Joenia Wapichana: “FUNAI was not defending Indigenous Peoples”

After becoming Brazil’s first Indigenous Federal Deputy (2019-2022), President Lula Da Silva has chosen her to chair the new National Indian Foundation (in Portuguese, FUNAI). Born in the State of Roraima, Wapichana People’s attorney was nominated to be Chair by Indigenous organizations and she is receiving support by officials and deputies. After four years of interventions and asset stripping, her objective is for FUNAI to meet its purpose once again: demarcate lands, compensate those affected, protect communities and monitor respect for Indigenous rights.

By María de Lourdes Beldi de Alcantara - February 1st 2023

MLBA: How were your first few days as head of the Institution?

JW: At this moment, we are going through a transition period, reviewing different roles and positions. We have also had many visits by Indigenous leaders here in Brasilia because in the past seven years, they were not allowed to enter FUNAI and, now, we are opening the doors of our home. For the time being, we are addressing the most pressing issues.

MLBA: Which was FUNAI’s main flaw in the past few years?

JW: Basically, it was not fulfilling its purpose: to defend Indigenous Peoples. That is why our objective is to regain that role. So far, I have lots of support. Not only from Indigenous organizations, but also from deputies and officials who, at least, have agreed to help. People know Lula’s administration faces many challenges, but we also have a very limited budget.
MLBA: What will be the relationship between FUNAI and the new Ministry of Indigenous Peoples?

JW: FUNAI is part of the Ministry of Justice. Jair Bolsonaro suggested moving it to the human right sector, but from my position as deputy, we were able to avoid it. FUNAI will be connected but not subordinated to the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples. It will continue to be a self-governed entity. Thinking ahead, the idea is to strengthen the autonomy.

MLBA: Which are the specific roles of FUNAI?

JW: We execute public policies. FUNAI’s technicians are responsible for going to the field and demarcating lands, compensating affected parties, protecting communities, and monitoring respect for Indigenous rights. These tasks are extremely necessary to rebuild the country. Unfortunately, we have a lot of work to do on a low budget. Therefore, the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples will have to play the part of raising funds.

MLBA: Could this create a bad relationship between ministries?

JW: Actions for the environment and for Indigenous Peoples are complementary. We will have a conversation with the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and for the Renewable Natural Resources (in Portuguese, IBAMA) and with the Ministry of Environment. The Minister of Environment, Marina Silva, and I have had a long and close relationship so we are certainly going to be able to coordinate actions. At this time of reconstruction of the country, we have to work collectively across all areas. It is not a matter of competing, but of getting stronger. It applies to the three of us: the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples and FUNAI.

MLBA: But, in reality, FUNAI is like a ministry...

JW: You are right. But a resourceless and undervalued ministry. It works as such, but institutionally speaking, it is a self-governed entity.
MLBA: You have always taken part of COP sessions, what is your opinion as to the results of the last one?

JW: I expected more. I have been with the COP for a long time, since I was much younger. I used to be president of the Indigenous Organizations Caucus. I followed the progress, but also the lack of concrete action in support of Indigenous communities. At the moment, many questions remain unanswered. We cannot live by promises. We need to implement actions to achieve, for example, the demarcation of Indigenous lands and to solve the problem of illegal garimpeiros. We continue saying that Indigenous Peoples are the protectors of the environment, but we don’t have the tools to protect them.

MLBA: Which actions is the Indigenous movement claiming?

JW: We want concrete, effective and necessary actions right now. Not in ten years. The COP coincided with Lula Da Silva taking office, so some commitments were made. He was very emphatic in that we are all to blame for the current climate crisis, and that Brazil plays a big role in the Amazon. Indigenous Peoples are necessary to protect the woods, water sources, and the sustainable uses of resources. Therefore, we need to protect the defenders of the Amazon, who are being murdered. They are dying due to malaria and mercury poisoning. We need to take immediate action.

MLBA: How were you appointed to Chair FUNAI and how was Sonia Guajajara chosen as Minister of Indigenous Peoples?

JW: Both Sonia and I were nominated by Indigenous organizations. My nomination was supported by the Coordinator of the Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (in Portuguese, COIAB), which unites 175 organizations from the Amazon and the south of Brazil, as well as public figures such as Chief Raoni and shaman David Kopenawa. COIAB has known me since I was a child and has been following my career path. Since I could not be reelected as Federal Deputy, I was available to take the position. Due to my experience in the Indigenous movement and the political world, they believed that I had what was needed for the job.
MLBA: How would you explain the great number of Indigenous women in politics?

JW: These are new times. We have become stronger in terms of education and we have been patient to understand the new era. There are still many women who have not been made visible. In my case, I studied law and advised Indigenous leaders in our fight for lands, in the protection of our rights and our search for justice. Access to formal education was very important to understand our rights and to support our communities. Many young people want to go to university to defend their people. Today, women can fulfil any role and we can pursue this fight.