

BRAZIL AND THE FUTURE OF THE AMAZON



This map illustrates the extent of the Amazon rainforest in South America. Into what countries does the Amazon rainforest span?

Brazil and its people have long played an important role in the Western Hemisphere and the rest of the world. It is one of the largest and most populous nations in the world and the home of most of the Amazon rainforest, known as the “lungs of the world.” Brazil experienced a military dictatorship for 21 years and currently experiences stark economic inequality and political violence. Many question the ability of the Brazilian government to protect the Amazon.

Geographically, Brazil is the largest country in Latin America and the sixth largest country in the world. (By comparison, the United States is the fourth largest in the world.) Unlike the rest of Latin America, which was colonized mostly by Spain and is now Spanish-speaking, Brazil was a colony of Portugal. More than 200 million inhabitants speak Portuguese. Brazil is the seventh most populous country in the world. (The U.S. is the third most populous.)

Brazil’s large population is also very diverse. Brazil is home to some 305 indigenous (or native) ethnic groups who speak around 274 different languages — the most of any country in South America. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, Brazil received more enslaved Africans brought to the Americas than any other place. (Brazil abolished slavery in 1888, making it the last country in the Americas to do so.) By 1930, immigrants from more than 60 countries had come to Brazil. Today, Brazil reflects that immigrant diversity and is home to immigrants from places as diverse as Italy, Japan, Lebanon, and Germany.

Brazil is also marked by profound economic inequality. According to the nonprofit Oxfam International, just the richest five percent of the population have the same income as the remaining 95 percent of the country.

Brazil’s Economy and the Amazon

The massive Amazon River basin, which is about twice the size of India, includes the Amazon rainforest. Brazil is home to about 60 percent of the rainforest. The Amazon is home to about 20 percent of all

sectors of Brazil’s economy, especially logging and mining. An April 2021 report found that over the past ten years, the rainforest had emitted more carbon than it retained.

Brazil is one of the top four food-producing countries in the world. It is the world’s biggest producer of sugarcane and coffee. It also produces massive amounts of soybeans, cotton, and forest products (timber and wood products, as well as palm oil and rubber). And Brazil raises more cattle for beef than any other country. The country’s economy depends significantly on all these agricultural products.

Mining is another important part of Brazil’s economy. It is among the world’s leading producers of iron ore (the main component of steel). Gold mining has also been on the rise in Brazil. While it is supposed to be regulated by the government, gold mining by illegal miners has increased dramatically and with devastating effects of water pollution and deforestation, or removal of trees from forests.

Brazil exports a great deal of its agricultural and mineral products to other countries. All Brazil’s products have an important quality in common: They require a lot of land to cultivate or extract. Past Brazilian governments have put important environmental protections in place to prevent the rainforest from being cleared for agriculture and mining. The country’s current president, Jair Bolsonaro, however, campaigned on loosening those restrictions and opening the rainforest up for more commercial activity.

The Election and Presidency of Jair Bolsonaro

Jair Bolsonaro took office as the president of Brazil in January 2019. He ran on a far-right platform that included pledges to take a hardline approach to law and order and revive Brazil’s economy. He called himself “proudly homophobic.” He advocated for police to be given more leeway to kill suspected criminals, suggesting that if a

policeman “kills 10, 15 or 20 . . . he needs to get a medal and not be prosecuted.”

The 2019 presidential race was marked by extreme polarization and political violence in Brazil. There were multiple politically motivated killings as well as extensive threats and violence directed at journalists. Most attacks were carried out by Bolsonaro’s supporters, with a few incidents attributed to supporters of his opponent, Fernando Haddad of the Workers’ Party (known as PT, its Portuguese acronym). Bolsonaro himself was stabbed and seriously wounded at a campaign rally in July 2018. It was not confirmed that the attack was politically motivated.

Bolsonaro had been part of extreme politics throughout his adult life. He joined the Brazilian army in 1977 and served for 15 years, reaching the rank of captain. From 1964 to 1985, Brazil was ruled by a brutal military dictatorship during which almost 5,000 elected representatives were removed from office, approximately 20,000 people were tortured, and over 400 people were killed or captured by the military and never seen again by their families. Bolsonaro later served in Brazil’s Congress for 27 years, representing Rio de Janeiro.

Bolsonaro has long praised the dictatorship years, calling them a “glorious” part of Brazil’s history. After becoming president, his administration placed more than 6,000 retired and active-duty military personnel in government positions including key cabinet roles. One such appointment was the next CEO of Petrobras, the state-owned multinational oil and petroleum corporation. There is a stronger military presence in the civilian government today than existed during the dictatorship.

From the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, President Bolsonaro downplayed its seriousness. He criticized state governors and city officials who imposed lockdowns. He also questioned the safety and efficacy of vaccines, including suggesting that the Pfizer shot might have extraordinary unknown side effects, even turning someone “into a crocodile.”

Bolsonaro and Climate Change

Since Bolsonaro took office, his administration got rid of numerous environmental protection rules and cut funding to agencies responsible for enforcing environmental protections. The administration also encouraged the clearing and occupation of land in the Amazon by ranchers, loggers, and miners.

Indigenous people who live in the rainforest have a track record of being highly effective stewards of the environment. However, the Bolsonaro administration cut funding and powers of the government agency responsible for indigenous interests. Within two years of Bolsonaro taking office, miners and loggers illegally invaded indigenous land, and seven indigenous leaders were killed.

In 2019, illegal gold miners deforested an area the size of 10,000 soccer fields through expanded mining operations. Deforestation in 2019 was four times higher than it had been in the previous two years.



Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro in 2019.

