

Nature and Human Rights of Indigenous Communities in the Amazon: A Cartography of Violence under Brazilian Governments

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Abstract

The Amazon serves as a pivotal intersection for two essential aspects of human rights: environmental preservation (for the benefit of humankind) and the habitation of community territories, where indigenous peoples, quilombolas, riverine communities, and others reside while safeguarding nature. These communities face significant threats from violence in the Amazon, manifested in invasions, deforestation, and illegal mining—challenges that, although historical, have been worsened in recent years (2019 to 2022) due to the suspension of the demarcation of indigenous lands and governmental actions that have amplified human rights violations in the region. Addressing these violations will necessitate many years of continuous and systematic efforts by official bodies. Consequently, our objective is to contribute to the understanding of the causes behind these issues to identify preventive solutions. We employed a deductive methodology, utilizing bibliographic research from secondary sources grounded in interdisciplinary-critical theories. Through historical and comparative analyses, we collected and systematized data on the Amazon corresponding to various government periods and quantitative indicators of forms of violence. Beyond period comparisons, we derive partial insights from relational comparisons over an extended historical timeline. The comparison by superimposing cartographic resulted in the demonstration of the highest levels of deforestation, invasions of territories and other forms of human rights violations, all reached during the 2019 to 2022 national government period. We therefore conclude that short periods of authoritarian governments can produce persistent humanitarian issues, hence the need for theorizing in relation to such periods.

Keywords

Indigenous Peoples, Environment, Amazonian Territory, Violence, Human Rights Violations

1. Introduction

The tragic events of June 5, 2022, in Atalaia do Norte, Amazonas, where journalist Dom Phillips and indigenous expert Bruno Pereira were brutally killed, have underscored the persistent issue of violence in the Brazilian Amazon. This incident not only shocked the nation but also intensified scrutiny regarding the array of challenges faced in the region. The violence prevalent in the Amazon is deeply entwined with several complex factors, such as power struggles, rampant deforestation, illegal mining operations, and the expanding influence of criminal organizations due to the ineffectiveness of anti-drug policies. Such issues are further compounded by the suspension of indigenous land demarcations and rhetoric favoring economic and political interests at the expense of environmental conservation and indigenous rights.

Despite its rarity in our academic practice, engaging in analyses focusing on specific, temporally and spatially defined events is crucial. The various events and processes that transpired in Brazil from 2019 to 2022 warrant thorough examination and comprehension. The severe human rights abuses, especially targeting individuals, populations, and communities in the Amazon, such as indigenous peoples, quilombolas, and riverine communities, alongside the significant environmental degradation reaching critical levels during this period, present irreversible consequences in the near future, given the gravity of the situation and the challenges delineated within the Amazonian context.

Our choice of methodology stems from the premise that, although the instrumental-mercantile logic of capitalist production tends to commodify, the Amazon cannot be reduced to a mere commodity. Defying the Cartesian constraints of modern rationality, we perceive the Amazon as an epistemically and ontologically complex entity, comprising a multitude of meanings. One such meaning can be traced to Dussel's seemingly straightforward universal principle in his *Ethics of Liberation*: the acknowledgment of human life as a mode of reality. This interpretation generates a myriad of other meanings that embrace the tangible daily lives of communities, encapsulating their traditions, knowledge systems, worldviews, and rationalities. Surpassing anthropocentric rationality, the Amazon is also imbued with a vital significance, serving as the life milieu for diverse subjectivities—both human and non-human—interwoven by the bonds of nature, a status recognized even in rulings by the Constitutional Courts of the region.

In light of the multitude of possibilities arising from the intricate dynamics prevalent in the Amazon region, we focus our discussion on two primary areas and the intersection we observe between them: the examination of human rights

violations against indigenous peoples and the scrutiny of environmental degradation. The Amazon fosters this intersection, functioning as a geopolitical realm where these dimensions interconnect, regardless of the artificial division imposed by modernity—the division between human society and nature manifested in the civilization versus savagery or barbarism dichotomy. Our methodological approach is deductive, grounded in the foundational principles of Dussel's ethics of liberation and Wolkmer's concept of collective subjects and their fundamental needs systems. This framework equips us to undertake a critical analysis of these issues, as elaborated in the first section.

In the second section, we employ comparative and historical methods to examine primary sources, including cartographic representations, statistics, public authority acts, and more. These sources are organized by government periods to construct a theoretical understanding of how various agendas have impacted environmental issues and community rights in Brazil. During this examination, we noted significant efforts by independent organizations to collect data and produce information, which stood in stark contrast to the paucity or complete neglect of similar initiatives by the government. In the final section, our analysis narrows its focus, using primary sources like statistics, on the acts of violence against the physical and existential dignity of individuals and communities, particularly those residing in the Amazon region. Our research methodology includes bibliographic resources, categorized into primary sources as previously mentioned and secondary sources, with a preference for critical human rights theories. These theories facilitate an intercultural and interdisciplinary approach required by the complexity of the issues addressed.

We recognize the necessity of continuing these analyses in the future, considering the cyclical nature of representative democracy and the persistent threats to human rights, notably the rights of indigenous peoples and communities, quilombolas, and land workers. These groups are collective subjects often marginalized and violated by modern liberal-individualist rationality, rendered even more vulnerable in times of rising authoritarian governments and those leaning towards fascism. In response to these concerns, we explore the Amazonian issue and evaluate how diverse political agendas in Brazil have influenced significant humanitarian topics, such as environmental protection and the advocacy of human rights conceived interculturally. This approach extends beyond the monocultural scope of abstract individualism and capitalist economic modernity.

In conducting the comparative analysis across different governmental periods, an evident overlap emerges between the cartographic representation of deforestation—depicted as violence against nature—and the cartographic representation of invasions and other forms of violence against communities, individuals, and indigenous groups in the Amazon. This analysis highlights that during the national government from 2019 to 2022, the identified cartographies of violence ascended to unprecedented levels across all evaluated axes, including environmental concerns, human rights, community rights, and indigenous peoples. Furthermore,

while there have been initiatives from public authorities aimed at mitigating the damages inflicted during this period, and some positive outcomes have been noted, the environmental conditions and the rights of indigenous populations remain critically vulnerable, primarily due to the severe repercussions of actions and neglect encountered during the Bolsonaro administration.

2. Amazonia and Modes of Reality: Indigenous Resistance to Privatization Interests

The Brazilian Amazon, since the era of colonization, has been a landscape marked by disputes and tensions owing to its complex nature as a region where diverse community realities are produced and reproduced. Simultaneously, it is a site where elements are commodified and evaluated by the capitalist production model. This complexity calls for a theoretical approach similar to that of geographer Santos (2005: p. 255), who asserts that “[...] it is the use of the territory, and not the territory itself, that becomes the focus of social analysis.” Consequently, we anchor our analysis in the tension arising from the various uses—relationships—sought by differing rationalities that interact through dynamics of assimilation (monocultural), resistance, and violence.

The concept of modes of reality, informed by Dussel, encompasses human life in its myriad forms of understanding and existing within the world, based on “each concrete human being.” This perspective shapes Dussel’s Ethics as an Ethics of liberation, emphasizing life affirmation amidst threats of extermination and “the collective suicide towards which humanity is steering unless it changes the trajectory of its irrational actions” (Dussel, 2012: p. 11). Contrary to the “non-place” conceived by the universalizing discourse on human rights and its propagated specific culture—dubbed the hybris of the zero point by Castro-Gómez (2005)—human life, serving as the universal benchmark for all ethics, is actualized through cultures, each representing its unique lifestyle, a mode of reality. In modernity, however, the capitalist production system not only persists in colonizing disparate modes but also eradicates them, threatening the total annihilation of cultures.

