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Bolsonaro: The Fate of The Paris Climate Agreement and Global Climate Change Under A Shift In Brazilian Domestic Politics

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BOLSONARO: THE FATE OF THE PARIS AGREEMENT AND GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE UNDER A SHIFT IN BRAZILIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS

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(BOLSONARO: THE FATE OF THE PARIS AGREEMENT AND GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE UNDER A SHIFT IN BRAZILIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS. *Journal of International Society*. Bryce Chechile) Bryce is a third-year undergraduate student at the University of California, Santa Cruz studying Politics and Environmental Studies. His primary interest is in the study of interstate climate change agreements. He is grateful for his loving friends and family for their unwavering encouragement and support. He can be reached at bchechil@ucsc.edu.

I. Introduction: Jair Bolsonaro

Pressure is rapidly increasing in the international

community for states to form multilateral coalitions to control accelerating rates of climate change. Multilateralism in regards to climate mitigation, however, is being undermined by the absence of crucial global players that have succumbed to the rule of populist leaders characterized by anti-environment stances. The year 2016 saw the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and now a similar narrative is emerging in Brazil through the election of Jair Bolsonaro in October 2018. Notoriety and controversy followed the former army captain on the campaign trail, as his unabashed espousal of demagogic rhetoric and a nationalist platform earned him the moniker, “Trump of the Tropics.” Yet what stirred prevailing concerns within the international community were Bolsonaro’s hostile views toward the environment—primarily his avowal to follow in the footsteps of the United States and withdraw Brazil from the 2015 Paris Climate Accord, as well as his advocacy for development of

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the Amazon rainforest, one of the planet's largest natural defenses against global warming.¹ In light of these uncertainties, this paper seeks to discern what the first 100 days of the Bolsonaro administration may signal for Brazil's environmental future. It establishes an evaluation of whether President Bolsonaro actually possesses the necessary support to fulfill his promise of withdrawing from the Paris Agreement through an exploration of the congressional dynamics Bolsonaro faces, this includes the dynamics of "coalitional presidentialism" and the executive power of legislative agenda-setting (as well as the uncertainty involved in the latter) from literature on Brazilian politics. Moreover, an exploration on the likelihood of congressional withdrawal from the Paris Agreement leads into a discussion of how, regardless of congressional support, Bolsonaro's incapacitation of the country's environmental institutions and policies will likely foster spikes in rates of deforestation and lead to a trajectory of non-compliance with the country's Paris Agreement commitments to clamp down on deforestation and emissions.

II. Brazilian Context

At the crossroads of this pressing issue are three parties: the Bolsonaro administration, the Brazilian legislature, and the Amazon rainforest. Considering the context of the former two in this discussion, and their interactions to date, is critical in understanding the likelihood that Bolsonaro would formally

exit the Paris Climate Accord. However, to set the tone for how consequential Bolsonaro may be for global climate change, the implications of deforestation of the Amazon rainforest should be understood first.

i. The Amazon

Although it transcends the borders of nine South American countries, the fate of the Amazon rainforest under Bolsonaro is of elevated importance since Brazil's respective share of the Amazon comprises nearly 60%, the single largest terrestrial carbon sink.² Brazil's Amazon rainforest is widely known as "the lungs of the world" for its consequential role in the global carbon cycle.³ Rendering this area vulnerable to deforestation could destabilize the balance of the Amazon rainforest by triggering climate-related phenomena that affect other areas of Brazil far beyond the Amazon.⁴

The usual cascading effect is drought, which has been recorded in more than 80% of Brazil municipalities in the last five years, a finding which scientists have linked to deforestation.⁵ However, the Amazon's plays a role in regulating climate much farther than the borders of Brazil via the hydrologic cycle. Between 30 and 50 percent of its own rainfall can be attributed to the ascension of moisture from the Amazon's billions of trees, which has a formative impact on the seasonal cycle in South America and beyond.⁶ For these reasons, the Amazon is known as a "global weather-maker".⁷ Perhaps most impor-

1 Ed Atkins, "Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil is a Disaster for the Amazon and Global Climate Change", Motherboard, https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/43ejw3/jair-bolsonaros-brazil-is-a-disaster-for-the-amazon-and-global-climate-change (accessed October 28, 2018).

