

Brazil, once a champion of environmentalism, grapples with new role as climate antagonist

By [Terrence McCoy](#) and [Gabriela Sá Pessoa](#)

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RIO DE JANEIRO — Last year, as the [coronavirus](#) exploded into a global catastrophe and international commerce lurched to a halt, carbon emissions worldwide fell for the first time in modern history. They fell in the United States. Plummeted in the European Union. Dropped in India.

But not in Brazil.

Despite a steep economic recession, a devastating covid-19 outbreak and a patchwork of coronavirus restrictions, the country still managed to pump 9 percent more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere than it had in 2019, a consortium of Brazilian organizations reported in a large climate study released last week.

“The principal factor,” [the authors wrote](#), “was deforestation.”

Brazil on Tuesday joined a global pledge to end deforestation over the next decade. But if even a debilitating pandemic failed to slow deforestation in Brazil, home to two-thirds of the Amazon rainforest, scientists worry the target will be difficult to meet under the stewardship of President Jair Bolsonaro, who has repeatedly called to develop the forest and undermined agencies charged with preserving it.

“When you have the head of state, the most powerful man in the country, pretty much telling people to go deforest and what is illegal today will be legal tomorrow, then it’s very hard,” said Raoni Rajão, one of Brazil’s leading researchers on deforestation. “There isn’t enough money or carbon credits in the world that can change the situation.”

As leaders meet in Scotland for the United Nations climate summit known as COP26, it’s been a week in which Brazil has been forced to reckon with just how out of step it now is with the rest of the world. In the span of a decade, Latin America’s largest country has gone from environmental champion to antagonist, led by the divisive Bolsonaro, who has seen globalist subterfuge in concern over the burning biome. In a world increasingly willing to cooperate to curb global warming, Bolsonaro has instead forged a go-it-alone path, [preaching](#) the sanctity of sovereignty, [insulting other world leaders](#) and [forsaking](#) an international fund to protect the forest.

Now has come the political fallout

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“It’s known he has received a lot of criticism,” Vice President Hamilton Mourão conceded last week. “Everyone wants to cast stones at him.”

Bolsonaro has at times tried to push back against his image as a development-driven climate change skeptic. In a prerecorded address that aired at the climate summit, he touted Brazil’s commitment to the environment and said the country could be more ambitious in its policies.

“Brazil is a green power,” he said. “In the fight against climate change, we’ve always been part of the solution, not the problem.”

That Brazil is now seen by many environmentalists as just that — a problem — shows how quickly the country’s environmental reputation crumbled. A decade ago, the World Bank said Brazil was poised to “lead in green growth.” It had thrown itself into renewable energy and forbidden farmers in the Amazon from deforesting more than 20 percent of their land. A 2010 Pew Research Center poll showed 85 percent of Brazilians saw climate change as a “very serious problem.” That was more than double the rate in the United States. Deforestation was largely under control.

“It was a moment when Brazil truly was a hero,” said Beto Verissimo, co-founder of the Amazon Institute of People and Environment.

But even then, one of the country’s most combustible issues was beginning to crackle. A powerful new movement in politics, which valued development and economic prosperity at least as much as protecting the environment, was strengthening in the country’s vast interior, an agricultural powerhouse. Economic growth had created a new class of wealthy Brazilians far removed in geography and culture from the traditional spheres of power along the populous coastline.

“We became like the United States,” said historian and journalist Pedro Doria. “A huge red spot in the middle of the country. The big cities tend to be more cosmopolitan, but in the middle there is a new Brazil that is suddenly rich and has its own culture, its own industry, even its own music. They have political power, have become stronger because of that money and are deeply conservative.”

They came to make up the *ruralista* movement, an emerging political force. They amassed a large membership in the National Congress and scored a major victory in 2012 in the rewriting of the forest code, which effectively granted amnesty for illegal deforestation before 2008. Environmentalists say the measure helped spark a new era of deforestation in the Amazon.

“It was a message from the ruralistas,” Verissimo said. “That these areas in the Amazon, this massive swath of forest that didn’t have any purpose, was going to be by some form privatized, and the people who occupy it will be granted land rights and will be pardoned.”

The ruralistas would come to form a crucial bloc of the Bolsonaro coalition. He, in turn, rewarded their support by selecting several ministers from their ranks, including the ministers of environment and agriculture. They presented a face of Brazil that had long been a part of the country but was unfamiliar to most outside its borders.

“The elite in Brazil has expanded,” Doria said. “Now the world is hearing more voices.”

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environmental organizations, the media and Indigenous communities.

Now the administration is asking for aid from the international community.

“What credibility does it have to receive money?” asked Carlos Minc, the country’s environment minister from 2008 to 2010. “Brazil has lost the conditions — not in this government and not with these results — it has completely lost the conditions to be seen as a reliable partner.”

For former environmental officials, it has been difficult to watch.

“It took 30 years to build our soft power on the environment,” said Izabella Teixeira, environment minister from 2010 to 2016. “It has been lost in three.”

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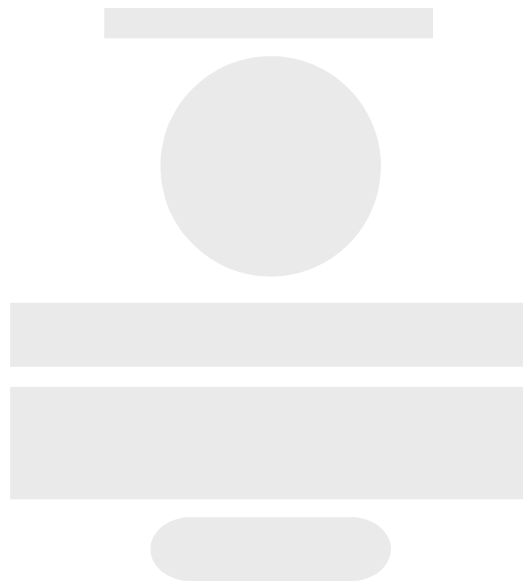
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