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The Amazon is fast approaching a point of no return

Brazil's rainforest is being stolen and cleared at an accelerating pace, and the Bolsonaro government is fanning the flames, write Jessica Brice and Michael Smith



Aerial picture showing a fire in a piece of land in the Amazon rainforest, about 65 km from Porto Velho, in the state of Rondonia, in northern Brazil. Picture: Carl de Souza/AFP via Getty Images



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In April, lawmakers in the Brazilian state of Rondônia gathered for a hasty vote in a squat cube of a building that had sat largely empty for months.

Few places on Earth had been hit harder by Covid-19 than Porto Velho, the concrete capital city, which, like everything else in the region, has been carved out of the Amazon rainforest. But on that rainy afternoon, while the city was in lockdown, the legislators felt they couldn't wait any longer.

They needed to pass a bill that would slash the size of a state rainforest reserve known as Jaci-Paraná and another park farther south.

Once a vast expanse of sinuous streams and soaring stands of mahogany and castanha trees, Jaci-Paraná Extractive Reserve has been largely transformed into pasture for cattle.

Roads cut into the bright red mud crisscross the reserve, connecting hundreds of ranches where 120,000 cattle graze. The ranches are illegal.

The new law would change that. The owners would no longer have to hide the origin of their livestock to sell to big beef producers. More importantly, the land grabbers would have a path to legal title.

Almost half the state legislators are ranchers or got elected with agribusiness money. They'd long wanted to wipe the slate clean for their rural base, and now they had support all the way up to the presidential palace in Brasília.

In a few days, President Jair Bolsonaro would appear at a US-sponsored climate summit to defend Brazil's record on the Amazon. For two years, Donald Trump had been a friend as Bolsonaro dismantled protections for the rainforest.

President Joe Biden most certainly would not be. The lawmakers' plan could fall apart if Biden ratcheted up the pressure.

"Listen well," Ezequiel Neiva, a rancher and lawmaker, told his colleagues. "This is one of our last chances to vote."

The bill passed unanimously. Coronel Marcos Rocha, Rondônia's governor and one of Bolsonaro's staunchest allies, signed it into law on May 20. (It's being challenged in court.)

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A study released in July by Brazil's National Institute for Space Research shows that parts of the Amazon where the burns are the worst have flipped into net carbon emitters, contributing to climate change rather than helping to limit it. Picture: Dr Erika Berengue/PA Wire

Jaci-Paraná, formerly large enough to swallow Mexico City, was slashed in size by 89%, leaving only a sliver of terrain along its western edge. The other state reserve mentioned in the bill, Guajará-Mirim, lost 50,000 hectares, or 124,000 acres.

Two days after the Rondônia law passed, Bolsonaro didn't let down the ranchers. He was defiant when he spoke via video link to Biden and other heads of state at the Leaders Summit on Climate.

Bolsonaro praised Brazil's work in protecting the Amazon, while pointing a finger at the developed world's addiction to fossil fuels as the key culprit in climate change.

Above all, he lamented the "Amazonian paradox."

The rainforest is one of the globe's greatest natural resources - in both the commodities it holds and its role in producing oxygen and cleaning the world's air - and yet most of the 24 million people living in and around it are poor.

"The value of the standing forest" must be acknowledged Bolsonaro said. "There must be fair payment for environmental services provided by our biomes to the planet at large."

The message to the world was clear: Pay us to leave the Amazon alone, or Brazil will find its own way to extract that value.

There's ample evidence that the government is already doing that. A review of thousands of public documents and dozens of interviews with prosecutors, forest rangers, and members of Bolsonaro's inner circle show that Brazil's government is engaged in an active campaign to open up the Amazon to privatization and development - first by turning a blind eye as public and protected lands are raided and cleared, and then by systematically pardoning the people responsible and granting them legal title to the stolen lands.

Bolsonaro's government didn't invent the practice. It's rooted in the nation's 1988 constitution, and two presidents before Bolsonaro rammed through changes that essentially amnestied about 25,000 people who'd been squatting on public properties, a review of Brazilian land records shows.

But Bolsonaro and his team want to accelerate the process like never before by making it easier for big ranchers to get in on the game.

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"All that land that's been cleared in the Amazon, the law allowed it," says Luiz Antônio Nabhan Garcia, Bolsonaro's land-policy czar.

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"That's how it happened in the United States. It happened in Australia. When colonizers first went out and took that virgin land, all of it came from the state."

Land grab

During the 1970s, the military government in Brazil viewed turning the wild expanses of the Amazon into cities, farms, and mines as an imperative of national security.

The dictatorship, which endured until 1985, built military bases, power plants, and a network of roadways throughout the thick jungle.

Those infrastructure projects fueled what's known as the "Brazilian Miracle," a period of 10% annual economic growth that still stands out in many minds as the nation's golden era. But these were some of the darkest days for the rainforest itself.

