

# Brazil election brings new hope for the Amazon

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Brazil's ouster of right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro this week is giving environmentalists hope for the future of the Amazon rainforest.

The Amazon — considered of major importance to combating climate change — faced increased logging and clearing under Bolsonaro, whose administration openly deprioritized environmental laws.

On Sunday, Brazilians elected Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, known colloquially as “Lula,” to replace Bolsonaro. Da Silva, who was also the country's president from 2003 through 2010, has pledged to protect the precious rainforest.

“Let's fight for zero deforestation,” he said after winning the election.

“Brazil will fight for a living Amazon; a standing tree is worth more than thousands of logs — that is why we will resume the surveillance of the entire Amazon and any illegal activity, and at the same time we will promote sustainable development,” he added.

But there could still be challenges ahead, including with the country's more conservative National Congress.

Preserving the Amazon is vital to fighting climate change because of the amount of planet-warming carbon dioxide that the massive forest can absorb: around 123 billion tons of carbon above and below ground, according to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The forest's carbon storage is "absolutely necessary to fight the climate emergency," said Brazilian climate scientist Carlos Nobre.

The Amazon is also home to hundreds of Indigenous groups and a vast trove of animal and plant species.

During da Silva's prior two terms, his administration tackled land-clearing in the Amazon with a multilayered strategy that expanded the scope and number of protected areas, tackled illegal logging and funded new means of remote satellite surveillance to identify areas where forest was being lost.

Da Silva and his successor Dilma Rousseff also targeted root causes of deforestation — such as the easy credit available to agricultural interests clearing new lands. They incentivized new sustainable supply chains and investment into making Amazonian agriculture more productive so that economic growth could take place through more intensive cultivation of existing parcels, rather than clearing new ones.

But Rousseff was impeached in 2017 in what she called a "parliamentary coup" orchestrated by the rising members of Brazil's "ruralist" faction of large agricultural landholders and mining interests.

After a right-wing anti-corruption campaign saw the still-popular da Silva imprisoned, Bolsonaro swept to power in 2018 on a platform that included scaling up development of the Amazon.

Under Bolsonaro, deforestation began trending sharply upward. The first half of 2022 saw record deforestation rates, according to Mongabay. Last month, INPE, Brazil's space agency, found that deforestation was up nearly 50 percent from a year ago.

A primary factor in this forest loss was the Bolsonaro government's slashing of environmental funding, incentivizing land clearing for Amazon infrastructure projects and, particularly, fostering a lax attitude toward law enforcement in the forest, according to a March study in *Environmental Research Letters*.

Bolsonaro also supported oil development and mining in Indigenous reserves while doing little to block illegal invasions by miners into protected areas. In one campaign video, he blasted environmentalists who don't want to let Brazil's Indigenous communities "evolve" or "plant on their land, explore, mine."

An October study in *Cell Press* showed that Indigenous-controlled forest lands tend to be "the healthiest, highest functioning, most diverse, and most ecologically resilient."

"Bolsonaro's administration did not prioritize to enforce the law, especially environmental law, in the Amazon," said Carolina Genin, climate director at World Resources Institute Brazil (WRI).

Raoni Rajão, a professor of environmental management and social studies of science at Brazil's Federal University of Minas Gerais, said a range of actions under Bolsonaro worsened deforestation: installation of political appointees to key positions, requiring meetings — some of which never happened — before levying fines and changes that drew out the appeals process.

Rajão, who is also a fellow at the Wilson Center, said that had Bolsonaro won the election, losing the Amazon would have been “ensured.”

Studies have shown that the Amazon is nearing a “tipping point” after which it is unlikely to recover. Crossing those lines is expected to be disastrous for both the forest itself and its ability to combat climate change.

Nobre, the climate scientist, said that if the tipping point is exceeded, large portions of the forest will “degrade” into open canopy ecosystems and will generally shrink over a 30- to 50-year period. It would also release more than 200 billion tons of carbon dioxide over this period, he said.

He predicted that if these thresholds are crossed, the world would lose its chance to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, or 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit, and would instead face global warming of at least around 2.4 or 2.5 degrees Celsius, meaning 4.3 to 4.5 degrees Fahrenheit.

Much of this loss is already underway — at least in some parts of the patchwork of landscapes that make up the great forest. A 2021 study in *Nature* found that some parts of the Amazon — in particular the agricultural frontier in the forest's southeast — are already emitting more carbon than they store.

Bolsonaro's laissez-faire approach to the Amazon shows the close role between enforcement — or lack thereof — and conditions on the ground.

“The state can actually change things very quickly because actually it's a question of will — of enforcing the law,” WRI climate director Genin said, while also noting that “it's not a silver bullet, but it will solve an important part of the problem.”

But while the enforcement and environmental policies of the da Silva administration could make a major difference for the rainforest, the new president faces a far more difficult challenge than in his first administrations — starting with the tight control that the Bolsonaro faction still maintains with its commanding lead over both houses of Brazil's Congress.

Bolsonaro's party won 99 seats in the 513-member lower House and 13 of the 27 seats in the Senate — a dramatic base of power in a body split among some 16 parties.

While da Silva can undertake a lot of the enforcement and regulatory policies unilaterally, Rajão said that he expects the president-elect to have more trouble with any legislative proposals.

“It’s a very conservative Congress. It’s a very anti-environmental Congress,” he said.

If there is one dramatic reprieve for the forest, it may be simply that Bolsonaro will not get to appoint two more justices to the nation’s high court. That body just defied the president by ordering the government to reactivate a billion dollar international fund aimed at protecting the forest, which Bolsonaro had frozen.

In the U.S. and around the world, leaders and lawmakers acknowledged the importance of da Silva returning to power.

“Lula’s win is a victory for global climate action. The importance of the Amazon as a carbon sink cannot be overstated, and its preservation is critical to preventing the most destructive climate change scenarios. Lula significantly curbed deforestation during his previous tenure in office, and I am eager to work with him to restore environmental protections in the Amazon, support indigenous communities, and drive international progress on climate,” Sen. Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii) said in a statement.

President Biden, too, said that he was putting a team together to discuss what he and da Silva can do together, saying that the Brazilian leader wants to focus on “the environment, democracy, and dealing with the poor in his country. And saving the Amazon.”