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‘APOCALYPSE NOW’ FOR AMAZONIA: DEVASTATING PROMISES BY BRAZIL’S PRESIDENT-ELECT



ALERT’s Philip Fearnside is arguably the world’s top expert on conservation of the Amazon forest. Here he tells us why Brazilians are so worried about the recent election of Jair Bolsonaro — the man many people are calling the ‘Tropical Trump’.

November 14, 2018

Brazil’s election two weeks ago of Jair Bolsonaro — known by many as the “Tropical Trump” — is clearly a catastrophe for Amazonia.

Despite Brazil's incredible natural values including the world's greatest rainforest, **environmental issues** were of **little significance** to most voters during the recent campaign.

What was really on voters' minds? An **April 2018 poll** found three-quarters of the population worries about Brazil being invaded by a rich country bent on stealing its natural wealth.

Such paranoia aids Bolsonaro's efforts to portray environmental concerns as threats to Brazil's **national sovereignty**.



LEGISLATIVE LANDSLIDE

Along with Bolsonaro, conservative victories in this year's congressional elections could speed up approval of **proposed legislation** that would effectively eliminate environmental licensing and halt the creation of new protected areas.

Bolsonaro is especially hostile to the rights of indigenous peoples. He **promised** not to allow demarcation of “**a single centimeter**” of new indigenous land.

Many ordinary Brazilians are scared. **Eleven pieces of legislation** Bolsonaro supports are being fast-tracked and may be passed even before he takes office on 1 January 2019.

One of Bolsonaro's main congressional allies has **promised to "sell"** the country's indigenous lands.



Bolsonaro is extremely popular with big agribusiness and its economically powerful lobby.

Of **considerable interest** to them is a proposed law to classify the **Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST)** — which seeks to have certain private lands redistributed from wealthy landowners to the rural poor — as a terrorist organization.

This, plus Bolsonaro's proposal to allow weapons to be carried for "**protection of rural properties**," could incite more armed conflicts in Amazonia — which is already the scene of thousands of **rural murders**.

And while he's at it, Bolsonaro also promises an **end to “activists”** such as environmental and social advocates and to **expel international environmental groups**.

GUTTING ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTIONS

Under Bolsonaro's present plans, Brazil's environmental agencies would be stripped of power to license infrastructure projects — an enormous issue because such projects are major **drivers of deforestation**.

What remains of infrastructure licensing would be **distributed** to other ministries, notably those that most impact Amazonia: **Agriculture, Infrastructure, and Mines and Energy**.

All this is akin to inviting the ‘fox to guard the chicken coop’.



Brazil's current **environmental licensing** is **woefully inadequate** even without Bolsonaro's schemes to weaken it further. Control of deforestation would be relaxed, he claims, with an end to the **“industry of [environmental] fines.”**

TROPICAL TRUMP

For Bolsonaro, comparisons to Donald Trump are inevitable.

Climate-change denial, a **powerful force** in Brazil, is vigorously endorsed by Bolsonaro.

Like Trump, he portrays climate change as a foreign conspiracy — to prevent Brazil from developing economically — and uses social media to send **climate-denialist materials** to his voting base.

In August 2018 one of Bolsonaro's sons traveled to New York to **meet with Steve Bannon** — the man who convinced Trump to abandon the Paris Climate Agreement.

During his election campaign, Bolsonaro **promised to withdraw Brazil** from the Paris Agreement, just as Trump has done for the U.S.



But just before the runoff election in Brazil, Bolsonaro appeared to walk back this controversial pledge — seemingly flip-flopping, as Trump has done many times in the past.

Yet Bolsonaro will only support the Paris climate accord, he says, if he gets a written guarantee that there would be no “Triple A Project” — a planned ecological corridor connecting the Andes to the Atlantic Ocean — which Bolsonaro sees as a foreign plot to usurp control over Amazonia.

Bolsonaro also wants a guarantee of no “independence of any indigenous area.”

He evidently believes indigenous peoples might one day declare independence from Brazil and be recognized by conspiring foreign governments.

Since guarantees for such deep-fringe positions could never reasonably be expected, Bolsonaro’s intent to withdraw from the Paris Agreement evidently remains unchanged.

VULNERABLE HOMELAND

Ironically, of all nations on Earth, Brazil is expected to suffer some of the greatest impacts of climate change, based on our best scientific knowledge.

If Bolsonaro is given free reign, we may just find out exactly how bad climate change is for the Brazilian economy, agriculture, hydro-power, and its peerless biodiversity and ecosystems.