Within this dialectical framework, we identify two strategic components outlined by Wolkmer in his concept of community-participative legal pluralism: emergent social actors in the realm of juridicity and the essential human needs. This identification gains particular importance when contrasted with the foundational elements of production modes and associated capitalist rationality. Under such rationality, the individual, abstract, and private subject emerges as the exclusive mediator for interpreting reality. This individualistic and private notion of the subject “[...] mediates both the condition of agents exercising supremacy, control, and manipulation over societal means of production and distribution, as well as the state of individuals alienated, oppressed, and marginalized within dominant social relationships” (Wolkmer, 2015: p. 278). Contrasting this homogenizing worldview, aspiring towards dignity and participation, are “multiple collective subjectivities” and alternative ways of being in the world, representing different realities.

Individuals interact with a system of needs that is particularly distinct when compared to the needs system of the capitalist production mode: “[...] with bourgeois capitalist and industrial modernity [the system of human needs] acquired unusual and limitless characteristics” (Wolkmer, 2015: p. 285). This distinction arises because, within various social constructs, the system of needs is constrained by their respective worldviews. However, the proliferation of the capitalist mode of production is characterized by the destruction of these concrete life systems and their defined boundaries. Consequently, the modern capitalist system of needs emerges—an inherently insatiable system driven by infinite “needs.”

In this context, we suggest distinguishing between the use of and the relationship with the territory to better understand the interaction dynamics within the geopolitical landscape of the Brazilian Amazon. Under the capitalist mode of production, the Amazon is assigned a use value, commodified as a product, as illustrated by Lukács (2003), where society converts everything, including life—and specifically human life—into commodities. This rationality embodies Dussel’s “irrational act,” which, prioritizing the profit of a few, propels humanity towards disaster, or what the philosopher termed as “collective suicide.” In contrast, within alternative realities such as ancestral community traditions—be they Latin American or stemming from African communities subjected to capture, enslavement, and forced migration—the Amazon transcends mere use value to adopt varied roles, shaped by each community’s rationality or worldview. From this perspective, it might take on a subjective nature that engages with other living entities, among which humans find themselves equal and belong, thus challenging and resisting the irrational perspective of capitalist development (Wolkmer et al., 2019).

Presenting a comprehensive overview provides the foundation for our analysis concerning the Amazon, enabling us to reflect on how various political agendas in Brazil influence critical humanitarian issues. These influences can be either beneficial or detrimental, especially regarding the protection of the natural environment and human rights, conceived from an intercultural perspective. This intercultural perspective goes beyond the monocultural framework of abstract individualism and the liberal-economic ethos typical of capitalist modernity.

Preliminarily, it is important to recognize the myriad ways the Amazon can be characterized. It features an expansive Hydrographic Basin that includes all tributaries and rivers constituting the Amazon River. This basin spans seven nations and nearly half of the South American continent, making it the most extensive surface freshwater system globally, contributing approximately 15% of the world’s freshwater resources. Within Brazil, the so-called “legal Amazon”—a designation given by the Brazilian government in the 1950s—covers nearly 60% of the country’s territory (Legal Amazon, 2022). This region hosts profound sociocultural diversity, extending across multiple nations and housing hundreds of communities, including indigenous, quilombola, rubber tapping, chestnut gathering, babassu collecting, and riverine peoples, totaling around 33 million individuals. Indigenous knowledge within the Amazon is estimated to encompass around 1.6 thousand

species of medicinal plants, demonstrating a deep understanding and connection with their surrounding environment. Within Brazil, 227 indigenous groups are identified, with linguistic families mainly derived from Tupi and Macro-Jê ancestries, though regrettably, only half are documented in official records (Carneiro Filho & Braga de Souza, 2009).

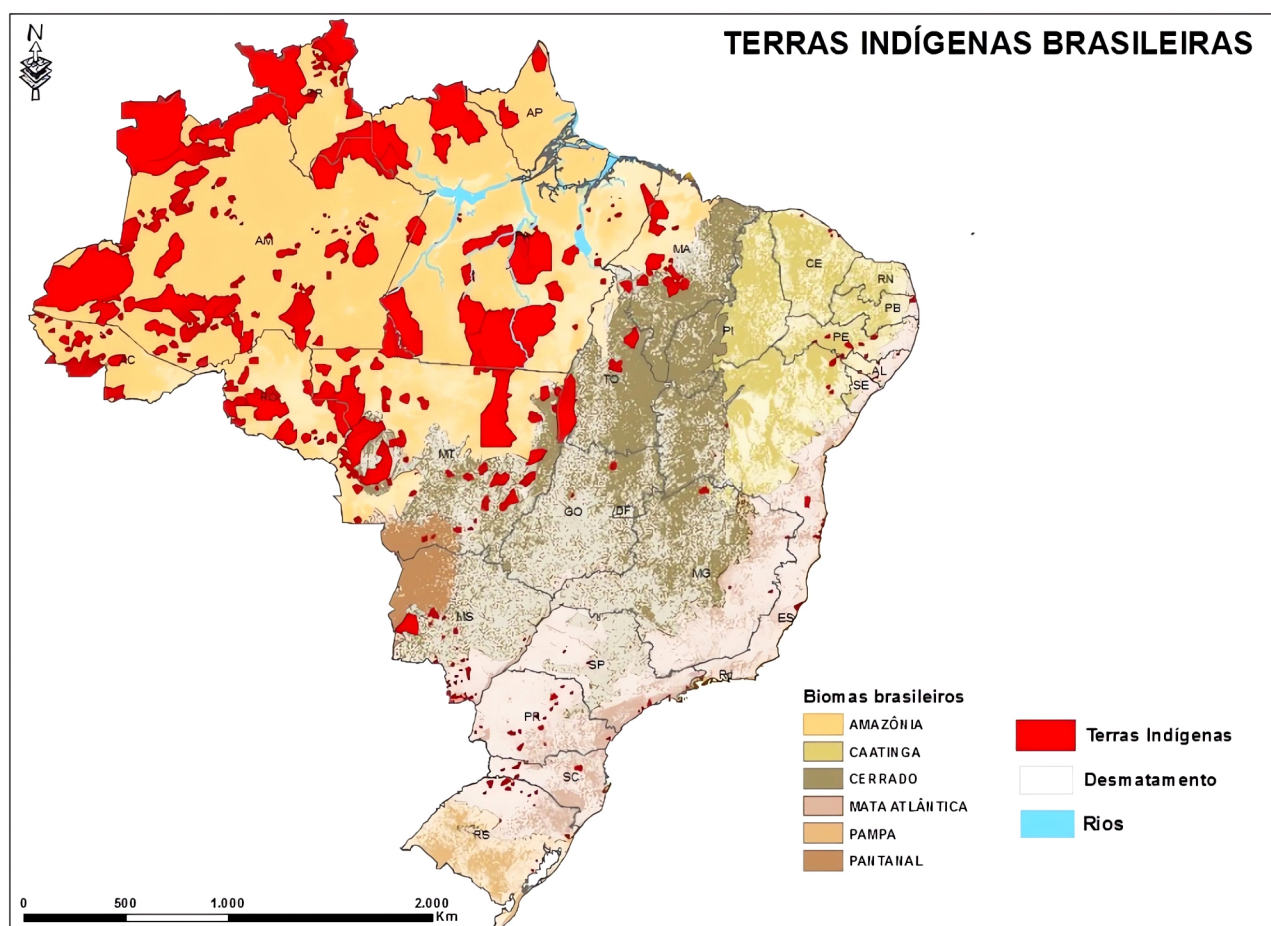


Figure 1. Indigenous lands in the Amazon up to 2015 (IPAM, 2015).