2 Associated Press, "Scientists Warn Brazil's President-Elect's Policies May Smother Amazon, the Earth's 'Lungs,'" NBC News, November 26, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/brazil-s-president-elect-jair-bolsonaro-may-smother-rainforest-scientists-n940326>.

3 Ibid

4 Watts, Jonathon Watts, "Fears for Amazon as Bolsonaro plans to merge environment and agriculture ministries," The Guardian, November 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/01/bolsonaro-environmentagriculture-ministries-amazon> (accessed: December 20, 2018).

5 Jonathon Watts, "Brazil's New Foreign Minister Believes Climate Change is a Marxist Plot", The Guardian, November 15, 2018, www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/15/brazil-foreign-minister-ernesto-araujo-climate-change-marxist-plot.

6 Associated Press, "Scientists Warn Brazil's President-Elect's Policies May Smother Amazon, the Earth's 'Lungs'

7 Ibid.

tantly, the extent of deforestation that occurs in this region has global implications for climate change, as it produces nearly a fifth of all global atmospheric oxygen.⁸ The rampant deforestation that Bolsonaro's policies entail, such as opening up protected forest in the Amazon to development, would compromise the amount of carbon dioxide the Brazilian Amazon can sequester, incapacitating one of the planet's most significant defenses against increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide. For these reasons, the protection of the Amazon creates a significant interest within the international community, whose respective efforts to curb emissions may be undermined by the shrinking of the largest carbon sink on the planet. This aspect itself may be seen as a threat to the success of the Paris Agreement, underscoring the truly global implications of deforesting the Amazon, and by extension Bolsonaro's policies toward it.

ii. Brazil's Environmental Track Record

Brazil itself has historically served as an example of global environmental action, especially in the fight against climate change. The nation hosted the trailblazing 1992 Earth Summit, which marked the first ever meeting of global leaders to support a UN-backed convention pertaining to climate change, and was credited with laying the foundation for later efforts.⁹ This is a far-cry from the reality of Bolsonaro's Brazil, which backed down from hosting the

25th U.N. Conference on Climate Change (COP 25).¹⁰

In regards to its own efforts, Brazil has been commended for its success in driving down its deforestation rates through more rigid enforcement of rainforest protections in recent decades.¹¹ Bolstered by satellite monitoring and the expansion of protections for indigenous lands, the country was able to curb its annual deforestation rate significantly from its mid-2000s peak of 9,650 square miles.¹² However, developments in the last decade reversed promising trends. Deforestation rose again in four of the six years after leftist president Dilma Rousseff's 2013 support of a policy that pardoned those who deforested only on small, privately-owned properties.¹³ Moreover, controversial political corruption dominated the Brazilian public sphere—ultimately culminating in the 2016 impeachment of Rousseff—and triggered a faltering in forest protection enforcements.¹⁴ Farmers and cattle ranchers seized on this opening to convert untouched rainforest to pasture and farmlands, doubling the deforestation rate from 2017 to 2018—to roughly 3,000 square miles per year.¹⁵ Lax policy enforcements under a Bolsonaro administration would likely incentivize ranchers and farmers to expand further into the Amazon, which would likely skyrocket the national deforestation rate. This rate surged by nearly 50% in the three months leading up to the presidential

8 Ibid.

9 Sandipan Talukdar, "Jair Bolsonaro Could Be a Disaster for the Environment, Scientific Research", *Brasil de Fato*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2018/10>.

10 Agence France-Presse, "Jair Bolsonaro Says Brazil Owes World Nothing on Environment", *Japan Times*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/03/24/world/jair-bolsonaro-says-brazil-owes-world-nothing-environment/#.XL-DWutKjBI>.