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Millions of people migrated inland from coastal cities, carving homesteads and huge industrial hubs out of the jungle. In 40 years, the Amazon has lost an area as big as California to deforestation.

Some scientists suggest the Amazon is now close to a tipping point, at which it will become a savanna rather than a rainforest. It will pump greenhouse gases into the atmosphere instead of pulling them down, and so-called flying rivers - bands of moisture in the air that bring rainfall to the continent - will dry up. As many as 10,000 species may be at risk of dying off.

Since taking office in January 2019, Bolsonaro, a former army captain, has revived the 50-year-old worldview that Amazon development and Brazilian prosperity go hand in hand.

And he's stacked key land management and environment agencies with farmers and ranchers who share his vision. Jaci-Paraná is the latest example of that vision's realization, but it's far from the only one.

Bandeirantes, located east of Jaci-Paraná, is a dusty blip of a farming community, a crosshatch of dirt roads and a few dozen structures surrounded by coffee plantations and cattle pastures.

A little more than two decades ago, it didn't exist. No roads. No ranchers. Just rainforest. Today, it's something of a model for would-be land-grabbers across Rondônia.

For years government ads on TV and radio and in newspapers had promised plots and prosperity for anyone willing to make the journey. The Amazon was "a land without men for men without land," the ads declared.

Millions answered the call to conquer the "green hell," and the population of Rondônia swelled from about 115,000 people in 1970 to more than 1.1 million in 1990.

Behind the boom was the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform, or Incra, a government agency the military regime created to speed Brazil's industrial revolution.

After the military dictatorship gave way to a democracy, Incra was given a new mission. Instead of colonizing the Amazon with industrial farms and factories, the agency was told to reclaim whatever hadn't yet been developed, dice it up into tiny lots, and hand those out to Brazil's poor for subsistence farming.

It was one of the largest social welfare giveaways of all time. But the execution was bungled.

No longer backed by the power of the military, Incra couldn't enforce its rules when conflicts over land broke out. People rushed to claim whatever plots appeared to be free.

Wealthy owners stripped of their properties fought in court to save their stakes, tying the land up for decades. Documents were easily forged or altered to make bogus titles look legitimate. A resale black market for the dubious claims proliferated. Some falsified documents have now changed hands so many times that it's impossible to determine the real owners of some parcels.

The Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources, the federal regulator known as Ibama, knows all about the deforestation, but doesn't do much to stop it.

A study by the independent news site InfoAmazonia found that between 1980 and 2019, Ibama issued 75 billion reais (\$14 billion) of fines, adjusted for inflation, but collected only 3.3% of the total.

Poverty

Meanwhile, politicians, from local council members all the way up to the president, encourage the destruction. A cross-check of political databases and Ibama fines shows almost 1,000 elected officials and political appointees are on government blacklists for environmental crimes.



Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro arrives to attend the annual military exercises by the Navy, Army and Air Force, in Formosa, Brazil, Monday, Aug. 16, 2021. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)

It's poverty that truly drives the calls to develop the rainforest, from both the left and the right. Thirty percent of Brazilians live in poverty, including 13% who survive on less than \$2 a day, according to the World Bank.

In the country's north, where the rainforest is, poverty is especially dire: Clean water, sanitation, and electricity are luxuries. Almost one-third of the population is functionally illiterate, unable to meet day-to-day reading or writing needs.

The Covid pandemic became just one more item on a long list of scourges that includes malaria, dengue, and Zika.

The commodities boom in the mid-2000s brought a wave of prosperity that few Brazilians had experienced. The crash a few years later dragged down everyone.

Today, prices are again surging, and with them, schemes to grab even more land. Only now the schemes are more daring, more organized, and a lot more violent.

Brazil's deforestation machine is complex, and it's impossible to know exactly who's directing its movements.

A large part is certainly driven by the everyday Brazilian who longs for land, but that alone can't explain the sheer scale of the destruction or the recent sophistication in the attacks.

A few decades ago, when undesignated government land was bountiful, it was easy for a lone farmer to drive some stakes in the ground and claim it as his own.

But those plots are gone; what's left in Rondônia are protected parks and territories. Environmental-crime prosecutors now describe a fraud that turns poor Brazilians into foot soldiers for criminal gangs, logging companies, and industrial farming operations.

It's the stuff of novels, the type of book Carlos Rangel dreams of writing if only he could retire.

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“The people on the ground don't have the financial wherewithal to pay for the kind of operations you see,” says former state prosecutor Aídee Maria Moser Torquato Luiz, who tried for two decades to stop the land grabs in Jaci-Paraná before finally giving up and moving away from the Amazon.

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“Someone is bankrolling them.”

At the core of the scams is the byzantine land-management system Inca left standing in the chaotic transition from dictatorship to democracy.

“There's a huge discrepancy between reality of fact and the reality in our documentation,” says Tatiana de Noronha Versiani Ribeiro, the lead federal prosecutor on the Queiroz case.

“Criminal gangs figured out how to mine the documentation and exploit the confusion.”

