

## **Indigenous Peoples, public policies and elections in Brazil**

*The country owes a great internal, social and historical debt: the genocide of the Indigenous Peoples. Reparations began to be made for this reality with the 1988 Constitution, a series of public policies aimed at recognition of their rights and the demarcation of Indigenous Lands. In recent years, however, faced with the setbacks experienced under the government of Jair Bolsonaro, the Indigenous movement has opted for resistance, organization and political participation through candidacies. The State needs to be aware that the Indigenous struggle is focused on historical reparation.*

**Mirian Potiguara - December 1<sup>st</sup> 2022**

Legislation concerning Indigenous Peoples was long marked by a conservative and homogeneous vision that defended the interests of the colonizing people. This situation was detrimental to peoples that had inhabited the Brazilian lands for centuries. At no time did any legislation respect the territorial and ancestral rights of Indigenous Peoples.

This reality began to change in the 1980s, when the Indigenous struggle moved from pan-Indigenism to atomization through NGOs, associations and human rights organizations. This fragmentation multiplied the number of organizations and helped to build strategic alliances. Ethnic mobilizations thus made it possible for the leaders themselves to present themselves to the State and Brazilian society. Within this context, the leaders participated in the drafting of Chapter VIII “On the Indians” of the 1988 Federal Constitution.

As a result of this Magna Carta, Indigenous Peoples now have the right to policies that value our languages and traditional knowledge. To implement this right, however, we need to strengthen the institutions that prioritize our cultural values. And in terms of Indigenous schools, it is essential that we have specific curricula, timetables that respect our traditions, differentiated teaching methodologies, educational materials published

in Indigenous languages and teacher training for Indigenous individuals so that they can teach in our communities.

### **Three decades of Indigenous policies**

Against this current backdrop, it is important to be aware of the public policies that have been implemented by the different governments over the years and their effect on our rights and autonomy. The government of João Batista Figueiredo (1979-1985) was known as the “New Republic” because it served as a transition between military authoritarianism and democracy. This presidency had tragic consequences for Indigenous Peoples: epidemics and endemics spread, affecting dozens of Amazonian peoples. The State's aim was to integrate the Indians into the Brazilian nation, and those who resisted this assimilationist process were exterminated through territorial expansion and colonization.

During the government of José Sarney (1985-1990), many Indigenous territories, especially in the Amazon, were occupied by invaders, fishermen, loggers, gold prospectors and mining companies. The National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) became a bastion of anti-Indigenous sectors, and the policies implemented were aimed at freeing up land for mining, logging and the establishment of colonizer settlements. It is estimated that more than 2,000 Yanomami died as a result of diseases transmitted by the invasion of their lands.

During the Collor de Mello presidency (1990-1992), the Ministries of Justice, Health, Education and Agriculture were all granted powers to promote actions and services for Indigenous Peoples. Under pressure from the [Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit](#), Collor de Mello carried out the demarcation of the Yanomami area and approved 108 Indigenous Lands. After he was removed from office, and during the Itamar Franco administration (1992-1994), a Second National Conference on Indigenous Health was held. This lay down guidelines and parameters for a new policy in this area. In the two years of this government, 20 Indigenous Lands were ratified.

During the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003), Decree 22/91, regulating the land demarcation procedure created by Collor de Mello, was repealed. Decree 1775/96 instead established the “right of contradiction” aimed at facilitating opposition to the demarcation of Indigenous Lands. This strategy resulted in dozens of land demarcations being challenged, even after the Indigenous presence had been identified, demarcated and verified. In his eight years in office, Henrique Cardoso approved 147 Indigenous Lands.

The Indigenous Peoples thought that, in the two presidencies of Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010), they were going to find a government committed to their demands. They therefore expected their lands to be demarcated and differentiated, and dignified policies to be implemented, in line with the Constitution. However, land titling, a duty of the State, was not made a priority and many of the demarcation procedures ended up getting blocked. As a result, very few Indigenous Lands were regularized: Lula approved only 88 territories, many of which were already in process under previous governments.

From the very start of Jair Bolsonaro's government, the country and the international community witnessed the dismantling of protection policies for Indigenous Peoples and environmental conservation areas, especially in the Amazon. Two very clear examples of this can be given: the weakening of FUNAI and the dismissal of high-ranking officials from their management positions. Only two of the 39 regional coordinators are now career civil servants. Bolsonaro's presidency will be remembered as a genocidal and inhumane government that sowed hatred and violence in our nation.