11 Associated Press, "Scientists Warn Brazil's President-Elect's Policies May Smother Amazon, the Earth's 'Lungs'".

12 Ibid.

13 Dom Phillips, "Bolsonaro Declares Brazil's 'liberation from socialism' as he is sworn in", *The Guardian*, January 1, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/01/jair-bolsonaro-inauguration-brazil-president>.

14 Ibid.

15 Associated Press, "Scientists Warn Brazil's President-Elect's Policies May Smother Amazon, the Earth's 'Lungs'".

election as these groups anticipated Bolsonaro's forthcoming policies.¹⁶

III. Campaign Promises versus Actual Capacities. Bolsonaro's anti-environment platform garnered a great deal of attention for how starkly it contrasted Brazil's pro-environment past, and the potentially damaging future it could create for Brazil. If Bolsonaro were to formally withdraw the country from the Paris agreement, it would translate to a retraction on the country's 2015 commitment to reduce carbon emissions by 37 percent from 2005 levels by 2030.¹⁷ If Bolsonaro's platform of opening up the Amazon to extractive industry becomes actualized, this poses new risks to Brazil's deforestation efforts (which are outlined in the Paris Agreement). The question emerges: What capacity does Bolsonaro possess to institutionalize campaign discourse into policy?

i. Ability to Withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord via Congress.

Of Bolsonaro's many contentious campaign promises, what raised predominant concerns for those in the international community was his vow to withdraw Brazil from the Paris Climate Accord. However, to add to the confusion, he then back-tracked on this stance in the days leading up to the presidential election, adding uncertainty to where currently Bol-

sonaro stands on the issue.¹⁸ Although he has not been explicit in denying the existence of man-made climate change, Bolsonaro has hinted at a denial of the science behind global warming, describing climate change as "greenhouse fables."¹⁹

However, Bolsonaro's actual capacity to withdraw Brazil from the Paris agreement, if he so chooses, is limited by a host of factors. For one, Bolsonaro's first hundred days in office have been characterized by failed efforts at passing legislation promised on the campaign trail, such as reform of criminal justice, gun ownership, and tax policies.²⁰ This could be due to the difficulty Bolsonaro's party is finding in maneuvering the thirty parties that currently split the Brazilian Congress within the coalitions built by Bolsonaro.²¹ To make matters worse, and perhaps as a result, Bolsonaro's once high approval rating has dropped to 32% according to polling, which may serve as incentive to members of Congress to distance themselves from the president further.²² While the Paris Agreement was ratified in the Brazilian Congress almost unanimously, new changes in Congress may, however, bolster Bolsonaro's efforts if he chooses to abandon the agreement.²³ Since that time, the composition of Congress has shifted, with the last election cycle ushering in a new group of representatives in one of the highest

16 Fabiano Maisonnave, "Bolsonaro's Deforestation of the Amazon Has Already Begun", *Climate Change News*, November 14 2018, <http://www.climatechangenews.com/2018/11/14/bolsonaros-deforestation-amazon-already-begun/>.

17 Associated Press, "Scientists Warn Brazil's President-Elect's Policies May Smother Amazon, the Earth's 'Lungs'".

18 Maisonnave, "Bolsonaro's Deforestation of the Amazon Has Already Begun".

19 Atkins, "Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil is a Disaster for the Amazon and Global Climate Change".

20 Marcelo Silva De Sousa and Mauricio Savarese, "Brazil's Bolsonaro Has a Few Wins, Some Missteps in 100 Days," *Washington Post*, April 9 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/congress/brazils-bolsonaro-has-a-few-wins-some-missteps-in-100-days/2019/04/09/a2ba3ccc-5a7c-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2_story.html?utm_term=.3aa7af192f67.

21 Atkins, "Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil is a Disaster for the Amazon and Global Climate Change".

