# Indigenizing Democracy: ‘Never again a Brazil without us’

### Bartira S. Fortes[[1]](#footnote-2)

## PROLOGUE - The Cocar[[2]](#footnote-3) and the Sash: Indigenous Participation in the Presidential Handover

[Figure 1]

Figure 1: President Lula alongside representatives of the Brazilian civil society ascending the Planalto ramp for the presidential sash handover ceremony on January 1, 2023. Photo: Ricardo Stuckert.

On January 1, 2023, the frigid Swedish winter provided a striking contrast to the warmth and vibrant atmosphere surrounding the inauguration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, also known as Lula, as the President of Brazil. In the confines of my living room, sheltered from the icy temperatures outside, I immersed myself in the unfolding of this significant milestone in the country’s political landscape. Through a live broadcast, I caught glimpses of the evolving events and witnessed people from all corners of Brazil expressing their aspirations for a peaceful transition of power and a renewed commitment to democratic values. As a Brazilian artivist and anthropologist living in Sweden, conducting research on Indigenous struggles, my attempt to comprehend the political transformations within my motherland drew heavily upon my personal experiences. My reflections went beyond typical fieldwork observations, as they were imbued with a profound emotional attachment, interweaving feelings of excitement, hope, relief, and care, as well as uneasiness and concern.

How does one adequately convey the magnitude of the tangible losses, encompassing both human and non-human lives, resulting from the systematic neglect of Indigenous rights and the devastating destruction of ancestral territories, compounded by the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil over the past years?[[3]](#footnote-4) While many of us have witnessed these events from afar, it is crucial to acknowledges that the tragic consequences have not only led to immeasurable loss of lives but have also significantly shaped subjectivities. In the face of such challenging circumstances, the presidential inauguration emerged as a glimpse of hope and a promising sign of better times. It became a moment to catch our breath, to embrace the present celebration, even as a sense of apprehension for the uncertain path that lies ahead lingers on. On this momentous day, the prevailing jubilation momentarily set aside my analytical lens, allowing me to fully immerse myself in the joyous atmosphere. Notifications flooded my group chats, brimming with emojis, memes, and heartfelt messages accompanied by virtual hugs, videos, and pictures capturing the vibrant festivities happening on the streets. Amidst the virtual cheering, I navigated the challenges posed by distance and varying time zones and embraced the opportunity to be united in celebration.

Glued to my computer screen, I watched Lula’s inauguration speech, wherein he summoned the spirit of unity in a divided nation. During his address, he made a resolute commitment to tackle the pressing political, social, and economic challenges that had plagued the country, particularly in the past seven years[[4]](#footnote-5). Lula vowed to strengthen democratic institutions, champion social equality, and combat the perils of climate change, framing Brazil’s environmental commitments and Indigenous rights as the wellspring from which the country would regain its standing on the global stage and restore its democratic ideals:

Indigenous peoples need to have their lands demarcated and free from the threats of illegal and predatory economic activities. Their culture must be preserved, their dignity respected, and sustainability ensured. They are not hindrances to development – they are guardians of our rivers and forests and an essential part of our greatness as a nation. Therefore, we are creating the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples to combat 500 years of inequality.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Shortly after delivering his speech, Lula stood alongside Sônia Guajajara, a prominent Indigenous leader and elected Federal Deputy. Side by side, they signed a decree[[6]](#footnote-7) that established the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, an unparalleled first in the annals of Brazilian politics. This historic moment marked the creation of a ministry entirely devoted to addressing the pressing demands of Indigenous peoples. With this momentous step taken at his inauguration, Lula set a precedent for future administrations to follow, underscoring the paramount significance of Indigenous participation in shaping the country’s policies.

In the wake of this unprecedented event, speculations reverberated across news outlets and social media platforms about who would take on the symbolic duty of handing over the presidential sash to Lula – a tradition that represents the peaceful transfer of power. The refusal of former president Jair Bolsonaro to partake in the sashing ceremony sparked debates on the profound divisions that had plagued the country and the urgency of healing those rifts, adding a layer of intrigue to the unfolding drama. Who would emerge as the influential figure to take the stage? Rumors circulated the digital sphere as names were thrust into the spotlight. The significance of these speculations reached beyond a mere ceremonial gesture, symbolizing the importance of upholding democratic values in times of political turmoil.