Bolsonaro and other Brazilian officials attended the Climate Leaders Summit convened by U.S. President Joe Biden to mark Earth Day in April 2021. At the meeting, Bolsonaro pledged to end illegal deforestation in Brazil by 2030, for the country to become carbon neutral by 2050, and to double Brazil’s budget for enforcement of environmental rules.

At the summit, Bolsonaro asked the United States to provide Brazil with \$1 billion in aid to pay for efforts to protect and conserve the rainforest in the Amazon. The day after the summit, Bolsonaro approved a 24 percent cut to the budget of Brazil’s ministry responsible for the environment, as well as other agencies under its supervision.

Where Does Brazil Go From Here?

The future of Bolsonaro’s presidency and what it may mean for Brazil and global climate change remain big questions for the country. Candidates he backed in local elections across the country in 2020 mostly lost. According to a March 2021 poll reported in Brazil’s largest newspaper, Bolsonaro has maintained a loyal base of followers throughout the country, even as his approval ratings have declined overall. Supporters like college administrator Silvia Rodrigues Farias see Bolsonaro as someone taking on “globalists” who are using the pandemic to exert greater control over societies around the world. She praises him for “fighting this every day.” Bolsonaro will be up for reelection in 2022.

His main rival will likely be former president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (aka “Lula”), who served two terms as president of Brazil, from 2003 to 2011. He was a member of the PT and an extremely popular president. His presidency was marked by sweeping social welfare



Protesters in Brazil's neighboring country Argentina demonstrate against Bolsonaro's climate policies, 2019.

restart their case against him in a new jurisdiction where Lula's case has been moved. But the court's decision does mean Lula is eligible to run for office again, which will add drama to Brazil's 2022 election. Polls show Lula is expected to win in a landslide when pitted against Bolsonaro.

Many of Brazil's democratic institutions — including the courts and the press — have resisted anti-democratic moves by the Bolsonaro administration. In a cabinet meeting in May 2020, the president announced that he wanted to send in troops to close the country's Supreme Court. Two of his close advisors, both generals, talked him out of it.

It is difficult to know what a continued Bolsonaro administration may mean for the Amazon rainforest, an environmental resource that is essential

for human and much animal life across the entire planet. At the same time, the world will also continue to demand and depend on many of Brazil's major exports. Observers across the globe will continue to watch how Brazil's people decide to pursue their country's motto, "Order and Progress."

reforms, including a massive campaign to eradicate hunger and to provide financial assistance to poor families. In 2017, Lula was convicted on corruption charges for accepting \$1.2 million in bribes while serving as president. He was sentenced to nine and a half years in prison. These convictions prevented him from running for president again.

After appeals, Brazil's Supreme Court in 2021 annulled Lula's convictions. The Supreme Court found that the federal court that tried Lula did not have jurisdiction to do so. Sergio Moro, the judge who presided over the case against Lula, was later found to have conspired with the prosecution and to have used illegal procedures to convict Lula.

The court's 2021 decision does not mean that Lula is innocent of the charges against him. Prosecutors must

WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. Explain the importance of Brazil to the world economy and environment.
2. How did President Jair Bolsonaro come to power? What were the effects of his administration on indigenous people, the Amazon rainforest, and Brazilian society?
3. Should the U.S. give \$1 billion in aid to Brazil? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY: The International Community and the Amazon

From Brazil to the United States to Europe, governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and even corporations have been weighing in with recommendations and strategies for responding to Amazon deforestation.

1. Examine the following proposals and discuss in a small group which one you think would be most effective and why. Also, decide which proposal you think would involve civic engagement by average Americans the most. You may also propose another option that is not listed here. Each group should choose a spokesperson to share their group's decision and reasons.
 - Private corporations, such as supermarket chains, should boycott Brazilian agricultural and mineral products to pressure the government to restrict logging and mining interests in the Amazon.
 - Governments, including the United States, should pass laws and regulations to ban imports that rely on deforestation in Brazil.
 - Brazilian indigenous and environmental NGOs should call upon governments to put pressure on the Brazilian government to stop deforestation in the Amazon.
 - The U.S. and Brazilian administrations should negotiate a deal in which the U.S. provides economic aid to Brazil in return for Brazil stopping deforestation.
2. After all groups have presented, write a paragraph about which proposal or proposals you think would be most effective and why.

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Standards Addressed

Brazil and the Future of the Amazon

California History-Social Science Standard 10.10: Students analyze instances of nation-building in the contemporary world in at least two of the following regions or countries: the Middle East, Africa, Mexico and other parts of Latin America, and China. (1) Understand the challenges in the regions, including their geopolitical, cultural, military, and economic significance and the international relationships in which they are involved. (2) Describe the recent history of the regions, including political divisions and systems, key leaders, religious issues, natural features, resources, and population patterns. (3) Discuss the important trends in the regions today and whether they appear to serve the cause of individual freedom and democracy.

California History-Social Science Standard 12.9: Students analyze the origins, characteristics, and development of different political systems across time, with emphasis on the quest for political democracy, its advances, and its obstacles. (8) Identify the successes of relatively new democracies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the ideas, leaders, and general societal conditions that have launched and sustained, or failed to sustain, them.

California History-Social Science Framework, Ch. 15, p. 375: . . . Mean-while, climate change has contributed to political and economic upheavals that are changing patterns of human migration and fueling regional conflicts. Elsewhere, countries such as Brazil have broken out of former patterns of Cold War subservience and economic dependency to become dominant regional and, increasingly, global powers. The present global scene now appears less predictable, less hierarchical, and—potentially—less stable than in past centuries.

National World History Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability, and peace in an interdependent world. **High School (5):** Understands the role of political ideology, religion, and ethnicity in shaping modern governments (e.g., the strengths of democratic institutions and civic culture in different countries and challenges to civil society in democratic states; how successful democratic reform movements have been in challenging authoritarian governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America . . .).

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