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Amazonia and the setbacks of Brazil's political moment (commentary)

Commentary by Philip Fearnside on 12 October 2018

- *In the October 7 Brazilian election, far right candidate Jair Bolsonaro won 46 percent of the vote, not enough to earn the presidency, but triggering a runoff election October 28 with Fernando Haddad who came in second with 29 percent. Analysts say that, barring surprises, Bolsonaro could be Brazil's next leader.*
- *Bolsonaro was elected based on several issues, including reaction to government corruption and his stance on crime. However, says analyst Philip Fearnside, Jair's most lasting impacts will likely be on the environment, especially the Amazon, indigenous and traditional peoples, and destabilization of the global climate.*
- *The candidate has promised to abolish Brazil's environmental ministry, expel NGOs such as Greenpeace and WWF from the country, slash science and technology budgets, "sell" indigenous lands, and "relax" licensing for major infrastructure projects such as dams, industrial waterways, roads and railways.*
- *But his most impactful act could be a pledge to pull out of the Paris Climate Agreement, ending Brazil's global commitment to reduce deforestation, triggering massive Amazon forest loss, and possibly runaway climate change. This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*



Jair Bolsonaro. Image by Fabio Rodrigues Pozzebom / Agencia Brasil.

A Portuguese-language version of this commentary is available on Amazonia Real [here](#).

Brazil's [presidential election](#) has created virulent polarization in the country with consequences for the Amazon. Right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro won the first round of the election on October 8 with 46 percent of the valid votes, and polls show him ahead by a wide margin for the second round to be held on October 28.

The current political moment is replete with threats of setbacks. Some are administrative, such as Bolsonaro's promises to [abolish](#) the Ministry of the Environment, [expel](#) international NGOs such as Greenpeace and WWF and [take away](#) any government funding that benefits "[activists](#)." There are also threats of major budget cuts for [science and technology](#).

Other [proposals](#) include "[selling](#)" Indigenous lands and "[relaxing](#)" environmental [licensing](#) for infrastructure projects such as highways and dams, in addition to other proposals that would effectively [abolish](#) licensing. Under these deregulatory measures, the social impacts of these infrastructure projects could not be undone at a later date, as is the case for displacing and scattering communities of indigenous peoples or of traditional Amazonian riverside dwellers ("[ribeirinhos](#)"), together with destruction of their livelihoods. The same irreversibility applies to environmental impacts.



Should he be elected and follow through with his campaign pledges, Bolsonaro could pose a major threat to Amazon biodiversity, Brazil's environment, and indigenous and traditional peoples. Image by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

Bolsonaro's proposal for Brazil to [abandon](#) the Paris Agreement on controlling global warming is one of the threats with the most [irreversible consequences](#). The Amazon rainforest faces a frightening process of degradation through fragmentation, logging, major droughts, floods and windstorms, forest fires and biological invasions of lianas and bamboo. In addition to these consequences, there are losses from [deforestation](#), whose annual rate increased by 52 percent from 4,571 to 6,947 square kilometers (1,765 to 2,682 square miles) between 2012 and 2017. Tipping points for the Amazonian forest are already very close, both from the advance of [deforestation](#) and from increase in global [temperature](#).

This is not just a Brazilian problem. Amazonia's huge [carbon stocks](#) in the [vegetation](#) and in the [soil](#) put this region at the center of global concerns about a "runaway greenhouse" because any substantial release of Amazonia's carbon stocks would make it difficult to control global warming.

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [report](#) released on October 8 has broadened global awareness of the existence and proximity of this planetary hazard. Unfortunately, denial of the existence of anthropogenic global warming, which represents an influential [force](#) in Brazil, has [already reached](#) the sphere

of [presidential debates](#). This is a formula for irreversible degradation in the Amazon, in addition to tragic impacts worldwide.



Bolsonaro's promise to abolish the environmental ministry and pull out of the Paris Climate Agreement could lead to rampant deforestation, and even runaway climate change. Image by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

The political moment in Brazil is largely dominated by other issues: loyalty to the Workers' Party (PT) versus "anti-PT" sentiment reflecting revulsion over corruption during the thirteen years that this party was in power, and generalized desire for tough measures to control crime and violence. Social and environmental concerns are being sidelined in the face of polarization on these other issues. Multiple people have told me of fights within their families due to political differences.

However, it is the social and environmental issues in Amazonia that will last. These issues are of paramount importance to the country and will be present well beyond the span of a presidential mandate. Recognizing and facing the threats to the Amazonian environment should be something that unifies the country, even in the midst of the divisions of the current political moment.

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The eyes of the world are on Brazil this month as it selects a new president who will help determine whether the nation stands as a guardian for the Amazon, or seeks to exploit and destroy it. Image by Rhett. A. Butler / Mongabay.