

Lula names staunch Amazon defenders as ministers in Brazil

Ministry for Indigenous peoples is created but new government faces huge challenges from Bolsonaro era



Brazil's president-elect, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, named Sônia Guajajara as his nominated minister for Indigenous peoples at a presentation in Brasilia on 29 December. Photograph: Adriano Machado/Reuters

Tom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro

Thu 29 Dec 2022 17.04 GMT

Two internationally celebrated Amazon defenders, Marina Silva and Sônia Guajajara, have been named as ministers in Brazil's new government in an attempt to contain the intensifying assault on Indigenous territories and the environment.

The announcement was made by incoming president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who will take office on Sunday after the country's four years of rainforest-wrecking under his far-right predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro.

Silva, 64, will return to her job as environment minister, which she held from 2003 to 2008 – a period when Brazil managed to dramatically cut Amazon deforestation.

Guajajara, 48, will lead Brazil’s first-ever ministry for Indigenous peoples, created in response to the wave of violence and land invasions stimulated by Bolsonaro’s dismantling of Indigenous and environmental protections.

“[This is] a landmark in our history of struggle and resistance,” said Guajajara. “The creation of the ministry for Indigenous peoples is proof of President Lula’s commitment to safeguarding our autonomy and space to take decisions about our territories, our bodies and our ways of life.”

Bolsonaro’s anti-Indigenous and anti-environmental policies were laid bare earlier this year by the murders of the **Indigenous expert Bruno Pereira** and the **British journalist Dom Phillips** in the Amazon, where deforestation has risen 60% since 2019.



Marina Silva with the incoming president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who has appointed her as environment minister. Photograph: Adriano Machado/Reuters

Speaking after Lula’s October election, Silva **said** the new government would battle to honour the memory of such rainforest martyrs by building “a new

democratic ecosystem” in which conservation, sustainability and the climate emergency would be prioritised.

Silva was born in a remote rubber-tapping community in the western Amazon in 1958, and went on to become Brazil’s youngest female senator and an internationally respected environmentalist. **She joined Lula’s cabinet** after his 2002 election, but resigned in 2008 after a series of political battles linked to environmental policy.

Guajajara was born in the Araribóia territory of the eastern Amazon and became one of the leading lights of Brazil’s flourishing **Indigenous rights movement**, as well as a prominent leftist politician. In 2018, Guajajara became the first Indigenous woman to run for Brazil’s vice-presidency. She won a place in Brazil’s overwhelmingly white, male Congress in October’s election.

During a recent trip to the Amazon, Guajajara said the new ministry – which will represent Brazil’s 307 Indigenous groups – illustrated Lula’s genuine commitment to environmental protection and defending Indigenous communities who had been left “threatened, weakened and vulnerable” by Bolsonaro.

However, specialists say the incoming government will face huge challenges in its battle to rebuild Indigenous and environmental protections, given the deliberate dismantling of the environment ministry that took place under Bolsonaro.

“The ministry has been destroyed. It no longer exists. It will have to be rebuilt almost from scratch,” said Marcio Astrini, the head of an umbrella group of NGOs called the Climate Observatory.

Astrini welcomed the return of experienced and knowledgeable environmental figures such as Silva, but warned the powerful politicians and criminal gangs pushing the rainforest towards a catastrophic tipping point would not suddenly disappear. “Amazon deforestation will not be liquidated overnight,” he said.