The preservation of the culture, biodiversity, and traditional lifestyles of indigenous peoples relies heavily on securing Indigenous Lands (TIs). These territories are integral for the communities to produce, sustain, and evolve their livelihoods. Beyond their immediate significance to the indigenous communities, these lands hold broader environmental importance due to the sustainable and respectful manner in which these communities interact with nature, thus safeguarding ecosystems critical to planetary life. A 2015 IPEA cartographic study evidences that regions with the highest density of Indigenous Lands remain the most intact, effectively resisting deforestation, which, as depicted in the accompanying map, encroaches upon these territories. Scholarly literature endorses the demarcation of lands as a robust public policy measure against deforestation, wherein such demarcated regions significantly deter forest destruction. Notably, during intervals

of extensive land demarcation, such as from 2004 to 2008, deforestation rates noticeably declined. In this period, 10 million hectares within the Brazilian Amazon were designated as TIs, while an additional 20 million hectares received protection under the Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Deforestation in the Amazon (PPCDAm). This strategy contributed to a substantial 37% reduction in deforestation rates (IPAM, 2015) (see **Figure 1**).

It is not solely indigenous communities that embody resistance practices within the Amazon. Alongside them, quilombos have led significant efforts in the struggle for land and against racial discrimination in Brazil (Araújo Chersoni, 2023), continuing to play a vital role in the Amazonian landscape as they persistently advocate for land demarcation and the safeguarding of their cultural heritage. Within the Legal Amazon, the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (Incra) has issued land titles to 148 quilombos, housing 11,754 families. Moreover, there are currently 583 land titling processes in progress within the region. Regions where quilombola communities are predominant also exhibit high levels of environmental preservation, with forest cover in certain communities reaching approximately 98% (Pereira, 2023). Forests managed by indigenous peoples and quilombola communities, among others, in the Brazilian Amazon constitute a significant carbon reservoir, estimated at about 13 billion metric tons. The transformation of these areas into pasture or agricultural land results in the emission of greenhouse gases and causes direct local effects, including shifts in temperature and alterations in regional rainfall patterns (IPAM, 2015).

Upon situating the Amazon issue within contrasting frameworks—the economic-mercantilist approach versus community-centric approaches—we begin to discern not only its importance in varying contexts but its significance to humanity at large. For communities, the Amazon embodies a living reality, serving as the cornerstone of existence, as shaped and nurtured by traditional beliefs—thus holding immeasurable intrinsic value. In contrast, within a capitalist production framework, the Amazon is perceived as a commodity, whereby its value is abstractly quantified as a price, detached from substantive meaning. However, the divergence does not conclude here: when commodified, the Amazon is seen as a finite resource, with its degradation posing a threat to the viability of survival conditions on Earth. Consequently, its exploitation impacts—and continues to impact—the entirety of humanity. Therefore, the contention over land in the Amazon is not solely a “domestic interest” issue. Global powers, multinational corporations, and various market entities are acutely aware of this, leading to their involvement in influencing democratic processes, political agendas, and local governance, a topic that will be explored in subsequent sections.

3. Sociopolitical Tensions and Environmental Protection: Varied Government Strategies toward Deforestation and Illegal Mining

As previously discussed, the significance of the Amazon extends across multiple

domains of both human and non-human interaction, necessitating public policies across diverse sectors. We propose a relational analysis concerning social policies on land distribution and environmental protection initiatives, informed by the theoretical model introduced earlier in the preceding section. These two issues encounter deep-seated sociopolitical tensions and are differently managed in alignment with governmental political agendas, resulting in acute manifestations of violence and the exacerbation of social and environmental challenges. This was particularly evident in the outcomes resulting from the rhetoric and actions of the Brazilian government during the period from 2019 to 2022 (“Jair Bolsonaro Administration”). We aim to systematically and theoretically assess these outcomes, as the repercussions from actions during this period are unlikely to be reversed in the near term, necessitating collaborative endeavors from the scientific community for comprehensive understanding and prevention.

The social and political conflicts within the Brazilian Amazon are marked by periods of heightened tension, prominently involving groups—such as agrarian advocates, conservatives, and pro-gun supporters—opposing indigenous rights and endeavoring to sway public opinion. In recent years, the so-called “core of Bolsonaroism” has allied with these factions, intensifying efforts to mislead the public through increased dissemination of misinformation and ideological rhetoric, such as claims that indigenous people possess excessive land or that Indigenous Territory (IT) demarcation, especially along borders, poses a threat to national security. Contrary to these claims, the regularization of such areas serves to both prevent land disputes and strengthen national integrity (Carneiro Filho & Braga de Souza, 2009). According to the Brazilian Constitution, indigenous lands are union property (art. 22, XI), subject to the “permanent possession” of indigenous peoples (art. 231, § 2), illustrating a clear distinction between property and possession rights—an aspect deliberately overlooked in intolerant narratives.

The strategies behind these messages are meticulously crafted to fulfill specific strategic objectives, whether ultimate aims or intermediary steps. Multiple independent organizations are committed to examining these processes, illuminating their contradictions and distortions. The Tricontinental Institute for Social Research exemplifies such efforts, bridging academic research with grassroots movements in emancipatory campaigns. The institute critically examined the political crisis precipitating the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and its repercussions for the Amazon and its peoples. Findings indicate a concerted effort among conservative economic interests and official powers—including the judiciary, legislature, and media—to seize control over the Amazon’s resources. Key evidence includes the influential role of agribusiness, which, under Temer’s administration, benefited from legislative advocacy. These sectors supported Bolsonaro’s presidential campaign, lobbying for commitments to undermine land rights movements, environmental policies, and territory demarcation. Following Bolsonaro’s election, destructive policies against indigenous, quilombola, and riverside communities—and the Amazon itself—were actualized. The Tricontinental Institute details how

the dismantling of environmental protections and the appointment of a pro-agriculture minister of the environment advanced these commercial objectives, underscoring the strategic alignment of local oligarchic and international interests seeking to exploit both the Brazilian workforce and natural resources (Tricontinental, 2019, n/p).

Following Temer's ascent to the presidency in 2016, the demarcation of Indigenous Lands ceased, driven by privatization interests of mercantile powers, until it recommenced in 2023 with Lula's presidency. During the intervening period, not only were there no new demarcations, but agribusiness interests also encroached upon already demarcated lands, intensifying conflicts in the Amazon region and promoting violent extractivism. The relentless pursuit of profit, inherent to the logic of capitalist accumulation, exacerbated the invasion and exploitation of territories traditionally inhabited by communities with deep-rooted connections to the land. These activities presented severe ecological consequences and infringed upon the rights of Amazonian peoples and ethnicities, posing a significant ethical-political challenge (Pajolla, 2023; Porto-Gonçalves, 2017; Mondardo, 2022).

As environmental threats escalated, protective mechanisms became increasingly underfunded or underutilized. The Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM) published land distribution maps for the region, revealing that, despite alarming rates of deforestation, only 2% of the territory was designated as conservation units. These data illustrate the extent of deforestation up to 2016, at which point the situation was already deteriorating (IPAM, 2018). It is evident that deforestation has severely impacted Indigenous Lands and Quilombola Communities within the Legal Amazon area.

The Amazon Institute of Man and Environment (Imazon) has been actively engaged in the monitoring and compilation of deforestation data within the Amazon region. As of June 2022, Brazil experienced its highest deforestation rates in fifteen years. Imazon's Deforestation Alert System (SAD), utilizing satellite imagery since 2008, documented the deforestation of 3360 km² of forest within a period of 151 days (January to May), with nearly half of this deforestation occurring in May alone. Comparatively, May 2021 had previously been regarded as the most detrimental month in fourteen years concerning forest loss. The forest in the State of Amazonas was most severely impacted, with deforestation rates doubling and peaking in conjunction with the tragic assassination of journalist Dom Phillips and indigenous expert Bruno Pereira (Imazon, 2022) (see **Figure 2**).

Despite the escalation of the environmental crisis and increased attacks on indigenous peoples, official institutions were systematically undermined or manipulated, allowing the advancement of exploitative practices and human rights violations against ethnic communities. A study by Climate Observatory (2022) examined the link between governmental actions under Bolsonaro and the rising deforestation rates in the Brazilian Amazon. Notably, the report highlights the appointment of Eduardo Bim as the head of the Brazilian Institute of Environment

and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama) by Jair Bolsonaro and then Minister Salles. In 2021, Bim became the first IBAMA president to be judicially removed, following suspicions of involvement in illegal timber trade activities.