22 De Sousa and Savarese, "Brazil's Bolsonaro has a few wins, some missteps in 100 days."

23 Scott Wallace, "Brazil's new leader promised to exploit the amazon—but can he?," *National Geographic*, October 21 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/10/brazil-president-jair-bolsonaro-promises-exploit-amazon-rain-forest/>.

numbers of incoming congressional representatives since Brazil's return to democracy in the 1980s.²⁴ The new class has a different dynamic than its preceding body since Bolsonaro's PSL, or Social Liberal Party, swelled from 8 to 52 seats (of 512) in the lower house and is now roughly equal in representation to the opposition party, known as the Worker's Party (PT), who could potentially block efforts at withdrawal.²⁵ The newfound representation of the PSL and others in Congress could provide Bolsonaro the support needed for key legislation, including a formal withdrawal from the Paris Accord.²⁶ Another factor buttressing Bolsonaro's potential to withdraw from the agreement is the fact that centrist parties now comprise a majority in the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies.²⁷ This could signal that Bolsonaro may be able to garner the 3/5, or roughly 300, necessary votes needed to move the bill to the upper house, considering centrists parties in Brazilian politics have typically thrown their support behind newly-elected presidents in exchange for pork, or to get their agenda to the table.²⁸ Support for this trend is documented in the literature on Brazilian politics. In "Democracy in Brazil: Presidentialism, Party Coalitions and the Decision-making Process," Fernando Limongi, professor of Political Science at the University of São Paulo, outlines the constraints facing congressional representatives in crafting legislation in light

of the pendulum of the presidency.²⁹ Since the 1988 Brazilian constitution bestows the president with a "monopoly over legislative initiative," Limongi asserts that in order to "influence public policy one has to be aligned with the president," giving those representatives especially in the center "two basic alternatives: to be part of the presidential coalition in the legislature, or to sit on the opposition benches, hoping to achieve the Presidency in the next term."³⁰ This theoretical foundation suggests that centrist representatives in the Brazilian Congress are at a crossroads in joining a coalition with President Bolsonaro: to either join the coalition needed to pass gun, tax, and other reforms publicized on the campaign trail and get an agenda incorporated into legislation, or to oppose the popularly elected President's agenda in hopes of the political pendulum swinging back in the next election year.³¹ In regards to the Paris Agreement, this volatility in coalition-building creates continual uncertainties for how the Paris Agreement will fare in the Brazilian Congress. How centrists will engage with coalition-building during the course of the rest of Bolsonaro's term is undetermined and still unfolding. Additional factors found in the literature on Brazil politics, which could also bolster Bolsonaro's efforts to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, are the power of legislative agenda setting, and a form of "coalitional presidentialism" that strategically

24 Sam Meredith, "Bolsonaro's pro-Market Agenda Faces Its First Test of Confidence as Brazil's Congress Returns", NBC News, February 1 2019, www.cnbc.com/2019/02/01/brazil-bolsonaro-faces-first-test-of-confidence-as-congressreturns.html.

25 Gamarski, Rachel. (2018) Bolsonaro Election Effect Turns Brazil's Congress on Its Head. Bloomberg News. Published October 8, 2018. Retrieved April 1, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-08/bolsonaro-election-effect-turns-brazil-s-congress-on-its-head>

26 Fernando Limongi, "Democracy in Brazil Presidentialism, Party Coalitions and the Decision Making Process", *Novos Estudos* 3, 2007.

27 Ibid

28 Ibid

29 Limongi, Fernando (2006). Democracy in Brazil: Presidentialism, party coalitions and the decision making process. *Novos Estados*. Published November 2006. Retrieved April 3, 2019. http://socialsciences.scielo.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0101-33002007000100001

30 Ibid

31 Ibid

seeks to maneuver multiparty congresses to set an agenda and build congressional support.³² In “The Coalitional Presidentialism Project” by Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power of the University of Oxford, “coalitional presidentialism” is depicted as a way for presidents lacking a party without a majority in the lower house to maneuver multiparty legislatures in Brazil and abroad.³³ As a product of engaging in and forming coalitions of support, presidential administrations are able to “secure the passage of their legislative agenda, but at the cost of entering into a set of political bargaining” through the practice of exchanging political favors to promote a clientelistic style of politics.³⁴ However, Bolsonaro’s campaign discourse suggests that coalition-building across party lines will not be feasible for this administration, as Bolsonaro assailed traditional coalition-building with opposition parties, which he equated with the corrupt majority party of the previous Congress.³⁵ The administration’s discourse thus far suggests that both the PSL and Bolsonaro will abandon this route, and instead rely on a strategy of coalition-building with cross-interest caucuses, forming coalitions on an ad-hoc basis with caucuses sympathetic to aspects of his platform.³⁶ These include the so-called “beef, bible, and bullet” caucuses represented by the agribusiness “ruralistas,” conservative evangelical, and pro-gun congressional caucuses.³⁷ It is with these caucuses that Bolsonaro may engage in the clientelistic nature of the “coalition presidentialism.” Brazilian Presidents often

