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Please cite as:
Favor citar como:

Ferrante, L. & P.M. Fearnside. 2021.
**Brazil's political upset threatens
Amazonia.** *Science* 371: 898-899.
<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abg9786>

ISSN: 0036-8075

DOI: 10.1126/science.abg9786

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The original publication is available at
O trabalho original está disponível em:

<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abg97>

<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/371/6532/898.full>

Brazil's political upset threatens Amazonia

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On 1 February, the Centrão coalition of political parties in Brazil, supported by President Jair Bolsonaro, gained control of both houses of Brazil's National Congress (1). Bolsonaro has a record of destructive environmental policies (2), but some of the pending bills that he supports were blocked by the former president of the Chamber of Deputies, Rodrigo Maia (3). Arthur Lira has now taken his position, and the legislature will now likely move to approve the bills that Maia had been blocking. This shift in power has ominous implications for Brazil's environment and Indigenous peoples.

Shortly after the new presidents of the two houses of Congress took office, Bolsonaro sent them a list of 35 bills that he wants passed but that Maia had indicated he would block (4). Many of these bills threaten the environment. Among them is a notorious bill that would allow mining in Indigenous lands and in protected areas for biodiversity (PL 191/2020). Also included were bills to reduce environmental-licensing requirements (PL 3729/2004), offer public forest concessions to private initiatives (PL 5518/2020), reward land grabbers by promoting the legalization of illegal land claims (PL 2633/2020), and modify sharing arrangements to promote oil and gas extraction (PL 3178/2019).

Other bills on this list are likely to exacerbate Amazonian land conflicts and attacks on Indigenous and other traditional peoples. For example, PLC 119/2015 would alter the implementation of Indigenous people's constitutional rights. PL 6438/2019 and PL 3723/2019 would further weaken gun-control laws. PL 6125/2019 would effectively give law-enforcement agents a "license to kill" by barring charges for excessive use of force.

These bills are expected to come up for a vote this year (5), at which point they are likely to pass. If they become law, they will exacerbate the effects of wood, mineral, meat, soy, natural gas, oil, and biofuel exports on deforestation in the Amazon and its associated loss of biodiversity and violation of Indigenous rights. Major importers of products from the Brazilian Amazon, such as the United States and China (6), cannot turn a blind eye to the impact of their trade with Brazil. President Bolsonaro and his supporters in the National Congress do not give much weight to the concerns of scientists and environmentalists, but they are very sensitive to international decisions that affect Brazil's exports. Global partners should consider their trade policies accordingly.

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