SAD acumulado de Janeiro a Maio

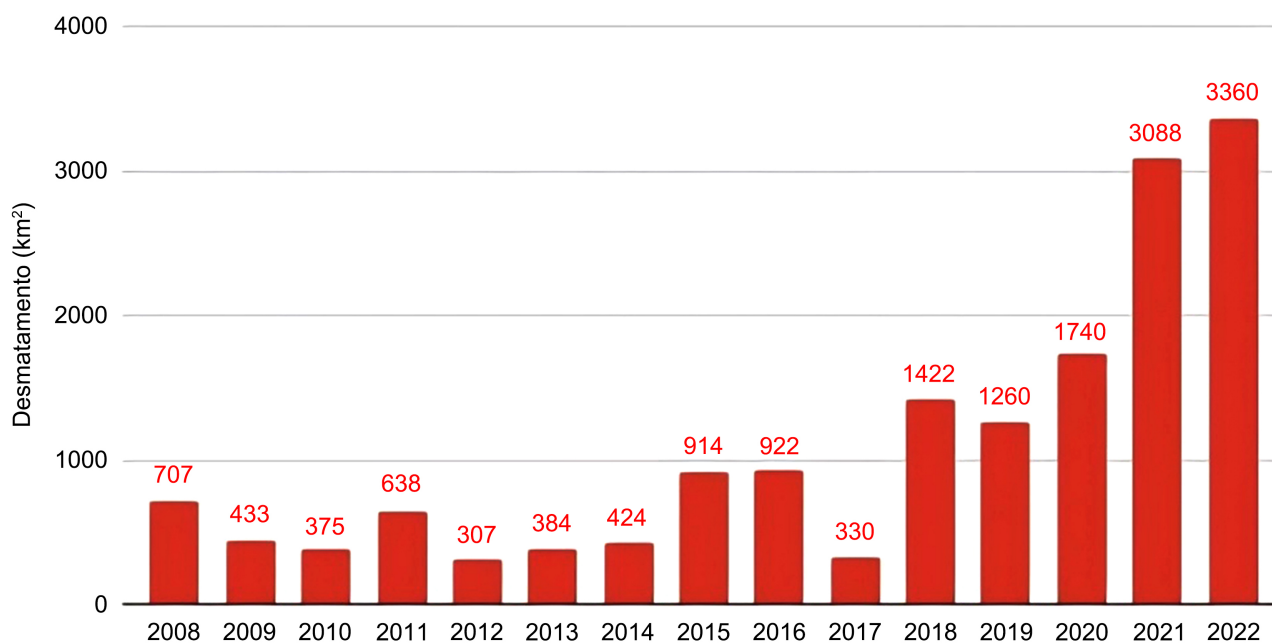


Figure 2. Deforestation in km² between 2008-2022 (Imazon, 2022).

Prior to this, Bim had already been restricting the powers and prerogatives of the agency: from August 2020 to July 2021, there was a notable decline (approximately 40% relative to previous administrations) in the number of infraction notices issued by Ibama for flora-related crimes in the Amazon, according to estimates from the Prodes system (*Satellite Monitoring of Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon Forest, 2023*). This system has functioned since 1988, employing satellite data to monitor clear-cut deforestation in the Legal Amazon, which informs government policy development. Additionally, 2021 saw a stark reduction in embargoes and seizures conducted by environmental inspectors in the region—by 70% and 81% respectively compared to 2018. Consequently, deforestation in the Amazon surged by 103.8% against the average of the preceding decade, while Ibama was led by military police and Armed Forces members appointed by the Environment Minister, replacing experienced career professionals. Concurrently, Bim imposed a code of “ethics” barring staff from engaging with the media (*Climate Observatory, 2022*), and Bolsonaro, amidst Brazil’s historic peak in deforestation, lauded an 80% drop in fines, proclaiming: “We stopped having problems with the environmental issue” (*Pajolla, 2022a*). The subsequent graph demonstrates the correlation between regulatory agency activities and the decrease in deforestation (see **Figure 3**).

The graph further illustrates that a “reduction in fines” does not signify an end

to “environmental issues”, contrary to assertions by the then Brazilian Head of State. Instead, what occurred was a “shielding” of information, obstructing public access and press activities, thereby hindering public scrutiny of governmental actions. Consequently, Bim forbade civil servants from communicating with the press, allowing the then President to declare that environmental problems no longer existed. Similarly, governments during the military dictatorship operated in this fashion. To this day, some maintain the belief that “there was no corruption during the dictatorship”, despite estimates indicating a greater extent of corrupt activities, as highlighted in Campos’ (2012) prize-winning thesis: the issue was not fewer cases of corruption, but rather that oversight and dissemination mechanisms were suppressed and silenced. At this juncture, it is pertinent to consider the insight from Dussel’s liberation politics: “The public is the sphere of visibility [meaning] politics is the sphere ‘of the public’. What occurs in non-public obscurity by the politician (as such) [...] constitutes corruption [...] acts unjustifiable in the public eye” (Dussel, 2007: p. 22).

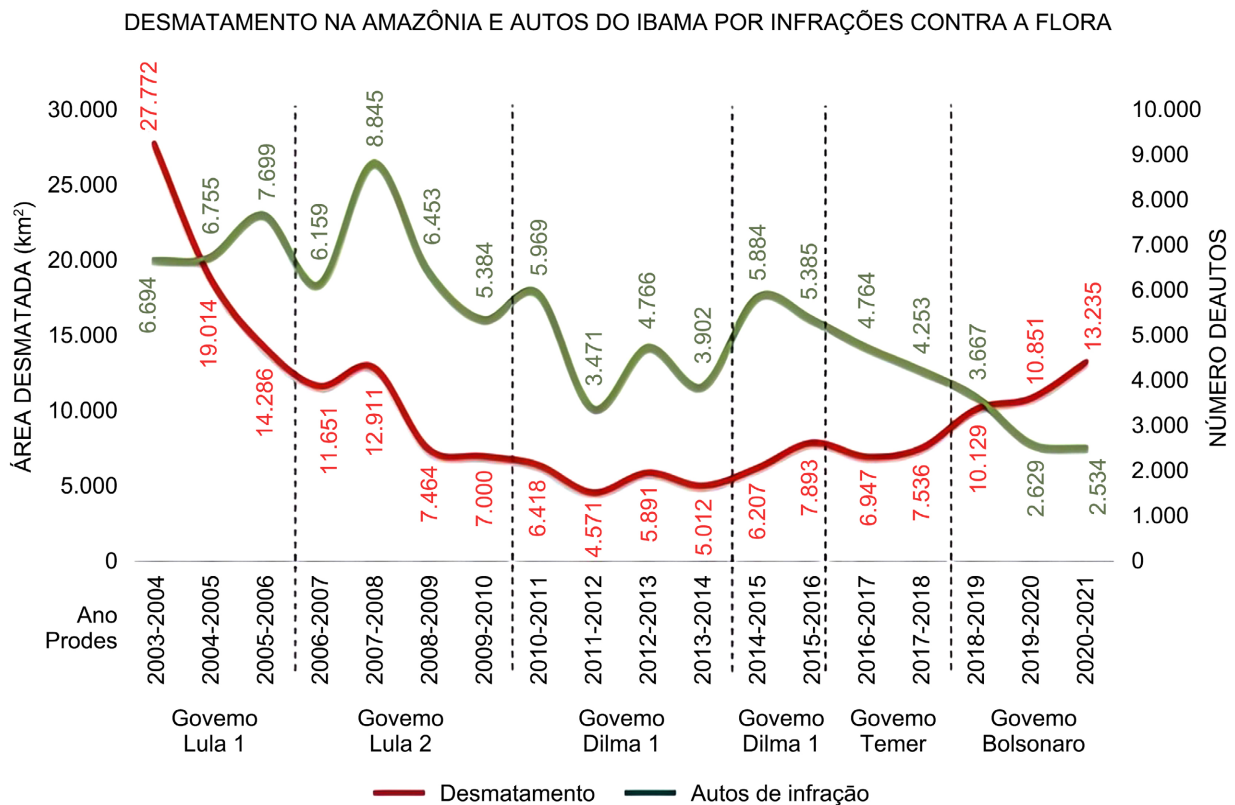


Figure 3. Deforestation in the Amazon and Infraction Notices between 2003–2021 (Climate Observatory, 2022: p. 12).

