Eliesio Marubo: “Brazilian politics has given no importance to the Indigenous movement’s agenda”

After his involvement in the search for indigenist, Bruno Pereira, and British journalist, Dom Phillips, the legal representative of the Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Yavari Valley (Univaja) spoke about the new landscape that is emerging with the arrival of Lula Da Silva to power, the creation of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples and the return of political dialogue. The Marubo lawyer narrates the violence being experienced in the north-west of the Brazilian Amazon and explains the protection mechanisms developed in the Indigenous territories given the absence of a State presence in recent years.

By Maria Alcantara – 1st December 2022

Maria Alcantara: What will your organization’s relationship with Lula Da Silva be like?

Eliesio Marubo: We are swimming against the tide. Although we were one of the few organizations that did not publicly show our support for Lula Da Silva, we were involved in helping to get him elected. We understand that activism has to have a certain impartiality, even with a leftist government. For us, our activism has to remain free from any political influence and any links with the government. This is both to exercise social control and to be able to submit good proposals. The new government must understand that, although we are partners, we cannot confuse our roles.

MA: Is it your intention to include your organization’s members in the future government?

EM: Beto Marubo, who forms part of the Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Yavari Valley, has been proposed to head up the new Ministry of Indigenous Peoples. If this materializes, we will continue to act as a social movement. In our opinion, it is possible that we may be able
to dialogue with the Federal Government in the near future on issues that are affecting us: the protection of Indigenous Peoples living in isolation and the *garimpeiros* (informal gold miners), among other issues.

**MA: Didn't you try to discuss these problems with Jair Bolsonaro's government?**

**EM:** We have constantly made these demands. But, of course, there was no talking to the Bolsonaro government. This was a government that was opposed to practising the pillar of politics: dialogue. We hope that we will at least be able to talk with the next government and, for this reason, we are submitting a series of points we want implemented: the strengthening of institutions such as the Public Prosecutor’s Office, the Federal Police and the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI); territorial protection and improved monitoring in the region; efforts to combat artisanal mining, organized crime, and the recruitment of young people into illicit economies. **One of the main demands is the protection of isolated Indigenous Peoples given that the Yavari Valley is one of the regions with the most peoples living in voluntary isolation in the world.**

**MA: What is the status of this agenda?**

**EM:** We are presenting these demands to all the candidates. At the moment, we are in dialogue with the transition team to ensure that a representative from the Yavari Valley can participate in the debate and discuss our agenda. Unfortunately, politics has not given the Indigenous movement’s agenda the necessary importance. Nevertheless, we will work with the people responsible for these issues and provide them with the necessary tools to be able to truly represent our community.

**MA: What is the situation of organized crime like in the Yavari Valley?**

**EM:** As an attorney specializing in criminal law, I understand that our region is immersed in a discussion about public safety and national security. Two days ago, a woman who was travelling from the territory to the city with her child in her arms was threatened by a criminal who pointed a gun at her chest. The criminal told her that he would kill her and that he would not stop until he had assassinated all the leaders of the Yavari Valley. That includes me, by the
way, I am one of the 12 leaders. The political class must be more sensitive to this sense of urgency. That is why we want to participate: so that our agenda is heard and becomes a priority. Otherwise, we will have more deaths like those of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira.

**MA:** If the people killed had been Indigenous individuals, do you think this case would have had the same international impact?

**EM:** Immediately after Maxwell’s death, FUNAI created security protocols for similar situations. So when Dom and Bruno disappeared, we already had a network of contacts with the press in order to raise the issue publicly. But if Bruno alone had been murdered, this case would not have had the same impact: the murder of Dom Phillips was an attack on the Brazilian and international press because the criminals knew he was covering the story. Clearly, he died because he was a journalist. And, naturally, the entire press was aware of it.

**MA:** The experience of Bolsonaro has taught us that, in the absence of the State, Indigenous Peoples can live without institutions and gain more autonomy.

**EM:** Bolsonaro’s government only exacerbated a context in which we had been living for decades. Naturally, our needs are now much more evident and I do not expect this situation to change with Lula. This is why I said that we need to preserve our space as a social movement, as a vanguard and as the last bastion of our community’s protection. We do not want positions in the new government and, even if our leaders take them, we will continue to strengthen our activism.

**MA:** Within this gained autonomy, were you able to improve control of your territories and the protection of your communities?

**EM:** In a way, our protection did result in an “improvement” because we were forced to look for alternative security measures. If someone enters an Indigenous Land illegally, we have the right to repel them. Of course, we will act on the basis of culture, tradition and patience. We are ready to use all the tools that the law permits to defend our lands and our families.
MA: When you say you will enforce the law, are you referring to the Indigenous rights set out by the UN or to the 1988 Constitution?

EM: I am talking about the Brazilian legal system which, by the way, includes the set of international standards. Both the local regulatory framework and international law guarantee the preservation of our culture, our tradition and our self-determination. In fact, anyone who knows a little about anthropology and studies the literature of our region knows very well how we have solved our problems and interests over the years. And this will not cease: in the face of imminent danger, our community will act.

MA: Some time ago we were able to verify the contamination of a river with acetone, a substance used by cocaine refineries. How does your organization deal with such cases?

EM: Using the instruments provided by the Brazilian State. Univaja has already sued the State several times. Even the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has provided us with protection and helped build a security policy. We also demonstrated that there was no security in our region before the International Court. We are not advocating anything other than what the legal system allows us to do. We will certainly use these tools to protect our borders and our interests.

MA: In addition to the IACHR, what other agencies and organizations provide protection?

EM: We have associates who help us in some activities but the organization that defends our collective interest is Univaja. Naturally, we are seeking partners, such as Greenpeace and Amazon Watch, to assist our leaders and to build a parallel agenda. Our organization will undoubtedly reach out to other partners to defend the interests of the Indigenous Peoples of the Yavari Valley. International organizations such as the IACHR are one way of seeking justice for our community.
MA: So you think there is a possibility of dialogue between the Indigenous Peoples of the Yavari Valley and the Lula Da Silva government in terms of implementing new public policies?

EM: The country is entering a new moment of dialogue and public policy construction. We hope that, with the creation of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, we will now be properly listened to. I don't think it’s perfect but I understand that it will open up a space in which to do politics and dialogue. Insofar as Brazil's highest authority is willing to talk and listen to our demands, it may be possible to reach agreements by which to establish new public policies. From a path based on collective, broad and equal participation, we will be able to implement good policies and, naturally, ensure the protection of our people.