offer jobs in the nation’s ministries to a coalition’s members in exchange for political support.³⁸ With no clear majority in a Congress split between more than thirty parties, this political route is a likely course of action.³⁹ But it remains to be seen whether these coalitions will suffice, considering that to date Bolsonaro has been unable to pass several pieces of key legislation promised during the campaign, such as gun and tax reform, through either houses of Congress.⁴⁰ This could reveal fractures or weaknesses within the ad-hoc coalition style of vote-gathering Bolsonaro has relied on in these first hundred days.

ii. Capacity to Remove Protections from the Amazon

Aside from considerations of achieving congressional support, what may compel the Bolsonaro administration to withdraw from the Paris Agreement are Bolsonaro’s plans to open the Amazon to development from extractive industries, such as agribusiness, mining, and logging. In the Paris agreement, Brazil voluntarily pledged to eliminate illegal deforestation in the Amazon and work to reforest 12 million hectares by 2030.⁴¹ Although Bolsonaro does not necessarily need a formal withdrawal from congress to cease compliance with the Paris Agreement, dismantling the agencies responsible for monitoring illegal deforestation could suffice—and serve as a path of non-compliance. His words and actions to date raise related concerns. Bolsonaro views the Paris Accord’s deforestation reduction goals of the

32 Paul Chaisty, Nic Cheeseman, Timmothy Power, “How MPs Understand Coalitional Politics in Presidential Systems,” *The Coalitional Presidentialism Project 12*, (Oxford: The Coalitional Presidentialism Project), 2015.

33 Ibid

34 Ibid

35 Phillips, “Bolsonaro Declares Brazil’s ‘liberation from socialism’ as he is sworn in”.

36 Ibid

37 Agence France-Presse, “Brazil’s Bolsonaro faces political test as new Congress sits,” *France 24*, January 2 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190201-brazils-bolsonaro-faces-political-test-new-congress-sits>.

38 Phillips. “Bolsonaro Declares Brazil’s ‘liberation from socialism’ as he is sworn in”.

39 Ibid

40 De Sousa and Savarese, “Brazil’s Bolsonaro Has a Few Wins, Some Missteps in 100 Days”.

41 Lisa Viscidi and Nate Graham, “Brazil Was a Global Leader on Climate Change. Now It’s a Threat,” *Foreign Policy*, January 4 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/04/brazil-was-a-global-leader-on-climate-change-now-its-a-threat/>.

Amazon as limits on Brazil's development and a threat to Brazil's "sovereignty," going so far as to say in March of 2019 "Brazil owes the world nothing" when it comes to the environment.⁴² Bolsonaro has openly stated that "too many protected areas stand in the way of Brazil's development," areas that could be tapped into for development via the construction of a snaking motorway through the Amazon.⁴³ He has openly championed weakening protections of Brazilian Amazonia so that powerful extractive industries have an opening to encroach into formerly protected regions.⁴⁴

