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Brazilian President Lula's Climate Authority challenge: pragmatism versus coalition politics

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In 2024, when Brazil was experiencing its longest drought since 1950 (Brazil MCTI 2024) and wildfires covered much of the country in toxic smoke, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (known as 'Lula') announced the creation of a 'Climate Authority'. At the outset of Lula's current term in January 2023, the creation of a Climate Authority was proposed by Marina Silva, a well-known environmentalist who heads the Lula administration's *Ministério do Meio Ambiente e Mudança do Clima* (MMA; Ministry of Environment and Climate Change), where the new authority was to be housed. Soon afterwards, the National Congress, which is dominated by agribusiness representatives known as *ruralistas* (ruralists), removed various key responsibilities from the MMA and transferred them to agencies friendly to their interests. The Climate Authority proposal therefore remained dormant until President Lula's recent announcement, and it continues to lack definition of its objectives and attributions (Pitombo & Chagas 2024). The Climate Authority depends on approval of it in the legislature, pending redrafting of a bill (PL 3961/2020) that would require measures to address 'climate emergencies' (Dalle 2024). Now, ruralist politicians are manoeuvring to have the proposed Climate Authority separated from the MMA and subordinated to an agency such as the *Casa Civil* (Civil House), which is an office within the presidential palace through which virtually all matters crossing the president's desk must pass and where these politicians can have great influence. The present Comment aims to analyse the possibilities of an autonomous and technical Climate Authority within the Brazilian political framework and to suggest alternatives for the development of a climate policy that is not constrained by party agreements.

Background on Brazilian politics

Understanding the current threat to Brazil's environment requires some background information on Brazilian politics. Brazil has a presidential system of government with three branches at the federal level: executive, legislative and judiciary. State governments have an increasing role in environmental matters, and municipal (county) governments are important actors in projects that impact the environment. Legislatures at both the state and federal levels are elected by state-wide vote totals rather than totals in municipalities or congressional districts. The seats are distributed based on the vote totals of the political parties, not the totals for the individual candidates. Brazil has many political parties, of which 20 have seats in the National Congress in 2025 (Congresso Nacional 2025). The party with the most seats is the *Partido Liberal* (PL; Liberal Party), the party of former president Jair Bolsonaro, whose anti-environmental actions during his 2019–2022 term in office were notable. In Brazil today the term 'liberal' has a different meaning from that in other countries and historical periods and implies reducing the government and favouring big business.

The federal legislative branch has multiple forms of influence over the executive branch that are not limited to the 'purse strings' of the annual budget. Most of the ministerial positions are offered to key political parties to gain their support for votes in the Congress. This gives these ministers power to direct federal projects to states or municipalities where their parties (and individual politicians within the parties) have electoral interests. Of course, there are also opportunities for corruption and for offering high-paying posts to political allies or their family members. In addition, there is a system of *emendas parlamentares* (parliamentary amendments), which are pork-barrel appropriations whereby individual members of congress are allotted significant amounts of money to spend essentially any way they wish, usually with a view to maximizing votes in the politician's state. There are many opportunities for corruption in this system. The *emendas parlamentares* system has burgeoned over the last decade, especially in the 2020–2024 period when R\$150 billion (c. US\$30 billion) were distributed (Vargas 2025). This is essentially a means of legally buying congressional votes; in a period of 20 days before a key vote on legislation in December 2024, the Lula administration distributed R\$8.3 billion (US\$1.5 billion) in this way (Vargas 2024). A part of the distribution of the *emendas parlamentares* is controlled by the presidents of the two chambers of the National Congress, but

Table 1. Brazilian municipalities with the highest numbers of fires in 2024.

Municipality (county)	State	Fire outbreaks ^a		Party in power in local government ^b (2017–2020)	Party in power in local government ^b (2021–2024)	Party in power in local government ^b (2025–2028)
		n	%			
São Félix do Xingu	Pará	7153	9.6	PDT (centre-left)	MDB (right)	PODE (extreme right)
Altamira	Pará	5731	7.7	PMDB (right)	PP (right)	PSD (right)
Corumbá	Mato Grosso do Sul	4942	6.7	PSDB (right)	PSDB (right)	PSB (centre-left)
Novo Progresso	Pará	4745	6.4	PSC (right)	MDB ^c (right)	MDB (right)
Apuí	Amazonas	4478	6.0	DEM (extreme right)	União (right)	MDB (right)
Lábrea	Amazonas	4120	5.6	PMDB (right)	MDB (right)	PL (extreme right)
Itaituba	Pará	3109	4.2	PMDB (right)	MDB (right)	MDB (right)
Porto Velho	Rondônia	3045	4.1	PSDB (right)	PSDB (right)	PODE (extreme right) or União Brasil (right)
Cáceres	Mato Grosso	2670	3.6	PSDB (right)	PSB ^c (centre-left)	PSB (centre-left)
Colniza	Mato Grosso	2515	3.4	PSB (right)	PSC (right)	União (right)

^aInstituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (INPE 2024).