First, the gangs comb through public records, looking for loopholes such as Queiroz's 100-year-old rubber-tapping permits. Then, with phony paperwork in hand, they recruit desperate families and convince them the land is up for grabs.

They bus them out to remote reserves, promising to pay for supplies and food. The claims are always challenged in court, but they sit in legal limbo for years.

By that time, the camps have grown into villages, and it gets more politically complicated to evict hundreds of families with children. All the while, the masterminds are raiding the forest of its hardwood. When they're done, they move on to their next target.

Many of the families can't make it on their own and end up abandoning the land they fought so hard for, or selling it cheap to big farmers amassing soybean and ranching empires.

Nabhan Garcia, Bolsonaro's land-policy czar at the Ministry of Agriculture, is a stout fast-talker with a bushy mustache and a penchant for khaki hunting vests.

On a June day, he walks into a barbecue for ranchers at the Ji-Paraná fairgrounds in Rondônia, and the crowd gathered under a long ramada whoops and cheers.

The dirt car park is brimming with four-wheel-drive Toyota Hiluxes and Ford Rangers and, next to it, a row of 10 forequarters of beef slowly roast over a bed of coal.

In the crowd are politicians, mining executives, and ranchers who've expanded into solar power and construction.

In one of the world's most unequal societies, these are the guys who've made it big, who've built empires - who, as Nabhan Garcia tells them, "carry Brazil on your backs and sustain it with your sweat."

Some boast of properties in the tens of thousands of hectares, which is possible only if they were granted during the dictatorship or pieced together from failed smaller farms, or are untitled land grabs. These are the guys Bolsonaro wants to boost.

Under legislation the president introduced in 2019 that's now making its way through congress, industrial-scale farmers may for the first time be able to get in on the legal land laundering and win clean titles to public tracts that were originally intended for settlements or reserves.



Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, right, detonates a weapon during annual military exercises by the Brazilian Navy. Picture: AP Photo/Eraldo Peres

The proposal opens the door to more farmers sitting on properties between about 300 hectares and 2,500 hectares. All combined, that's an extra 16 million hectares of Amazon land that could soon be titled, including properties that were deforested as recently as 2012.

The most dangerous change, however, according to Raoni Rajão, a land-management and environmental policy expert at the Federal University in Minas Gerais, is that the government wants to make it a no-check process, meaning Incra officials will no longer be required to go out into the field and inspect the properties before issuing titles. They'll rely only on satellite images.

"It works for the land-grabbers to not have Incra doing its job," Rajão says.

"It becomes an incentive to keep stealing land."

As special secretary of land affairs, Nabhan Garcia is leading the charge to rally support for the bill. With no previous political experience other than a failed congressional run in 2006, he's managed to amass an almost cultlike following among his fellow ranchers and an impressive level of influence with the president.

The two bonded during Bolsonaro's 2018 campaign over a shared love of guns and disdain for foreign governments they say are threatened by Brazil's agricultural prowess.

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“Behind it all - all the lies about the Amazon - is a dirty war fueled by geopolitics and hypocrisy,” Nabhan Garcia says.

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“No other country in the world has the potential to boost production the way Brazil does, and that scares people.”

About 167,000 claims for titles are awaiting an Incra decision. As many as 12% of them involve farms not currently allowed by law, making up 60% of the area being claimed.

Almost 30% of the land shows no signs of use before 2018, meaning the law change isn't about giving security to families who've been on the properties for decades, Rajão says. It's about amnestying more recent and bigger invasions.

Once Incra approves the title, the owner essentially buys it from the federal government. In a municipality in Para state, for example, a hectare from Incra costs as little as 46 reais. It's worth more than 100 times that in the open market.

The analysis of title claims is far from complete, mainly because data on properties is so hard to come by. Bolsonaro's government has used the pandemic as cover to clamp down on access to public information related to land grabs, and Rondônia state has been among the most aggressive in locking away its documents.

What is sure is that the destruction is accelerating. In recent years, Bolsonaro put the Ministry of Agriculture in charge of the environmental regulator, cut firefighting and management budgets, reversed plans to protect large swaths of indigenous lands, and proposed opening up indigenous lands to mining.

Roughly 10,500 square kilometers of rainforest were destroyed in the first six months of 2021, on course to eclipse 2020's 11-year high.

A study released in July by Brazil's National Institute for Space Research shows that parts of the Amazon where the burns are the worst have flipped into net carbon emitters, contributing to climate change rather than helping to limit it.

Many of the land grabs go far beyond what even Bolsonaro's administration has proposed pardoning. The thinking is that even though greenwashed titles for, say, a national park may not be in the pipeline now, it's only a matter of time before they are. With no real consequence or enforcement, why not stake the claims now?

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“What's astonishing is that these are self-confessed crimes,” Rajão says. “People go in and say, ‘I'm seizing this land,’ and they're rewarded for it, because the lawmakers keep moving the line forward.”

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