The pivotal moment had finally arrived. Lula stood before the crowd. As he ascended the Planalto ramp, the crisp air of the Swedish winter seemed to dissipate. In a remarkable twist, the task of presenting the presidential sash to Lula was not bestowed upon a high-ranking statesperson, but rather on a group of individuals representing the struggles of various marginalized segments of Brazilian civil society (Figure 1).[[7]](#footnote-8) The crowd erupted in applause. This unexpected choice carried an important symbolism, indicating a departure from conventional norms, and embracing a democratic ethos that affirms multiple collective voices.

This significance of the sash handover was further enhanced by the notable representation of Indigenous people within the group. Chief Raoni Metuktire,[[8]](#footnote-9) an esteemed Indigenous leader and environmental advocate, stood among them, adorned in a yellow *cocar*. The *cocar*, a sacred Indigenous feather headdress, holds profound cultural meaning for Indigenous peoples. The motto ‘Antes do Brasil da coroa, existe o Brasil do cocar’ (‘Before the Brazil of the crown, there is the Brazil of the cocar’) has been adopted by several social movements and activists dedicated to advocating for Indigenous rights. This motto speaks to the colonization that began in the early 1500s, where the *cocar* was replaced by the Portuguese crown, resulting in the devastating impact of the near-extinction of approximately ninety percent of the Indigenous populations within the first century of European contact in present-day South America.[[9]](#footnote-10) This powerful statement reflects the ongoing struggle for recognition and justice, bringing forth a necessary reckoning with colonial legacies, urging Brazil to indigenize[[10]](#footnote-11) its democracy, confront historical injustices, and redefine national identities.

The joint ascent of Chief Raoni and President Lula up the Planalto ramp signified not only a renewed commitment to Indigenous rights but also added a crucial dimension to Brazil’s democracy. In this pivotal moment, Indigenous peoples, who have long endured marginalization under persistent colonial power structures, stood at the forefront of the country’s future. The act of bestowing the sash, traditionally a symbol of power and authority, now held a deeper meaning – it became a conduit for the recognition of the plurality of cultures, languages, and ontologies at the core of our societies. The prologue to the presidential inauguration had set the stage for a new chapter in Brazilian politics. It served as a powerful statement: the country’s democracy can only thrive through the acknowledgment and political participation of Indigenous peoples.

As the vibrant festivities subside, an underlying concern resurfaces, casting a shadow over the horizon: Will the newly elected government be able to uphold its commitments to demarcate Indigenous lands and confront the pervasive exploitative economic activities within these territories? This question encapsulates the complexity of the task at hand, particularly in a country where the political and economic elite predominantly adheres to a colonialist view of Indigenous peoples as hindrances to progress, deeply anchored in an extractive, growth-oriented development model. The attainment of these objectives underscores the necessity for continued collective efforts that transcend mere rhetoric, as it entails challenging deeply ingrained power dynamics and structural inequalities that perpetuate environmental exploitation and the disregard for the fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples. Navigating the path forward will undoubtedly present formidable challenges.

## ACT 1 – Future Brazil: Reclaiming Democracy through Indigenous Art

**[Figure 2]**

Figure 2: Daiara Tukano, *A queda do céu e a mãe de todas as lutas* (The Falling Sky and the Mother of All Struggles), 2023. Part of the exhibition *Brasil futuro: As formas da democracia* (*Future Brazil: The Forms of Democracy*).[[11]](#footnote-12) Photo: Marina Gadelha / ASCOM SECEC DF.

In conjunction with the presidential inauguration, the National Museum of the Republic in Brazil unveiled the exhibition Brasil Futuro: as Formas da Democracia (Future Brazil: The Forms of Democracy). Driven by a sense of curiosity, I navigated through online platforms, embarking on a quest to explore the exhibition’s visual compositions and messages. The exhibition featured a diverse collection of Brazilian artworks, with the notable presence of Contemporary Indigenous Art[[12]](#footnote-13) through the contributions of Indigenous artists who have solidified their pivotal role in the decolonial turn within the Brazilian art scene.[[13]](#footnote-14) Daiara Tukano, Jaider Esbell, Ailton Krenak, Denilson Baniwa, Yacunã Tuxá, Gustavo Caboco, Edgar Kanaykô Xakriabá, Arissana Pataxó, among others Indigenous artists from a diverse range of ethnicities, wove their perspectives into the exhibition’s multifaceted portrayal of the country’s path forward.