^bTSE (2024); party classifications follow Bolognesi et al. (2023) and Pinto (2023).

^cRe-elected.

DEM = *Democratas*, Democrats; MDB (formerly PMDB) = *Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*, Brazilian Democratic Movement; PDT = *Partido Democrático Trabalhista*, Democratic Labour Party; PL = *Partido Liberal*, Liberal Party; PODE = *Podemos*, 'We Can'; PP = *Progressistas*, Progressives Party; PSB = *Partido Socialista Brasileiro*, Brazilian Socialist Party; PSC = *Partido Social Cristão*, Social Christian Party; PSD = *Partido Social Democrático*, Social Democratic Party; PSDB = *Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira*, Brazilian Social Democracy Party; União = *União Brasil*, Brazil Union.

a substantial part is controlled by the powerful Civil House within President Lula’s office. It must be noted that in President Lula’s earlier administrations an equivalent function was achieved illegally by distributing cash bribes (substantial cash payments) to members of congress to buy their votes, as revealed in the massive *mensalão* (big monthly allowance) scandal (e.g., da Costa & Sehmer 2012, Michener & Pereira 2016).

Brazil’s National Congress is dominated by two overlapping groups: the *ruralistas* and the *centrão* (big centre), the latter being a group of political parties that are not distinguished by classifications such as ‘left’ or ‘right’, but rather by being unabashedly transactional, essentially selling their votes to the highest bidder (known in Brazil as *fisiologismo*; Testa et al. 2024). A poll of Brazilian political scientists indicated the following eight parties as currently considered to be part of the group: PP, Republicanos, PL, MDB, União Brasil, Podemos, PSD and PRD (the former PTB and Patriota; Testa et al. 2024). The highest bidders for their support are often aligned with anti-environmental interests; for example, the *centrão* collaborated with the ruralist voting block to remove key responsibilities from the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change and the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples soon after President Lula took office in 2023 (Pitombo & Chagas 2024). In 2025, the *centrão* parties hold 69% of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 78% of the Senate (Congresso Nacional 2025), as well as the presidency of both houses of the National Congress and Lula’s Minister of Government, who heads the Civil House.

The *ruralistas* are large landholders and their representatives (Ferrante & Fearnside 2019). In the National Congress, these are individual members rather than political parties, and they are organized in the *Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária* (FPA; Agriculture and Ranching Parliamentary Front). In the second half of 2024, the FPA held 57% of the Chamber of Deputies and 62% of the Senate (FPA 2025). The FPA has not yet released the totals with the members of congress who took office in January 2025.

The *centrão* and *ruralistas* groups not only control sufficient seats in both houses of congress to pass ordinary legislation with more than 50% of the votes, but also surpass the 60% needed to override presidential vetoes or to amend the constitution. Amending Brazil’s constitution is easily done and does not require ratification by the states. The current constitution has been

amended 135 times since it came into force in October 1988 (Brazil PR 2025). Other interests allied with the *ruralistas* in weakening environmental controls include those for mining, logging and hydroelectric dams, thus adding to the constraints on President Lula’s actions on the environment.

The results of Brazil’s municipal elections indicate a growing threat to the Amazon

Brazil’s municipal elections of 27 October 2024 revealed a political landscape marked by the rise of the far right and right-wing parties, with positions very different from President Lula’s *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT; Workers’ Party). Of the c. 110 million valid votes for mayors, the far right secured 23% (26 million), while right-wing and centre-right parties accounted for 55% (62 million; TSE 2024). This political configuration – with a predominance of right-wing parties, particularly in the Amazon, where, between 1 January and 9 October 2024, 10 municipalities were responsible for 57.3% of the fire hotspots, 8 of which (including São Félix do Xingu, Altamira and Lábrea) being located in the Amazon region and are under the administration of right-wing parties (Table 1). This shift to the right has direct implications for environmental conservation because these parties tend to support reducing environmental controls, thus provoking more deforestation and forest degradation. There is a global anti-conservationist movement rooted in the extreme right, and Brazil is no different; indeed, it can be seen as a model for the anti-conservationist movement.

In 2024, São Félix do Xingu topped the ranking for fire hotspots, with Lábrea sixth (Table 1); both currently have right-wing governments and have elected far-right parties for the 2025–2028 term. This political shift poses a significant challenge to the environmental and climate agenda championed by President Lula.

The Climate Authority and Lula’s political contradictions

How can climate governance be promoted in the current political context? The Lula government faces two central challenges in implementing a climate agenda compatible with international

commitments and the country's new nationally determined commitment (NDC) defined in 2023.

