

Environmental Politics under Dilma: Changing Relations between the Civil Society and the State

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The environment has become a contentious issue in national politics in Brazil. The socioenvironmental effects of the commodification of the economy are now coming to the fore. The deforestation rate in the Amazon has gone up again after a decade of steady decrease; environmental conflicts have increased and intensified; violence in rural areas has deepened in the last decade; and, more recently, shortages of water and energy have plagued urban areas. Although most of these impacts resulted from policies implemented more than a decade ago, they are symptoms of a deeper political problem rooted in anemic levels of democracy, participation, and social justice under the Dilma government. The neodevelopmentalist model—based on expansion of natural resources extraction, large energy and infrastructure projects, and a centralized decision-making process—could hardly have produced a different outcome (Zhourri and Laschefski 2010). In this essay we argue that environmental politics in Brazil has suffered from an increasing distance between the civil society and the state, on one hand, and an increasing distance between rural and urban social movements, on the other. Next, we briefly describe these two processes since Dilma took office in 2011 and consider their implications for her second term, which began in January 2015.

The Distance between Civil Society and the State

Dilma inherited a damaged relationship with civil society organizations (CSOs), a state of affairs for which she herself was partly responsible. As a cabinet minister under Lula, her pet project was the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC), during which she opted for a technocratic style over a democratic decision-making process. As

president, she placed conservation policies at the lowest priority on the national agenda, pushed her development agenda forward, and kept her distance from CSOs. Three illustrative examples help to understand how the polarization between the state and civil society organizations has surfaced.

Dilma faced the highly politicized process of negotiating a new Forest Code at the outset of her first term. In Congress, she had to deal with the fierce Rural Caucus, which controlled the bill-drafting process and biased it toward the interests of agribusiness. Academics and activists repeatedly called for a wider debate and wrote letters and policy recommendations fully supported by empirical evidence. The government turned a blind eye to their claims. The final text, approved in 2012, legitimizes flexible reforestation obligations and provides legal mechanisms to reduce conservation units. As expected, with several gaps and ambiguities, reforestation has gone down and the deforestation rate has gone up since 2012 (Imazon 2015).

A second example is the construction of hydroelectric power plants in the Amazon. By using a discourse of “energy security,” Lula resisted repeated protests from CSOs, bypassed the mandatory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), and injected BNDES (Brazilian Development Bank) funding into colossal hydroelectric projects. Dilma followed Lula in confronting not only indigenous and peasant movements but also national and international organizations, escalating the Belo Monte dam construction into one of the most polarized socioenvironmental conflicts in the country (Justiça Global Brasil, n.d.). The technocrat Isabella Teixeira was appointed as minister of the Environment in order to facilitate environmental licensing (e.g., Hall and Branford 2014)

and the reduction of protected areas as well (Bernard, Pena, and Araujo 2014). Dilma ignored Free, Prior, and Informed Consent with indigenous populations and called for a state of emergency to suppress and criminalize socioenvironmental mobilizations against the hydroelectric projects.

The final example addresses the role of civil society organizations in the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 (also known as “Rio + 20,” held two decades after the historic United Nations Conference on Environment and Development of 1992 in Rio de Janeiro). Despite their broad attendance, effective participation of CSOs in the Brazilian delegation was kept to a bare minimum. As host of the event, the Brazilian government created different channels of dialogue with CSOs (e.g., the Socioenvironmental Arena at the People’s Summit, the Multi-Stakeholder Commission), but adopted a conservative position on climate governance with strong support for a mainstream development model. The result was a vacuous document with a wish list of mainly nonbinding commitments. The outcome was strongly criticized by social movements, researchers, and progressive politicians as a step backward from Rio 1992 (Hochstetler and Viola 2013).

These three examples reveal how conservation and rural populations have lost relevance on the national agenda, widening the gap between the state and the CSOs in environmental politics and leading to ecosystem degradation and social injustices. They reveal a clear prioritization of the neodevelopmentalist approach, relying on technocratic solutions to support elite groups. The result is a lack of dialogue between the state and the civil society.