Addressing the intricacies of the subject, following the unprecedented deforestation rates noted in 2022, Brazil experienced one of the most tumultuous and violent presidential elections in its history. On one side stood Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, representing the progressive faction, re-entering the electoral fray. In the previous election, where Bolsonaro emerged victorious, Lula was favored to win

the popular vote but was excluded from the race due to a ruling in a process deemed illegitimate, later annulled after evidence of judicial manipulation, involving both the Public Prosecutor's Office and magistrates, came to light. Lula is acknowledged as a contentious figure within the Brazilian left, with some factions viewing his tenure as having exacerbated the neoliberal agenda, albeit his terms are internationally recognized for advancing social agendas. Conversely, Jair Messias Bolsonaro was campaigning for reelection after an administration characterized by the resurgence of the far-right, the dismantling of social and environmental policies, and the empowerment of rural interests and predominantly white, conservative religious groups. The election was narrowly decided: Lula secured victory in the runoff with 50.83% of the valid votes, embarking on his third presidential term. During his campaign, Lula pledged to safeguard the Amazon rainforest from deforestation, illegal land appropriation, and extraction activities. He also vowed to bolster popular movements, shielding them from the criminalization they had faced in recent years (Araújo Chersoni, 2023).

In accordance with this directive, the first half of 2023 saw a recorded 60% reduction in deforestation in the Amazon. However, the level of destruction recorded in 2023 remained the sixth highest since monitoring commenced in 2008, due to significantly elevated rates between 2018 and 2022, which reached alarming levels (Imazon, 2023). This indicates that, despite the increased commitment of the Brazilian government from 2023 towards environmental preservation and community protection, substantial efforts are still required. Reversing the catastrophic impacts of the previous administration will necessitate extensive work and sustained actions over an extended period (Figure 4).

Desmatamento Acumulado Janeiro a Junho-SAD

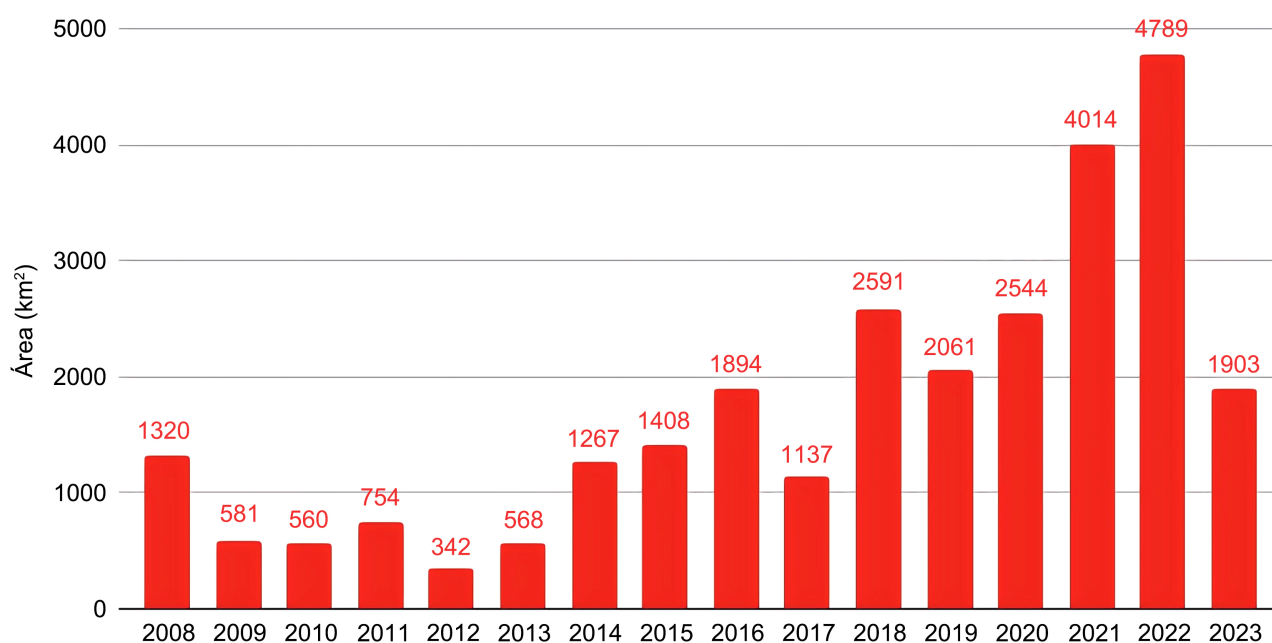


Figure 4. Comparative historical series between the months of May 2008-2023 (Imazon, 2023).

Monitoring efforts have fortunately continued to document reductions in deforestation rates, with ten consecutive months of decline noted as of January 2024 (Imazon, 2024). Nonetheless, despite the Lula administration's revival of environmental policies, other data starkly reveal the violent dynamics inherited from the Bolsonaro era in Brazil. A prime example is the invasion of indigenous lands, which has emerged as a central issue—and a historical hallmark of Brazil—in a violent conflict that has severely impacted the indigenous population and other land rights activists. The disparity between statistics and information on this issue under different administrations is also pronounced.

In 2022, the Indigenous Missionary Council (Cimi) published a report detailing data and evidence of escalating violence against indigenous peoples across Brazil, illustrating how these violations were linked to the Bolsonaro government's actions, particularly the dismantling of protection and assistance agencies. The report highlights a troubling rise in the number of invasions of indigenous territories by land grabbers, farmers, and similar entities (Cimi, 2022: p. 8). Over eleven hundred cases of invasions and various forms of harm to indigenous communities were documented (Oliveira, 2022). In the context of discussions on the transparency of political actions, independent journalism played a critical role during this period, aiding in comparisons between different administrations, thereby underscoring the gravity of these violations.

In this context, Salim (2023) reports data from Cimi, indicating a 252% rise in the invasions of indigenous territories during the Bolsonaro administration compared to the figures from prior governments. Salim attributes these violations to several factors, including the dismantling of public policies, the promotion of land invasions and illegal mining, and the spread of hate speech against indigenous peoples. These are recognized as key elements of Bolsonaro's anti-indigenous policy. Below is the graph illustrating the historical series across different governments (Figure 5):



Figure 5. Invasions of Indigenous Lands between 2003–2022 (Salim, 2023).

As previously noted, the violations that were already on the rise in 2018 saw exponential growth starting in 2019. These incursions into demarcated territories have resulted in severe consequences, including acts of violence against the land and its biodiversity. This surge in violence has been exacerbated not only by a lack of accountability but also by the promotion of hate and intolerance in public speeches, notably by the then-President. In several of his controversial statements, Bolsonaro openly supported mining activities; for instance, in 2021, he remarked that “it is not fair, today, to want to criminalize the miner in Brazil.” Such statements by Bolsonaro perpetuated long-standing myths propagated by landowners and miners, notably the assertion that a few indigenous people control vast amounts of land. It is crucial to emphasize that land demarcation not only secures housing, shelter, and the preservation of the identity, systems, and traditions of indigenous peoples but also aids in environmental conservation. According to the [National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples \(2023\)](#), the Yanomami Indigenous Land (TIY), the largest in Brazil, is home to over thirty thousand inhabitants residing in 384 villages. Nonetheless, Bolsonaro challenged the demarcation of this territory, expressing: “The Yanomami reserve. There are about 10 thousand Indians. The size is twice the State of Rio de Janeiro. Does that justify it? It is one of the lands with the richest subsoil in the world. No one is going to demarcate land with poor subsoil. Now, what does the world see in the Amazon, forest? It is focused on what lies beneath the earth,” Bolsonaro stated ([Pajolla, 2022b](#)).

