



en Reflection Original Anti-Capitalism Anti-Colonialism

Bolsonaro, an unrecommended adventure

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President Jair Bolsonaro has suggested that the expedition in which Indigenous expert Bruno Pereira and journalist Dom Phillips disappeared on Sunday, May 5th, near the Javari Valley Indigenous Land (in the state of Amazonas, Brazil) was an ‘adventure’ in a ‘completely wild’ region, ‘where anything can happen,’ and, thus, ‘unrecommended.’ Yet, Bruno and Dom are far from being two reckless adventurers. Bruno is one of the most experienced Indigenous experts in the country, working for over 11 years in this region of the Amazon, respected by Indigenous peoples and admired by his colleagues at FUNAI (National Indian Foundation), the government’s Indigenous affairs agency for which he worked. In turn, Dom Phillips carries over 30 years of experience in journalism, 15 of them in Brazil, a period during which he got to know and write about the Amazon, its Indigenous peoples, traditional communities, and the deterioration of environmental conflicts.

It was due to his exceptional work in the Javari Valley that Bruno was appointed by a council of Indigenous experts to take over the important role of General Coordination of Isolated and Recently Contacted Indians (CGIIRC) in Brasília, heading a FUNAI department in charge of articulating the protection of isolated Indigenous peoples in the Amazon. In this office, Bruno acted strongly against mining, drug trafficking, illegal fishing and hunting to ensure the protection of these Indigenous peoples’ territory. It must be explained that isolated indigenous peoples are those that decided to cut contact with the outside world, especially with white people. They have survived massacres and other forms of violence. The lack of direct communication between isolated peoples and the country’s environmental oversight

and control agencies are seen as an opportunity for many (currently, even by the Brazilian State) to go into Indigenous territories.

Working with Indigenous groups is not an adventure, and neither is journalism. Yet, since Bolsonaro's election, these have become high-risk professions in Brazil under the incentive of the President, who legitimizes and even instigates the opportunistic and predatory behavior of miners, drug traffickers, land-grabbers, hunters, that is to say, all of those now pushing forward into the forest. The Amazon, already the setting of intense conflicts and disputes, has become a war zone under the banner of backward and genocidal politics.

What is currently underway is a rigging of Indian agency, unprecedented in recent history. From the first few months after the 2018 elections onwards, FUNAI has been acting under the direct command of special interest groups over Indigenous territories, including members of the ruralist and evangelical groups in parliament, a fact that has negatively impacted protective actions for isolated groups' territories.

In 2019, Bruno was removed from his position at the Coordination of Isolated and Recently Contacted Indians (CGIIRC) to be replaced by an evangelical pastor, whose only competency was religious proselytism. It is widely known that Bruno's removal was motivated by 'incompatibilities' with the administration and the guidelines adopted by the current president of FUNAI, the Federal Police Chief Marcelo Xavier, as well as with President Jair Bolsonaro himself. This change shows a clear strategy by the government to facilitate the entry of missionaries into the lands of isolated Indigenous peoples. One should highlight that the pastor in question worked precisely in the Javari Valley region, the place with the largest number of isolated peoples in the world. And that isn't just a detail; it's a depiction of one of the forces that threaten both the physical and cultural integrity of these peoples, as such organizations have aimed at locating and forcing contact with these populations, disrespecting their political self-determination and putting them in clear sanitary risk.

This loss of structure put not only the whole protective territorial policy, built and improved over the years, in check, but also the logic and viability of producing and managing information about isolated Indigenous peoples inside government structures, historically corrupted and anti-Indigenous. After taking the office, CGIIRC coordinators have full access to the precise location of all huts, encampments, communal houses, crops, and paths of almost 30 isolated indigenous peoples monitored by FUNAI, as well as to the databank of additional 100 records of isolated peoples in the Amazon, which require more investment in research and field expeditions for confirmation. Many of these are located inside cattle and soy farms in the states of Mato Grosso, Pará, Maranhão, and Rondônia, that is, in areas of great political interest to the ruralist parliamentary group. This also justifies the intense dispute over control of the CGIIRC by diverse segments of the Brazilian government.

Bruno, therefore, had to distance himself from FUNAI to move forward with work that the state refuses to do. He represents countless other workers that left FUNAI when they became aware that the agency was no longer there to protect the rights of Indigenous peoples, but,

rather, to support the interests of those who want to take their rivers, soil, and forests. Days before his disappearance, Bruno talked about the hope of seeing FUNAI strengthened again. Of seeing it being run by Indigenous people and their supporters, and no longer by ruralists, fundamentalist missionaries, and the military, as it has lately been. He knew that rebuilding FUNAI's policies would be a slow and gradual process, but he was enthusiastic about this process: 'Keep calm! There are only six months left. We've already faced so much. It will soon pass', he says in one of his messages to cheer up his colleagues. The news of his disappearance hits his family and friends hard; it also hits the Indigenous people, who saw him as a partner.

Fulfilling his campaign promise, the President has not demarcated any Indigenous Land. A large part of the most experienced people working on Indigenous affairs have been replaced by military reservists. For simply carrying out protection actions in Indigenous territories, many FUNAI workers are being investigated and suffering internal affairs processes.

There are indirect ways to order the killing of Indigenous affairs experts, environmentalists, and journalists nowadays in the Brazilian Amazon. Being dismissive of injustice, encouraging mining and deforestation are some of them. Promoting inaction, taking too long to call on the Military, and to guarantee the resources and adequate equipment in the search for Bruno and Dom suggest the same intention.

Bolsonaro is an unrecommended adventure, not only for the Amazon but for Brazil and the world. We consider the international dimension taken by this case as a recognition of the centrality of people like Bruno and Dom not only in the protection of Indigenous land and people but also to ensure the possibility of a common future. With that, we still ask: Where are Bruno and Dom?

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