



FIVE QUESTIONS

ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN BRAZIL

FOR RAQUEL SIROTTI

82

The Brazilian government under President Jair Bolsonaro has been the target of international criticism for its lax environmental policies. The outrage was particularly great when, at a cabinet meeting in April, environment minister Ricardo Salles suggested taking advantage of the coronavirus crisis to relax the rules on protecting the rainforest. Did the protests against this have any effect?

RAQUEL SIROTTI Since the video of the meeting was published by court order, Jair Bolsonaro's government has received intense criticism – especially from international investors and funds supporting conservation projects. They threatened to withdraw their capital if the government didn't do more to protect the rainforest. In response, the president announced a decree banning slash-and-burn clearance for 120 days. The government is attempting to distance itself from the idea that it is opening the rainforest up to profiteers.

Is compliance with the decree being monitored?

There is a governmental agency called Ibama, which is in charge of monitoring compliance. The problem here is that Bolsonaro has replaced a number of Ibama officials with members of the military with no experience in environmental policies. Similarly, the director of the agency responsible

for producing data on deforestation in the Brazilian rainforest was dismissed after announcing that deforestation had risen by 88% during the first year of Bolsonaro's administration when compared to the previous year. His position was also given to someone from the military, generating a lot of debate about the continued reliability of data published by that agency.

Is no one doing anything to resist this process?

At the beginning of May, Brazilian federal prosecutors filed a lawsuit against Ricardo Salles, the minister of the environment, in which they accused him of violating his duty to protect the environment and called for his dismissal. So there is a movement going in the opposite direction, trying to replace Salles with someone more concerned with environmental policies.

How can the international community influence Jair Bolsonaro to protect the rainforest in the long term?

I think the most successful strategy has been the threat by international investors and entrepreneurs to pull money out of Brazil if the environment minister continues to open up the rainforest to investors to do whatever they please there. Import restrictions on Brazilian products may also be useful. Unfortunately, that appears to be the only language that Bolsonaro understands. Especially now that his government is facing

huge economic problems because of the coronavirus pandemic, everything related to investments, money, and donations is very important – even more so than before the crisis.

This year, the fires in the Amazon rainforest are raging stronger than they have done in a long time. Is there resistance to the slash-and-burn clearances among the Brazilian population?

Yes, definitely! Even though there is a large group of people involved in agribusiness, as well as landowners, who have a great vested interest in laxer environmental laws, the rainforest in Brazil is generally seen as one of our greatest assets – one that should be preserved, maintained, and not sold to international interests. The left-wing and more progressive parties are very concerned about the deforestation, and there is also a great deal of dissatisfaction among the middle class – even those who voted for Jair Bolsonaro in the election.

Interview: Barbara Abrell

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