Regrettably, the Brazilian government’s actions endangered indigenous communities not only through rhetoric that incited hate and intolerance but also through tangible policies. This prompted the Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil (Apib) to seek judicial intervention from the Supreme Federal Court (STF), highlighting the humanitarian crisis faced by the Yanomami and attributing increased mining activities in the region to presidential neglect, particularly the disregard for multiple court orders mandating the removal of miners from indigenous territories ([Pajolla, 2022b](#)). As analyzed by the [Climate Observatory \(2024: p. 54\)](#), the government’s approach appeared to actively promote mining activities in Brazil, accounting for its failure to observe judicial rulings and its dismissal of numerous international recommendations and preventive strategies previously endorsed by past administrations. Consequently, mining activities on Indigenous Lands surged dramatically, with a 625% increase since 2010 ([MapBiomias, 2022](#)), severely impacting several indigenous territories, including the Kayapó, Mundurucu, Yanomami, Tenharim do Igarapé Preto, and Apyterewa regions ([Climate Observatory, 2024](#)).

When analyzed over time, the surge in illegal mining parallels the rise in deforestation rates: under the Bolsonaro administration, illegal mining activities “skyrocketed,” predominantly affecting the Amazon region, with protected areas suffering the most significant impacts. In conservation units, there was a 352% increase in mining by 2021 compared to 2010. The mining alerts issued by Inpe’s Deter system reached their highest level since 2015 between January 2021 and

June 2022. During this interval, roughly 16,000 hectares were converted into mining zones within the Legal Amazon (Climate Observatory, 2024: p. 54). The subsequent graph illustrates that while the escalation began around 2016, the period from 2019 to 2021 witnessed unprecedented growth in illegal mining activities (Figure 6):

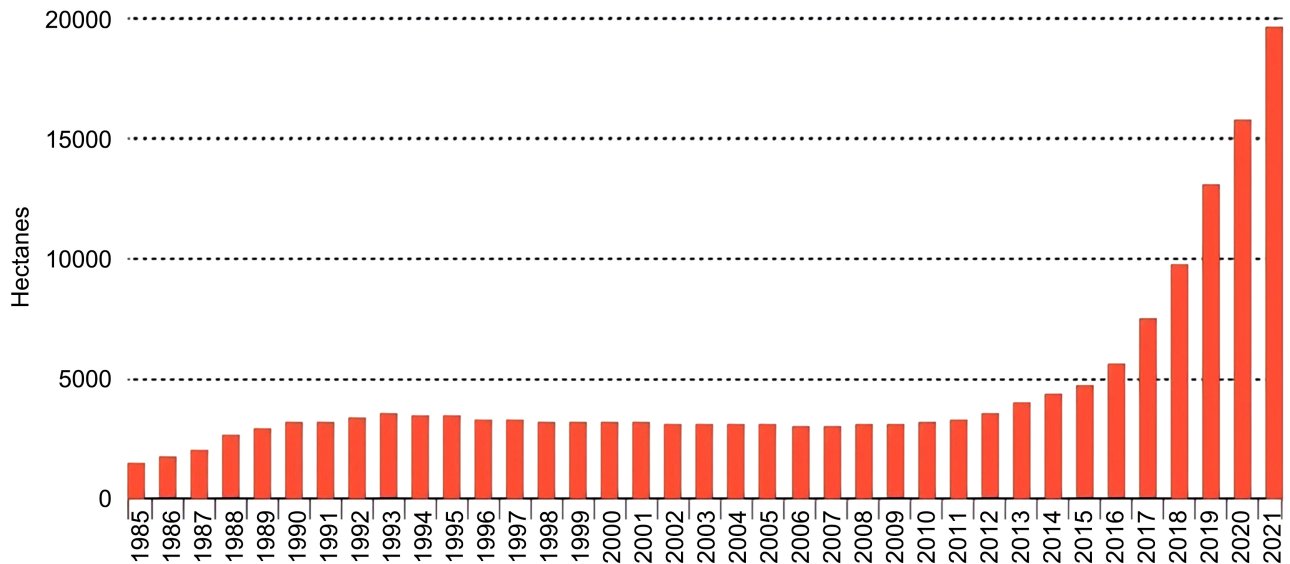


Figure 6. Mining in Indigenous Lands in Brazil between 1995-2021 (Climate Observatory, 2024).

The defiance against laws and established authorities suggested a belief in impunity. Studies revealed that 23% of mining alerts were registered in regions where such activities are explicitly forbidden, including Indigenous Lands. Notably, there was a significant increase in mining activities within the Yanomami Land, amounting to 54% between December 2021 and December 2022 (Manzoli & Rajão, 2022; Climate Observatory, 2024).

4. Violence and Lethality in the Amazon: Violation of Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The data and information previously discussed reveal specific dynamics of violence; nevertheless, they represent only a fraction of the broader chain of human rights violations impacting indigenous, quilombola, and other communities, as well as non-human life through environmental degradation. The infringement upon territories disrupts not only the collective identity and interaction with nature, inherently tied to the worldviews of the Amazonian communities but also leads to severe consequences. These invasions result in the spread of diseases, water and soil contamination, murders, sexual violence, and numerous other forms of brutality. For local communities, these actions signify the ultimate denial of life.

Geographer Estêvão Benfica highlights that the movement of miners has introduced various diseases to indigenous populations in the Amazon, framing mining as a form of violence across multiple dimensions. Satellite imagery reveals only a

fraction of mining's impact on communities: it exposes deforestation but does not capture the spread of diseases, health deterioration, inter-community conflicts, rising violence, or the depletion of essential subsistence resources. "Together, these factors undermine the capacity to sustain life within the communities" (ISA, 2023). Malaria exemplifies a preventable yet potentially fatal disease, with its incidence rates historically mirroring those of illegal mining and deforestation and scientific research developed by de Aguiar Barros et al. (2022) demonstrated the causal connection between mining and the incidence of the disease. The subsequent graph, produced by monitoring agencies and disseminated by the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), illustrates on the left the number of malaria cases and on the right, the scale of deforested areas (in hectares) (Figure 7):

