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Damming the Amazon unfettered after Brazilian purge (commentary)

Commentary by **Philip Fearnside** on 14 May 2018



In January 2018, two key Brazilian officials, Paulo Pedrosa, executive secretary of the Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME), and Luiz Augusto Barroso, the head of Energy Research Enterprise, an MME agency responsible for energy planning, announced a shift away from destructive Amazon mega-dam construction.

- *They said the reason for the shift was the heavy environmental and social impacts of such dams.*
- *After the appointment of Moreira Franco, the new Minister of Mines and Energy, both MME officials were replaced. Franco is under investigation in the lava jato (car wash) corruption probe. Amazon dams are particularly prone to corruption.*

- *There has been no mention since January that any planned Amazonian dams listed for construction by 2026 will be cancelled. This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*

The Belo Monte mega-dam under construction. Belo Monte displaced as many as 40,000 people and did tremendous damage to the Xingu River fishery, plus other environmental harm. Its construction was cloaked in charges of government and construction company corruption. Photo courtesy of Lalo de Almeida/Folhapress.

Amazon dam plans appear to have gotten a new boost from a shakeup in Brazil's Ministry of Mines and Energy in April 2018.

Hope had surged in January 2018 that Brazil's energy priorities were shifting away from highly destructive Amazonian dams. Two key officials — Paulo Pedrosa, the executive secretary of the Ministry of Mines and Energy, and Luiz Augusto Barroso, the head of EPE (Energy Research Enterprise, which is the agency under the Ministry of Mines and Energy responsible for energy planning) — [stated](#) that the heavy environmental and social impacts of Amazon dams meant that priority should shift to other energy sources, such as wind and solar.

But both of these officials have now been removed from their posts after a new minister of mines and energy was appointed.



The Santo Antônio dam on the Madeira River, part of the Madeira Hydroelectric Complex. Photo by the Brazil's Growth Acceleration Program (Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento (PAC) on flickr, used under a CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 license

While it would be a great advance if the January statements were transformed into a change in the role of environmental and social impacts in decision-making, many destructive dams in the pipeline for construction would be [likely to go ahead](#), even if the January statements

were acted upon. There was no mention since that any of the planned Amazonian dams that are [listed](#) for construction by 2026 would be [cancelled](#).

The heavy impacts of dams, given as the motive for the January statements, may not have been the key factor: [economic realities](#) would logically lead to the same policy shift. Contrary to frequent claims by dam proponents, hydropower is not “cheap energy,” even ignoring social and environmental impacts. A [worldwide survey](#) shows the normal pattern to be for dams to have much higher financial costs, and to take much longer to begin generating power, than is thought at the time construction decisions are made. This is shown by recent cases in Brazil, such as the [Madeira River dams](#) and [Belo Monte](#), which cost more than double the amount officially expected.

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