Bolsonaro's plans could also spell disaster for the nation's environmental agencies. With the power of executive decree, Bolsonaro can restructure the government's ministries—without congressional approval.⁴⁵ He publicly supported (before having to walk back) a proposal aimed at merging the country's agricultural and environmental ministries, the latter of which controls the Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA), an environmental agency under the ministry which serves patrols and penalizes deforestation and is also tasked with the licensing process for oil wells, federal highways and hydroelectric plants.⁴⁶ Although Bolsonaro was forced to backtrack on this proposal due to concerns from the powerful agribusiness lobby about exports being associated with deforestation, these developments

heighten concerns he will embolden the conversion of the Amazon to farmland.⁴⁷ These concerns are not unfounded, given that even if IBAMA's regulatory protections are somehow preserved, Bolsonaro has also called for hindering its Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation, which implements IBAMA's policies by penalizing those found to have illegally deforested.⁴⁸ These sentiments and actions raise concerns that the Bolsonaro administration could effectively do away with the predominant modes of oversight that prevent deforestation.⁴⁹ On his second day in office, moreover, he transferred control of Brazil's forestry service to the Agriculture Ministry and conferred them the authority to determine the borders of indigenous lands, instead of the official indigenous rights agency of Brazil.⁵⁰ These developments provoke apprehensions that the Agriculture Ministry may favor agricultural pursuits over the aim of preserving protected forest and indigenous areas. Moreover, Bolsonaro's Environment Minister Ricardo Salles is heading an effort to privatize many of Brazil's national parks to eliminate oversight for territories delineated as "conservation units" previously managed by the Chico Mendes Institute.⁵¹ Salles will potentially also head the "government council" that will replace Brazil's National Council of the Environment if recent proposals are approved, heightening fears among activists that further modes of oversight of illegal

42 Agence France-Presse, "Jair Bolsonaro Says Brazil Owes World Nothing on Environment."

43 Josh Gabbatiss, "Brazil's Far-Right Leader Jair Bolsonaro Threatens to Strip Powers from Government Environment Agencies," *The Independent*, December 2 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-environment-climate-change-amazon-deforestation-a8663596.html>.

44 Watts, "Brazil's New Foreign Minister Believes Climate Change is a Marxist Plot".

45 Maisonnave, "Bolsonaro's Deforestation of the Amazon Has Already Begun".

46 Ibid

47 Watts, "Brazil's New Foreign Minister Believes Climate Change is a Marxist Plot".

48 Atkins, "Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil is a Disaster for the Amazon and Global Climate Change".

49 Ibid

50 Associated Press, "Environmentalists Fear Rampant Deforestation as Brazil's Bolsonaros Eyes New Policy," *NBC News*, April 8 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/environmentalists-fear-rampant-deforestation-brazil-s-bolsonaro-eyes-new-policy-n992051>.

51 Jake Spring, "Brazil to privatize some of its most famous national parks starting this year," *Reuters*, March 27 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-environment/brazil-to-privatize-some-of-its-most-famous-national-parks-starting-this-year-idUSKCN1R82L7>.

deforestation will be eliminated.⁵²

IV. Conclusion.

The remainder of Jair Bolsonaro's presidential term will prove incredibly consequential for the course of global climate change. Whether Bolsonaro will be able to achieve a withdrawal from the Paris Agreement through congress (in addition to other major pieces of legislation) likely depends on the strategic course of action Bolsonaro selects in maneuvering the parties of the Brazilian Congress to build coalitions, or work with like-minded caucuses (a trend which the literature on Brazilian politics affirms). The literature also suggests, however, that the majority-comprised centrists will also play a consequential role in deciding whether to throw their support behind coalitions or caucuses formed by Bolsonaro. Yet despite the congressional intricacies involved with a formal withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the ongoing and forthcoming developments in the incapacitation of Brazil's environmental institutions and protections on the Amazon rainforest create clear concerns that the Bolsonaro administration will foster an atmosphere that encourages deforestation. Brazilian deforestation may serve to significantly counter the efforts of the international community in reducing the rate of global warming. This creates an obvious and problematic conflict for the international community, and begins to portray a significant regression in the effort to combat ever-increasing global climate change. However, the interactions, reactions, and pressures of foreign state actors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and multinational corporations with Brazil's lenient policies on protecting the environment may provide new opportunities for the country to shift course, and these interactions and pressures should be studied closely in the coming years.

52 Associated Press, "Environmentalists Fear Rampant Deforestation as Brazil's Bolsonaros Eyes New Policy".



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