securing the country's borders in Amazonia has been important since 2015 with the increasing migratory pressure from Venezuela, especially for the border state of Roraima, which had already declared a state of emergency at the end of 2017 in view of up to 2000 refugees per day. Bolsonaro has “inherited” this problem and openly expressed his opposition to the Maduro government, with which the Workers' Party of Brazil (PT) had sympathised. In 2018, Bolsonaro had been voted by 72 % of the electorate in Roraima and the population expected the problem to be dealt severely by the president. In any case, the state of Roraima had major border problems due to the cross-border habitat of the Yanomami, which was difficult to secure throughout the north of the country due to expanding gold mining by *garimpeiros* and drug trafficking routes. However, a closure of the border to Venezuela was rejected by the Supreme Court. The refugees against whom there were violent protests in Roraima (Maihold 2019a) were also distributed outside Amazonia in the country.

418 In 2015, negotiated by 196 countries (parties) under the aegis of the UN, the Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change. The Paris Agreement (COP 21) aimed to hold the increase in the global average temperature to “well below” 2°C, preferably to 1.5°C, compared to pre-industrial levels. The Agreement underpinned the COP 26 climate talks in Glasgow.

The president has spoken out decisively for the “valorisation” of the natural resources of Amazonia and against tropical forest protection and the area size of Indigenous territories. Fires in Amazonia seemed to promote Bolsonaro’s “economic development model” for the rain forest region. However, Brazilian entrepreneurs have publicly complained that the government’s initial lack of response to the countless fires in Amazonia damaged Brazil’s image. Only international pressure led to the use of the military to fight fires, after Bolsonaro’s long hesitation and the claim that this problem could be solved without foreign help. The next fire season will threaten the Amazonian rain forest and the crucial question is how to deal with this challenge. Obviously, this did not worry President Bolsonaro.