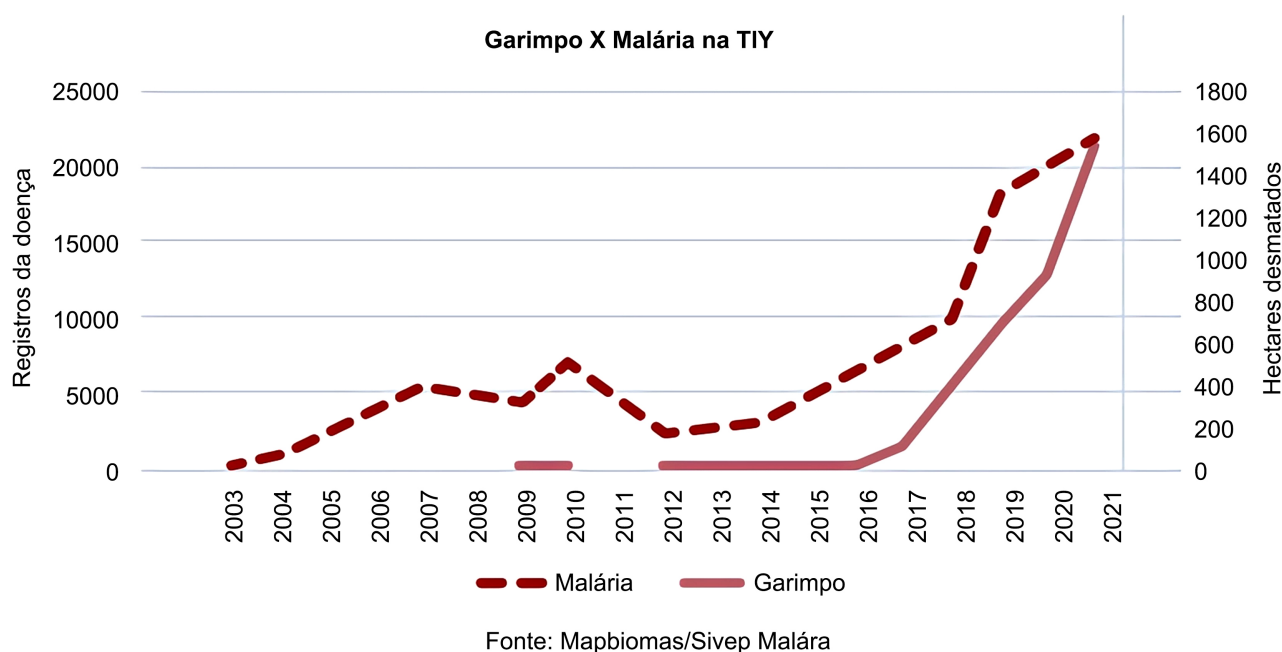


Figure 7. Mining x Malaria in Yanomami indigenous land ISA (2023).

An important dimension of lethality is intentional violent deaths, encompassing homicides, robbery-related fatalities, bodily harm resulting in death, and deaths caused by police interventions. The [Brazilian Public Security Forum \(2023\)](#) has compiled and analyzed data revealing that in 2021, there were 200 reported deaths among indigenous people, with nearly 60% occurring in the Legal Amazon region, despite it having a smaller indigenous population compared to other regions in Brazil. This disproportionate rate results in a violent mortality rate (per thousand) for indigenous people in the Legal Amazon (13.1) that exceeds the average across other states (10.4) and raises the national rate (11.8). From 2018 to 2021, the ten municipalities with the highest rates of indigenous homicides were identified, predominantly located in Roraima, Amazonas, and Pará. Topping this list is Alto Alegre in Roraima, where 80 indigenous murders were recorded during this period. In 2021, the violent death rate reached 141.7 per 100,000 inhabitants

within an indigenous population of 12,705. Situated at the border with the Yanomami Indigenous Land, Alto Alegre confronts significant challenges and contributes to Roraima's status as the state with the highest number of deaths: 46 victims. This occurs despite "Roraima being one of the states with the lowest level of ethnic/racial/color identification of victims in police records, indicating that the police may not yet fully recognize the magnitude of the issue" (Brazilian Public Security Forum, 2023: p. 24).

The Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) conducted an analysis of these and other data, advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples and communities. They specifically criticized the overtly anti-indigenous policies implemented during Jair Bolsonaro's administration, attributing them as the primary cause of elevated mortality rates within this period. From 2019 to 2022, 795 murders of indigenous individuals were recorded, representing a 54% increase compared to previous administrations (Apib, 2023, n.p.). The Indigenous Missionary Council (Cimi) compiled a report that supported this comparative analysis, which is presented in the graph below (see Figure 8):

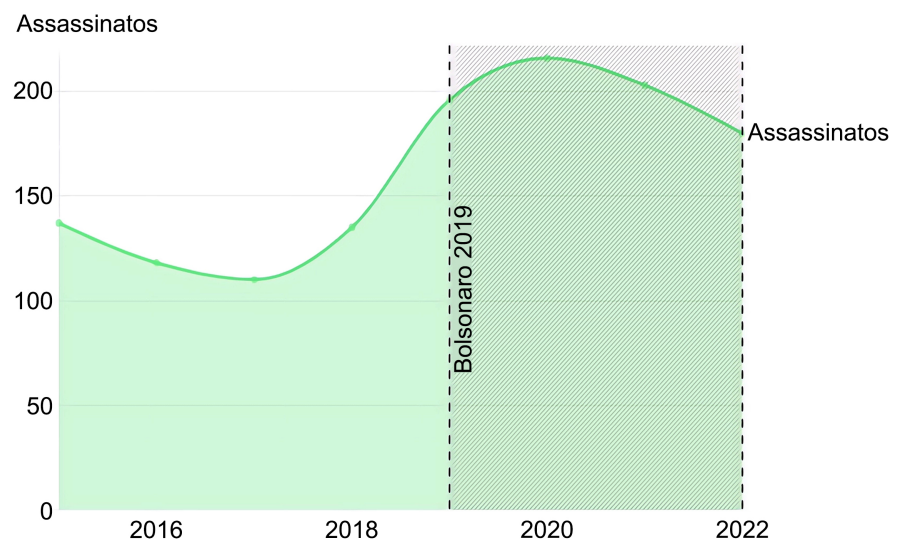


Figure 8. Murders of indigenous people—comparison by period of government (Navarro & Bispo, 2023).

The elevated mortality rates in the State of Roraima are linked to the presence of the Yanomami Indigenous Territory, identified by the Apib (2022) Report as a primary target of illegal mining activities. This report, spanning nearly three hundred pages, compiles data, grievances, information, and analyses that chart a comprehensive chain of violence and human rights infringements affecting Amazonian peoples and communities. These forms of violence peaked during the study period, notably with instances of power abuse against indigenous populations more than doubling under the Bolsonaro administration (averaging 22.2 cases annually) as compared to the Dilma and Temer administrations (averaging 8.7 cases annually). Regarding the protection of patrimonial rights, the report highlighted

the negligence and delays in land regularization, and the containment of territorial disputes, invasions, illegal exploitation of natural resources, and various patrimonial damages. Cumulatively, there were 1334 cases of patrimonial violence. In the context of violence against individuals, which encompasses abuse of power, sexual violence, attempted murders, negligent homicides, racism, threats, and other offenses, 416 cases were documented.

In 2022, there were numerous instances of suicide, totaling 115, with 35% involving young indigenous individuals, alongside the deaths of 835 children aged four years and under. The government was accused of omissive forms of violence, including neglect in healthcare and education, particularly through the shortening of Restriction Ordinances, which temporarily barred non-indigenous access to Indigenous Territories, thereby easing invasions into the lands of voluntarily isolated peoples. The Report, in analyzing each data category, highlights the connection to the actions and omissions in public policy, exposing the “normalization” of indigenous genocide under the Bolsonaro administration, which justified these actions as necessary for economic growth (Apib, 2022).

From 2019 to 2022, there was a marked rise in lethal violence against specific societal groups. In the context of violence in the Brazilian Amazon, the activities of miners are pivotal in initiating widespread violence against Amazonian and indigenous populations. The inaction of the President in response to these rights violations implies complicity that must be further investigated by national and international courts, to which Brazil is accountable. The President’s stance during this period likely emboldened or facilitated the activities of various groups.

The intensification of conflicts and violence in the Amazon region, along with the violations of indigenous rights, appear to have facilitated the rise of new criminal organizations, notably the so-called agromilícias (Brazilian Public Security Forum, 2023). These groups have initiated attacks on indigenous territories, peasant lands, agroecological communities, and others. Additionally, violence has escalated with the evolving organization of the drug market in the Amazon, which Couto (2018) characterizes as increasingly adopting a transnational corporate nature.

A number of scholars argue that lethality is a defining feature of Brazilian history. From the work of Aniyar de Castro (2005), who explored criminological critiques to illuminate what is termed subterranean criminal law, to racial theories emphasizing the central role of racism in the violent actions of state and parastatal entities, leading to the “black body fallen on the ground” (Flauzina, 2006), there has been an observable increase in lethal violence against indigenous peoples and other advocates for land rights. This lethality also reflects the failure of the war on drugs, with its geopolitics, as previously analyzed by Del Olmo (1990), representing a sort of transnationalization of punitive and repressive policies. However, these policies indiscriminately impact even the victims.