Firstly, there is the political scenario: Amazonian state and municipality (county) governments promote a neoliberal agenda (Vilani et al. 2023), and a conservative federal legislature has been elected for the 2023–2026 period, including 66 federal deputies and 12 senators who support former President Bolsonaro (Fernandes et al. 2024). These groups also support the dismantling of Indigenous and environmental policies and support illegal Amazon mining and deforestation, and they also engage in climate change denialism (Vilani et al. 2023; Fernandes et al. 2024). As of September 2024, Lula's government comprised 38 ministries, containing ministers from 11 different parties, with a majority of centre-left (40%) and right-wing (25%) ministers.

This multiparty coalition, combined with presidentialism, federalism and a proportional electoral system, is known as 'coalition presidentialism' (Bielschowsky 2020); this describes the dynamics of the Brazilian political system, characterized by a strong presidency that often leads to conflicts between the Executive and the Legislature, where the president holds extensive powers. However, party fragmentation and the lack of a solid support base in Congress generate tensions and difficulties for governing, creating a scenario in which the Executive branch must constantly negotiate with various parties, often resulting in political instability and crises in governing; thus, this concept highlights the challenges of effectively implementing public policies because the relationship between the branches of government is marked by rivalries and disputes rather than harmonious collaboration.

Lula's three presidential administrations have relied on this model. However, the ruralist bloc, supported by other conservative sectors (including votes from parties with ministerial seats), approved the *Marco Temporal* (Time Frame) criterion for recognizing Indigenous land rights in October 2023 (Federal Law 14.701), overturning President Lula's vetoes, ignoring the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples and disregarding the ongoing Supreme Court review of its constitutionality.

Secondly, there is Lula's 'pragmatic' development agenda: in his past administrations he championed large hydroelectric dams such as Santo Antônio, Jirau and Belo Monte, with significant impacts on Indigenous peoples, riverine communities, climate and biodiversity (Fearnside 2014a, 2014b, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). During that time, when Marina Silva was still Minister of the Environment and she was in conflict with the former Minister of Mines and Energy, Dilma Rousseff, Lula decided to support Dilma Rousseff. Today, the situation is even more complicated, but when Lula had to choose, he chose 'development' (Fearnside 2024b).

In a similar vein, despite the federal environmental agency's unfavourable opinion, Lula has publicly supported the highly controversial oil drilling in the mouth of the Amazon River (Viecel & Nogueira 2024). Rebuilding BR-319 – a road linking one of the most preserved areas of forest in central Amazonia to the infamous 'arc of deforestation' in southern Amazonia (Ferrante 2024) – would increase illegal mining and logging, threaten Indigenous peoples (Fearnside 2024a) and raise the risks of a new pandemic (Ferrante 2024). Both megaprojects are of interest to local and state governments elected in 2022.

Aware of this political scenario and an internal dispute between the MMA and the Civil House, Lula decided to postpone the dialogue with the National Congress until the first quarter of 2025, when a new president of the Chamber of Deputies will be elected (Bergamasco et al. 2024). Will Lula's administration be able to

influence the choice of a politician sensitive to environmental conservation?

Final remarks

Internally, Lula's administration can use the Amazon Fund (established to receive donations in support of conservation in Amazonia, which has had major support from Norway and Germany) to 'rebuild citizenship of the Amazonian people in favour of forest conservation' (Vilani et al. 2023). It can only be hoped that future elections will favour candidates committed to forest conservation.

Concessions made to right-wing parties have proven ineffective at promoting environmental protection and Indigenous rights, and Lula must acknowledge this reality and seek external support. While halting the loss of Amazon forest is very much in Brazil's own national interest (Fearnside & Silva 2023), other countries have a role to play by conforming to international guidelines applicable to Brazilian commodities, such as those in the European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), particularly those sourced from the Amazon (Ferrante & Fearnside 2022). Mining-free zones need to be defined in the Amazon in collaboration with Indigenous peoples (Vilani et al. 2022), and the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples and the implementation of International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 need to be strengthened, ensuring Indigenous participation in decisions concerning their territories and infrastructure projects in the Amazon. While Indigenous peoples and Indigenous lands have significant benefits for the Amazonian environment (Fearnside & Ferraz 1995, Nepstad et al. 2006), Indigenous rights need to be respected independent of these roles because they are human rights.

At the opening of the 79th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2024, Lula criticized the world at large for its unfulfilled climate mitigation pledges. Now Lula has to decide which path he will take on the climate issue. Does the Climate Authority proposal genuinely aim to promote climate governance, or is it merely a means to legitimize the economic dynamics advancing across the Amazon? Postponing the decision leaves two serious uncertainties pending: can conservation of the Brazilian Amazon afford to wait for a favourable moment in the coalition presidentialist system? And how is the realization of this hope complicated by the discrepancy between the slow pace of politics and the acceleration of climate change and extreme events?

One certainty seems indisputable at this moment: after 2 years of his current administration, it should be clear to Lula that an internal coalition for addressing climate change is unattainable.

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