

Person in the News **Marina Silva**

Marina Silva, an unflinching campaigner to save Brazil's rainforest

In her new spell as president Lula's environment minister she will face challenges even greater than in her first term



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Marina Silva hails from a part of Brazil so remote that even Brazilians say it is not real. *O Acre não existe* — Acre doesn't exist — goes the bon mot, a playful nod to the isolation of the sweltering Amazonian state, which more than a few have struggled to find on a map.

But it was this densely forested sliver of Brazil, hanging off the nation's northwestern frontier, that forged Marina (as she is universally known) into an environmentalist. It was here she began a lifetime of green activism that is now reaching a peak with her appointment to what is one of the world's most consequential jobs.

This week the 64-year-old daughter of impoverished rubber tappers was sworn in for another stint as Brazil's environment minister under the new leftwing government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. During her first term in office from 2003 to 2008, Marina was hailed for her unflinching devotion to forest communities and an almost fanatical focus on reducing deforestation, even as her methods riled powerful farming interests. Today she faces the same mission, but with much greater urgency.

Deforestation in the Amazon rainforest has soared in recent years. Estimates suggest an area the size of 3,000 football pitches is razed every day, dramatically undercutting the rainforest's role as a carbon sink for global emissions. Parts of the biome — which cuts across nine Latin American nations — now emit more carbon than they absorb.

“Things have changed and the picture is much worse than it was in 2003,” Marina told the FT last year. “The [previous] Bolsonaro government didn't just weaken [environment] management, it didn't just cut budgets, it also empowered the sectors which are damaging for indigenous people and gave a lot of economic power to the most backward elements in agribusiness.”

Growing up in rural Acre, Marina witnessed first-hand the devastation that accompanies deforestation. When a bulldozing crew arrived to construct a highway near her hamlet when she was 14, they brought with them an epidemic of measles and malaria. Soon two of her younger sisters were dead. Then a cousin and an uncle. Her mother died months later.

“I know what it is to starve. I had to share an egg with seven other siblings, with a little flour, salt and bits of chopped onion. I remember asking my mother and father, ‘aren't you going to eat?’ And my mother replied, ‘we are not hungry’. And a child believed that,” she recalled.

After contracting hepatitis, the adolescent Marina moved to Rio Branco, the state capital, where nuns taught her to read and write. Working as a maid, she funded her education and studied history at a local university. There she met Chico Mendes, an environmentalist and rubber tapper, who was later murdered by cattle ranchers, and she began her career of green activism.

Long before protecting the Amazon became a platform that could reliably win votes, Marina parried her passion for the environment into politics, winning local elections and becoming the then-youngest ever federal senator at 36. When Lula set up his first government in 2003, there was only one choice for environment minister.

“The fight against deforestation is something very personal for Marina. She is a religious person, and being minister and implementing a strong environmental policy is more than a job for her, it is a calling,” said Raoni Rajão of the Federal University of Minas Gerais.

Short and slight in frame, Marina appears almost frail after a lifetime of rainforest ailments including five bouts of malaria, three of hepatitis, one of leishmaniasis and a dose of mercury contamination. But her resolve cuts through once she speaks. “She becomes huge in an argument. She becomes huge when she enters a room and speaks her mind, refusing to be intimidated by powerful men,” said Maria Laura Canineu of Human Rights Watch.

Her first stint as minister was widely hailed as a success, with Marina reducing Amazonian deforestation by as much as 70 per cent. Her administrative and financial initiatives included new management of public forests, the creation of a forest service and a biodiversity institute and several funds for the maintenance of the Amazon.

However, her unyielding manner offended agricultural and mining interests, who complained she was holding back development by refusing to give out environmental licences. Tensions rose with Lula. While Marina described deforestation as a “cancer”, the president referred to it as “a nodule, which may or may not be malignant”.

Frustrated, she left the government in 2008, before unsuccessfully contesting the presidency three times. Now she is back. She joined Lula’s election campaign last year on condition that he toughen his environmental promises. Pledges to achieve “net zero deforestation” — meaning forest loss could be offset by other measures — now simply read “zero deforestation”.

Despite having Lula’s full-throated support, Marina faces an enormous challenge. The Amazon’s myriad criminal enterprises have become more ingrained, savvy and technologically advanced. She also takes over an enforcement apparatus gutted by budget cuts.

Yet her resolve remains fierce. “Destroying the Amazon is destroying the planet,” she once said, “and if I don’t care about that because I need to make a profit on the next soyabean crop or shipment of wood, I’ve broken the social bond. That is what this is all about.”

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