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Commentary:

Will President Bolsonaro withdraw Brazil from the Paris Agreement?

Commentary by [Philip Fearnside](#) on 31 January 2019



- *Early in his presidential campaign, candidate Jair Bolsonaro stated that he planned to pull Brazil out of the Paris Climate Agreement. Then, just before his election, the media reported that he was committed to keeping the nation in the accord.*
- *However, what Bolsonaro actually said was that he would keep Brazil in the agreement “for now,” but only if several conditions were met, allowances that would likely require alterations in the international accord.*
- *As there is no one who can make these assurances, Bolsonaro’s conditions cannot be met. Meanwhile, Amazon deforestation is rising, and the new government has announced massive plans for Amazon development. Brazil has also withdrawn its sponsorship of the 2019 United Nations Climate Conference (COP25).*
- *Bolsonaro may yet choose to leave Paris, or may stay in the accord, feigning international cooperation while promoting deforestation. Either path poses great risks to the climate and Amazonia. This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*



Trees illegally harvested inside a Brazilian Amazon indigenous reserve on their way to a sawmill, likely for export to the European Union, U.S., and other nations. Image by Sue Branford.

The frequent shifts and contradictions in the positions of Brazil's new president may be confusing, but the upshot for climate is ominous. Widely reported statements that President Jair Bolsonaro will keep Brazil in the Paris Agreement have conditions attached that suggest the opposite, while his appointments and policies clearly run counter to Brazil's 2015 carbon emissions reduction pledge.

Bolsonaro's [denial](#) of anthropogenic climate change and his [campaign promises](#) to abandon the Paris Agreement have [important implications](#) for deforestation, dams and other [developments in Amazonia](#).

Honoring [Brazil's commitment](#) to reduce its emissions by 43 percent below the 2005 level by 2030 would require reversing a trend of [increasing deforestation rates](#) that has prevailed in the country's Amazon region since 2012. The Environment Ministry has used the 2015 Paris carbon-cut commitment made by Brazil as an important justification in obtaining funds from the federal budget for its efforts to control forest loss.

Carbon emissions continue escalating: during the 2018 presidential campaign, with Bolsonaro well ahead in the polls and widespread euphoria among "ruralists" (large landholders and their representatives) in anticipation of his victory, deforestation rates [increased](#) by 36 percent as compared to the same months in 2017. And one [study](#) has calculated that deforestation rates could almost triple if all of Bolsonaro's Amazon development proposals take effect.

Bolsonaro has appointed climate deniers to head both the [Environment Ministry](#) and the [Foreign Affairs Ministry](#). Both the new ministers of [environment](#) and [foreign affairs](#) have abolished the sections within their ministries that dealt with climate change.



What happens in the Brazilian Amazon doesn't stay in the Brazilian Amazon. Research shows that the loss of the region's vast rainforest could seriously contribute to destabilizing the global climate. Image courtesy of NASA.

A statement by Bolsonaro before the October 2018 runoff election was widely reported as a reversal of his intention of abandoning the Paris Agreement, but there was actually no reversal. [What Bolsonaro said](#) was that Brazil would remain in the agreement if "someone" could give him a written guarantee that there would be no "Triple A" project and no "independence of any indigenous area." Triple A refers to a proposal by a Colombian NGO for a chain of protected areas linking the Andes to the Atlantic, which Bolsonaro believes is a foreign conspiracy to take Amazonia away from Brazil, while "independence of any indigenous area" refers to his belief that foreign governments are trying to convince indigenous peoples to declare independence from Brazil so that the conspiring governments can recognize the areas and gain control over Amazonia.

Since no written guarantee can be expected regarding these imagined threats, Bolsonaro's promise to leave the Paris Agreement [remained intact](#). He [later said](#) that Brazil could stay in the Paris Agreement, but only if the agreement were changed to suit his demands.

The Climate Convention's upcoming 2019 Conference of the Parties (COP25) was also [characterized by Bolsonaro](#) as a threat because "Triple A is at stake in this accord," and after the election he successfully requested the lame-duck Temer administration to revoke Brazil's invitation to host the conference.

After Bolsonaro took office, he was convinced to keep Brazil in the Paris Agreement “for now,” the [result of pressure](#) from parts of his administration and from international sources, which included a threat by French President Emmanuel Macron at the November 2018 G20 meeting in which [Macron specified](#) Brazil’s remaining in the Paris Agreement as a condition for France’s support for a trade accord between the European Union and Mercosul, the South American regional economic organization.

When corporate [CEOs questioned Bolsonaro](#) in a closed session at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, on 22 January 2019, he said Brazil would remain in the agreement, but his statement is [quoted as being qualified](#) that the country will stay in the accord “for now.” Just minutes before, Bolsonaro had made no public statement on the topic in his prepared plenary address.

The next day, Bolsonaro made clear that staying in the Paris Agreement was only “for now” and that there were [strings attached](#), including payment to Brazil for carbon emissions reductions and “respectful” treatment of the country. When the vice president was questioned about Bolsonaro’s position on the Paris Agreement [he dodged](#) by saying only that the president is aware that “we cannot escape the question ... of climate.” Bolsonaro’s statements in Davos on the environment were contested by [fact checkers](#) and generally bore [little relation](#) to his actual actions in Brazil.

Jair Bolsonaro, who is often labeled the “tropical Trump,” is unpredictable in many ways, but one pattern that has become clear is his finding ways to work around any backtracking he may be forced to do on controversial topics. The end result is that his original agenda is achieved anyway. One example: dropping his [promise](#) to abolish the Environment Ministry but [effectively eliminating](#) its functions.

With the Paris Agreement, he may make good on his threats to withdraw if his demands for alterations in the agreement are not met, or he may stay in the accord and simply ignore the mitigation measures to which Brazil committed itself. Either path poses a danger to global climate and to Amazonia.