When reflecting on the concept of lethality as a defining feature of Brazilian history, it is crucial to examine the meaning of history itself. Specifically, which

history are we considering? To support such an inference, it is essential to focus on the narrative of the colonial period. Dussel (1997) argues that understanding history requires its division into distinct periods, as periodization forms the basis of historical knowledge. Although this division is not inherent to history and is both artificial and arbitrary, influencing its content, it remains necessary. Without periodization, it would be impossible to comprehend the continuity of events that constitute history.

It is crucial to determine which aspects of Brazilian history are fundamentally marked by violence, a concept intertwined with the broader narrative of violence in Latin America under colonial subjugation. From the late 15th century, a power dynamic emerged, described by Quijano (1992) as “coloniality”, which established extreme forms of violence distributed through racial hierarchies—manifested in domination and racism, sexual domination—expressed as machismo, and the domination and exploitation inherent in capitalist labor. In terms of labor, exploitation is an intrinsic characteristic. The Latin American continent was familiar with conflicts and intercommunity disputes, yet it had not encountered violence and cruelty to the extreme degree introduced by the conquerors during the initial land invasions. As Dussel (1993: p. 131) observes: “The invasion concluded. The warriors were vanquished. The same fate awaited the Mayans, the Incas of Atahualpa... extending to the farthest reaches of Tierra del Fuego in the south, or Alaska in the north, over the ensuing years. Modernity emerged... liberating the oppressed from the Aztecs’ bloodthirsty gods... and akin to the Sixth Sun rising on humanity’s horizon, a new deity (capital) inaugurated a novel ‘sacrificial myth’, with Tlacaélel’s ‘myth’ yielding to the equally sacrificial ‘myth’ of the ‘provident hand of God’ harmoniously regulating the market” (Dussel, 1993: p. 131).

The initial invasion’s violence in 1492 extends to contemporary times, notwithstanding formal assurances of rights—human rights, state protection, and international commitments. Economic exploitation subjugates nature and traditions, representing an ambitious order unknown to ancestral peoples, who began to endure its effects with colonization by the victorious deity—capital, as articulated by Dussel. Society is structured under this paradigm, and it appears increasingly challenging to break free from our colonized mindset that reifies all aspects of reality. The Brazilian Public Security Forum (2023: p. 22) highlighted that “primarily, the existence of indigenous peoples is intrinsically tied to their territories, meaning threats to these territories and their lifestyles are direct threats to them.” Therefore, it is crucial to transcend our proprietary perception of the world and acknowledge that territory is not mere property; it is a life-enabling space, essential for the persistence of diverse realities.

5. Final Considerations

Upon overlaying the data, we observe a direct relationship between illegal mining, deforestation, human mortality, and other adversities in the Amazon that indicate a severe risk of extinction for indigenous communities. The complexity of violent

dynamics in the region necessitates the coordination of diverse public policies, enabling a multifaceted approach not only to specific issues but, more importantly, to structural challenges. Although conducting specific analyses is not very common in our academic practice, we recognize that the events and processes that occurred in Brazil between 2019 and 2022 still require systematic organization and understanding, particularly from human rights defense perspectives. We use perspectives in the plural because it concerns not only the violation of human rights as interculturally understood or redefined in light of critical theories. Even when considered with all the limitations attributed to hegemonic theory, human rights were flagrantly violated in Brazil so severely that it will take considerable time and effort to reverse or mitigate the effects of such violations.

In this study, we aim to compare the governance periods characterized by differing political orientations and commitments. We draw a clear line between the administration of Bolsonaro (2019-2022) and the preceding and succeeding PT administrations. We view the tenure of Michel Temer as a transitional phase that set the stage for the initial implementation of policies associated with rights reductions in Brazil. Given the extensive analytical scope this model provides, we have chosen to focus on a particular issue that has long been a concern and aligns with our academic research interests: the protection of the natural environment and the safeguarding of collective subjectivities, particularly those of indigenous peoples, their traditions, and ways of life. In Brazil, the critical intersection of these concerns is situated in the Amazon. Understanding the implications of violence against this region is incomplete without recognizing that such violence is inherently directed against indigenous peoples. As noted by the Indigenous Missionary Council (Cimi, 2022) and the *Brazilian Public Security Forum* (2023) report, indigenous peoples are intrinsically linked to their territories and, by extension, to nature itself.

From an anthropocentric viewpoint, the infringement on human rights—the environment—can be attributed to the perilous intersection of two primary factors: the mercantile logic of endless accumulation and the neglect and complicity of the national government. Extending beyond this anthropocentric framework, we assert that the rights infringed upon include those of non-human entities—nature and all its constituent living beings, humans included, both individually and collectively. In defying the colonial rationality that predominates the official legal system, we must acknowledge collective existences and fundamental needs. This involves more than merely recognizing individual subjectivity and its aspirations. It requires acknowledging alternative forms of existence, of being in community with other humans and with various life elements and entities integrated by nature—within the territory. This marks the onset of the intricate domain of ancestral community rights, the significance of nature, and the enforcement of intercultural practices and actions that oppose assimilationism.

The administration of Jair Bolsonaro was elected with the pledge that no new indigenous lands would be demarcated, a promise that was indeed realized

throughout his tenure. The cessation of territorial demarcations, coupled with the dismantling of regulatory agencies, facilitated the expansion of illegal mining activities on Indigenous Lands and other demarcated areas. Additionally, this led to unprecedented deforestation rates, surpassing those recorded during the two previous administrations.

Organizations dedicated to the protection of indigenous peoples and the Amazon frequently reported what they perceived as Bolsonaro's anti-indigenous policies. This observation is crucial for understanding the violent dynamics of the periods under review, where the intersection of harmful governmental actions and predatory commercial interests resulted in a significant increase in mortality rates among indigenous communities, environmental and human rights activists, researchers, and land defenders. The mortality figures for these groups reflect the policies implemented during the far-right administration of Jair Bolsonaro.

The succession of Lula's administration, which served as a representative of the progressive movement in the presidential elections, despite facing criticism from within the progressive camp, promised immediate reforms in addressing deforestation rates. While it is too early for a thorough evaluation of his current government, there is an observable shift in approach regarding deforestation figures in the Amazon, consistent with previous PT administrations. The reinstatement of demarcation for Indigenous and quilombola lands, coupled with a reduction in deforestation, illustrates this policy direction.

The multifaceted violence occurring in the Amazon, referred to here as dynamics of violence, echoes the historical patterns of colonial invasion, subsequently becoming embedded in Brazilian history—perspectives that have been central to our research endeavors (see [Wolkmer, 2015](#); [Araújo Chersoni, 2023](#), [Ferrazzo, 2015, 2019](#)). The violence wrought by miners, the encroachment of deforestation upon Indigenous territories, and the spread of diseases like malaria due to miner displacement, all exemplify persistent forms of violence that ultimately have devastating effects on Indigenous, quilombola, and other communities. This tragedy is further obscured by underreporting, lack of documentation, and omissions in public assistance policies.

As stated in the motivations for this analysis, we consider it essential for a critical and engaged epistemology with the populace to systematize, understand, and theoretically formulate concepts regarding periods of rights violations and the responsibilities in reparation. We aim to align with the efforts of research institutions, activists, indigenous voices, and other defenders, whose fundamental work in data production has shaped policies addressing violence, especially during times of state policy dismantling and rampant violence. These contributions were made while official authorities engaged in censorship, obstruction, and omission regarding the mapping of Amazonian realities. Thus, in this article, we venture beyond our “comfort zone” to conduct a more focused analysis that advocates for the rights and protection of ethnic, ancestral, riverine, and other communities, aiding in the prevention of new chains of violations. As [Dussel \(2007\)](#) elucidates,

authoritarian governments may periodically reclaim the exercise of power, but true power remains with the people, underscoring the enduring truth of Archbishop Dom João Batista da Mota e Albuquerque's famous words: "only the people save the people".

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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