

Q&A: Expert discusses environmental policies of the Bolsonaro government

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Deforestation in the world's largest rainforest in Brazil has soared under President Jair Bolsonaro. In June the number of fires in the Amazon rainforest, one of the most diverse ecosystems on earth as well as a

critical buffer against global warming, reached a 13-year high. After mounting criticism of Bolsonaro's environmental policies and increasing pressure from national and international investors, the government has announced it will decree an "absolute moratorium" on burning the Amazon rainforest for 120 days. We spoke to Raquel Sirotti, doctoral researcher at the Max Planck Institute For European Legal History, about the significance of the four-month ban and the President's political strategy of short-term profits at the cost of the environment.

The Brazilian government has imposed a ban of forest fires for four months. What is in your opinion the probability that President Jair Bolsonaro will enforce the decree?

Sirotti: I think it's not really a matter of probability, I think the problem is that most of the fires in the rainforest in Brazil are illegal. So while you can launch a decree saying you will prohibit fires for a period of time, you still cannot control what's being done illegally. I would say that even if Bolsonaro is able to enforce the measure, there will still be a lot of illegal fires. Also, the decree do not solve the problem: what is going to happen after these four months? The content of this decree is no environmental policy. It shows something that has been constantly denounced by Brazilian opposition forces. The government strategy is to be permissive with fire and deforestation by, on the one hand, criticizing and not complying with former regulations and standards, and, on the other, not having a clear environmental policy.

Is compliance monitored?

There is a governmental agency called Ibama, which is in charge of monitoring the implementation of environmental measures in general. The problem is that since the beginning of the Bolsonaro government,

this agency has been treated very badly. Bolsonaro has fired a number of Ibama officials, replacing them with members of the military with no experience in [environmental policies](#). So there has been a change in personnel in that agency, which is jeopardizing the enforcement of environmental measures. Also, the director of the agency which is responsible for producing data regarding deforestation in the Brazilian rainforest, the INPE, was dismissed last year after announcing that deforestation in 2019, Bolsonaro's first year of government, rose 88% in comparison to the prior year. He was replaced by a military, what generated a lot of debate about how trustful data produced by this agency can be. Last but not least, the Amazonia Found, which is the institution responsible for managing resources directed to the prevention, monitoring and fight against deforestation, is currently managed by the Vice-President Hamilton Mourão, who is also a military man with no experience with environmental policies.

The Brazilian government has been criticized for its lax environmental policy. Already during the election campaign, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro had promised to open the Amazon for increased economic use. Why this about-turn of the 120-day decree?

At a ministerial meeting on April 22, the environmental minister Ricardo Salles said that the government should take the opportunity of the diversion created by the coronavirus crisis, while the attention of the press was focused on covering the COVID-19 pandemic, to push through further deregulations of environmental policies and hand more power over to agribusiness. Since the video of this meeting was released by court order, however, the government has received intense criticism from international investors and funds supporting conservation projects. They have been putting pressure on the government to do more to protect the rainforest, threatening to withdraw their capital otherwise.

In response, the decree to stop the fires was now announced. There's an attempt for greater regulation of the fires and to get away from the idea that Bolsonaro is opening the rainforest to profiteers. This is a direct result of international pressure, but still, it is far from being a protective environmental policy.

Is Bolsonaro just trying to reassure his international critics?

I would say he is trying to make sure that international money will keep coming to Brazil by creating the impression that he cares about the environment and that even though he has been pushing through a policy of fewer regulations, he's not going to destroy everything.

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

I think the most successful strategy has been corporate pressure, the threat by international investors and entrepreneurs to pull money from Brazil if the environment minister continues to open the rainforest to investors to do whatever they like there. Unfortunately, this appears to be the only effective language. It must be said that Bolsonaro has shown a complete lack of sensitivity regarding compliance with international environmental standards and agendas. However, especially now that the government is facing huge economic problems because of the coronavirus pandemic, international money is of high importance. I believe the strategy that has been adopted so far—corporate pressure if Brazil's environmental record deteriorates any further—will be effective as long as it is maintained even after the 120-day decree has ended.

Are import restrictions on Brazilian products useful?

I would say yes. The country is facing a huge economic crisis and banning imports by people not complying with environmental laws will make this crisis even worse. So everything related to investments, money, and donations is very important to Brazil right now, even more important than before the crisis.

What is the general acceptance of law and order? Are laws observed or rather ignored if this is not monitored?

I think under Bolsonaro's government, environmental policies and laws are generally not observed or enforced. As I said before, there are many reports that the officials in charge of ensuring compliance with these laws are being replaced with military personnel, which is a huge challenge for law enforcement. He is installing trusted appointees who share his core beliefs, which of course contributes to these laws not being complied with.

Actually, at the beginning of May, federal prosecutors filed a lawsuit against the minister of environment Ricardo Salles, calling for his dismissal and accusing him of violating his duties to protect the environment. So there is a movement going in the other direction, of trying to replace Salles with someone more concerned with environmental policies.

Around 10,000 square kilometers of Amazon forest were cleared last year, accompanied by huge fires. Is there resistance of the Brazilian population against the fires?

Yes, definitely! Even though there is large group of people involved in agrobusiness as well as landowners, who have a great vested interest in laxer environmental laws, in general, the rainforest in Brazil is seen as one of our greatest goods that should be preserved, that should be maintained and not sold to international interests. The leftwing and more progressive parties are greatly concerned about the deforestation and criticizing the environmental minister Salles. Also the middleclass, many of whom actually voted for Bolsonaro, are greatly worried about the lack of these regulations. There is a lot of confusion and discontent—even among the people who voted for Bolsonaro in the election.

How is the topic of rainforest protection seen within Brazilian society?

Since the workers party [government](#), since before Bolsonaroro, the topic of environmental law, especially the revised Brazilian Forest Code in 2012, has been a very sensitive and much-discussed topic. Since the update in 2012, which was quite controversial and has caused much confusion, the question of how to preserve the [rainforest](#) and with which measures, has been a topic of much debate in Brazilian society.

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