The Distance between Rural and Urban Social Movements

When the recent wave of street protests began in 2013, many described these events as a new social movement in Brazil reflecting the enhanced consumption of the emergent urban middle class. If these analysts looked outside the urban centers, however, they would have realized that protests, social unrest, and oppressive measures by the state have long been part of the daily life of many rural populations. Physical distance, combined with the euphoria of insertion into the consumption market in the new millennium, helped the state to conceal the struggles of the rural poor from the emergent urban middle class. Given low levels of attention from a highly urbanized Brazilian population, the national government has made virtually no effort to tackle environmental injustices caused by state-driven development policies.

The social bases of the PT-led government, which have historical ties to and wide support among urban workers and organized unions, also share this new conception of development in which ever-growing segments of society are included in the labor and consumption market. For them, the places in which commodity extraction and hydroelectric mega-projects take place are distant abstractions; and they often conclude that peasants and indigenous and other traditional peoples should simply be incorporated into the labor and consumption markets (Fellet 2014).

Despite the apolitical, technocratic stance taken by the national government, social movements remained important allies of Dilma in the presidential elections of 2014 (Questão Indígena 2014a, 2014b). While critical of the neodevelopmentalist model,

rural leaders urged their bases to vote for the incumbent government as the lesser of two evils: they feared that opposition parties would pursue an openly neoliberal project (*Brasil 247*, 2014). Now these same rural leaders are demanding that the PT-led government address their agenda: implementation of land reform and creation and protection of indigenous territories, as well as infrastructure and policies to support small-scale production systems (Ferreira 2014). These movements of the rural poor have declared their willingness to fight for their rights and demands (Rádio Brasil Atual 2015). However, their main challenge is to reframe their narrative in the direction of a more urban-inclusive socioenvironmentalism.

Toward a New Socioenvironmentalism

Environmental politics under Dilma goes beyond issues of biodiversity conservation, climate regulation, and carbon mitigation measures. It touches upon the neodevelopmentalist model based on commodity expansion, or recommodification of the economy, and reliance on energy- and water-intensive production activities. It also touches upon attempts to minimize citizenship through recentralization of political decisions regarding the environmental impacts of large-scale projects and limited participation of local communities and civil society organizations. Ultimately, it touches on core issues of inequality, as rural populations have borne the costs of the emergence of an urban middle class whose hunger for energy and material goods is fed by the expansion of unsustainable activities in ecologically and social sensitive areas (Castro 2014).

For now the scenario seems grim. The recent appointment of Kátia Abreu—none

other than the leader of the Rural Caucus in Congress—as minister of Agriculture, shows that the neodevelopmentalist model based on commodity expansion is only deepening. The increased repression and violence in the rural areas, which brought Brazil to an uncomfortable position as the most deadly country for environmental activists in the world,¹ has closed the political space for contestation and active participation. The only opportunity to strengthen socioenvironmental movements appears to lie in the cities. Urban civil society has shown its ability to innovate its mobilization strategies during the street protests of 2013 and to fight against more neoliberal trends in the recent presidential elections in 2014. In July 2013, a constitutional amendment that would have curtailed the power of the Ministério Público was defeated by a large majority of the Congress. Similarly, on the eve of the last parliamentary recess in December 2014, Congress voted down another constitutional amendment that would have assigned responsibility for demarcation of indigenous territories to Brazil's 27 states, rather than to the federal government.

While the historic mobilizations of June 2013 were articulated mostly by the urban middle class, showing only limited solidarity with the rural poor, recent energy and water rationing has reminded city dwellers that environmental degradation in remote areas concerns them as well. Perhaps this is the beginning of a much-needed alliance between rural and urban social movements that could bring strong pressure to bear on the state. With an invigorated socioenvironmentalism linking the rural and urban poor and middle classes, Dilma 2.0 could be compelled to take a more progressive approach to the environment in 2015 and beyond.

Note

- ¹ “Deadly Environment: A Rising Death Toll on Our Environmental Frontiers Is Escaping International Attention,” *Global Witness*, April 15, 2014, <https://www.globalwitness.org/deadlyenvironment/>.

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