## **Consolidation of the Indigenous movement**

Indigenous Peoples' resistance is based on their own warrior nature and on alliances with institutions willing to collaborate with our cause and with the implementation of public policies. We therefore need our leaders to occupy decision-making spaces in order to guide public policies in line with what we believe is best for our future. In this sense, the [Indigenous Campaign](#) is part of a project to strengthen political participation by standing leaders as candidates in electoral processes.

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With the launch of the open letter [“For an increasingly Indigenous parliament”](#), this movement aims to defend our cultural and ancestral identity. On the one hand, as resistance to the project of annihilation of a pluricultural country and, on the other, in order to denounce the paralysis in the process of demarcating Indigenous Lands. In 2020, the [Manifesto for Indigenous Peoples, Organizations and Leaders](#) set out an Indigenous perspective on the country's political conflict. Finally, with the slogan [“Let's fix politics”](#), the Indigenous mobilization of 2022 was fundamental in building a grassroots organization.

It is not enough to occupy the municipal legislatures. We plan to occupy the Senate and the Presidency of the Republic, in other words, where the most important decisions are made. Climate change mitigation is at the top of the agenda for candidates and there is no one better placed to address this issue than Indigenous Peoples. We also need to strengthen the institutions related to Indigenous health and education: FUNAI, the National Health Foundation, the Indigenous School Education Programme, the Municipal Education Secretariats, the Special District for Indigenous Health, the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office and the Indigenous Missionary Council.

## **The *Bancada do Cocar* (Feathered Headdress Lobby) has arrived to indigenize politics**

In the current political climate, the Indigenous candidates are gaining increasing space within the political parties. This is a direct result of the Indigenous mobilizations around occupying public office. In 2022, these organizations held a [“aldear a política”](#) to elect their representatives to Parliament. While the mobilization of these political actors should be celebrated, there needs to be a rethink of the political parties' openness towards the Indigenous movement and also greater incentives to ensure these candidates are electorally viable.

We must therefore be attentive to the possibility of greater Indigenous representation in the traditional spaces of power. To this end, a [bancada do cocar](#) (Feathered Headdress Lobby) has been created at the federal and state levels: a bloc bringing together Indigenous, Afro-descendant, feminist and LGBTQI+ legislators excluded from

democratic participation. This lobby will be very useful in fighting the regulatory and institutional dismantling that has taken place in recent years.

In the 2022 elections, five well-prepared Indigenous representatives won seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Among them, that of Sônia Guajajara is noteworthy, as she is symbolic of the Indigenous warrior woman and would be a good candidate to represent us in the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, coordinating Indigenist policy. This is not enough, however. As Indigenous Peoples, we want to discuss our participation in all areas of Lula's government. We want to be present in the construction of cultural, educational and health policies, in the Ministry of Justice and, of course, in the Ministry of the Environment.

In such dark times, we should heed the words of Paulo Freire: “We need to have hope, but hope that springs from the verb *esperanzar* [to hope]; because there are people whose hope comes from the verb *esperar* [to wait and/or to hope]. And the hope of the verb *esperar* is not hoping, it is waiting. To hope is to get up, to hope is to go after it, to hope is to build, to hope is not to give up!”. And since we Indigenous Peoples are a people of struggle and resistance, we will never surrender. That is why our hope comes from the verb *esperanzar* and we will fight for better times.

## **Like a Phoenix**

We are tired of the State's guardianship, telling us how to act and what to do all the time. Today we have a voice and, like the phoenix, we are rising with greater strength as the protagonists of our own history. Today, history is being told by our own people and we believe that it is through education that we will occupy the spaces that are rightfully ours. Everything was taken from us, our native language was extinguished, our identity was denied, our people were decimated and we were not allowed to participate in the building of this land.

The nations of the world are experiencing social problems, and their citizens and governments are trying to solve them. The solution involves changing the way people live, transforming harmful practices into healthy ones, changing societies' values and

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creating new technologies that improve people's quality of life. Unlike the current genocidal government, we expect Lula to make a commitment to work with Indigenous Peoples and to rebuild social policies with neither hatred nor rancour.

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