Amongst the artworks on display was the painting A queda do céu e a mãe de todas as lutas (The falling sky and the mother of all struggles) (Figure 2) by Daiara Tukano, an artist, activist, educator, and communicator from the Eremiri Húusiro Parameri clan of the Yepá Mahsã people, also known as Tukano, from the Upper Rio Negro in the Brazilian Amazon. Her site-specific painting intervention conveyed a powerful message about the crucial role of Indigenous peoples in the foundation of democracy in Brazil. A short text beside the artwork reads:

To love life as the sky loves the earth and as the earth loves the sky. The forest that holds up the sky has already spoken: Democracy is to demarcate all Indigenous lands. Earth is the mother of all struggles. How much more grief for how many worlds can we endure? The problem runs deep, and the sky is high above. Let us wake up to be able to dream of greater worlds. Añu Mahsã.[[14]](#footnote-15) [[15]](#footnote-16)

Inspired by the book *The Falling Sky*,[[16]](#footnote-17) Tukano’s painting depicts a woman, symbolizing the Earth, holding the sky, portrayed as a male body with a bird’s head.[[17]](#footnote-18) Written by Davi Kopenawa, shaman and spokesman for the Yanomami of the Brazilian Amazon, in collaboration with anthropologist Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky* explores the Yanomami people’s cosmology and its relationship to Indigenous rights and the environment.[[18]](#footnote-19) The title of Tukano’s artwork refers to the Yanomami belief that the sky is falling, a symbol of the depletion of the Earth through the expansion of the detrimental consequences of misguided extractive activities. In alignment with the Yanomami ontology, this depletion ultimately leads to a collapse of the balance between the earth and the sky.[[19]](#footnote-20) Kopenawa asserts that signs of this impending collapse are becoming evident as the minerals that provide strength to the earth have been extracted at an alarming rate. This worldview forms the foundation for the Yanomami struggle against predatory extractive activities within their territories.[[20]](#footnote-21) By incorporating elements of Yanomami cosmology, Tukano sheds light on the importance of Indigenous knowledge in tackling environmental challenges and offers a critique of extractivism’s destructive forces.

At the core of the painting, Tukano presents her interpretation of a sacred red feather cloak belonging to the Tupinambá people. The Tupinambá cloaks had been stripped away from their cultural context and transformed into ethnographic artifacts confined within the walls of museums in Europe.[[21]](#footnote-22) The presence of a Tupinambá cloak prominently depicted in the painting serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring colonial power dynamics embedded within museums, emphasizing the urgency to reclaim spaces that have historically subjugated and exoticized Indigenous peoples. Resonating within the broader socio-political landscape of Brazil, Tukano’s artwork provides a thought-provoking reflection on the intricate intersections of art, democracy, decolonization, and Indigenous struggles.

To further enrich my virtual exploration of the exhibition, I joined a live stream on Tukano’s Instagram account. During the stream, she provided insights into the meaning and purpose of her artwork, adding a layer of interactive engagement to the virtual experience. In her words:

For us [Indigenous peoples], democracy has never existed. But it is a beautiful utopia, and we will fight for it until our last breath. To engage in this [democratic] exercise, we can only do it together, by being able to dialogue on equal terms [...] including understanding what art is. In my language, there is a word that might be closer to art, hori, which means miracle, vision, light, color. It represents a vision that goes beyond what the eyes can see, but rather the vision of the spirit.[[22]](#footnote-23)

By intertwining ancestral heritage with hori[[23]](#footnote-24) expressions, Tukano reflected a commitment to decolonizing not only the realm of art but also the political sphere. This artistic-spiritual endeavor sparked meaningful conversations about the value of Indigenous contributions in tackling pressing contemporary challenges, notably the far-reaching implications of climate change on societal, political, and economic levels. The incorporation of Indigenous art in the exhibition represented a noteworthy stride toward recognizing the transformative role of Indigenous peoples in shaping the trajectory of Brazil’s democracy.

The new momentum of Indigenous artists’ participation in the exhibition Brasil Futuro: as Formas da Democracia was highlighted by the projections of their artworks onto the façade of the National Congress during the Festival do Futuro (Future Festival). A festive part of the presidential inauguration, the festival encompassed performances and concerts by regional and national artists.[[24]](#footnote-25) In addition to the significant presence of Indigenous art and representation in the presidential inauguration, another ground-breaking moment occurred during the festival when Indigenous singer Kaê Guajajara, accompanied by Indigenous rapper Kandú Puri and the Indigenous rap group Nativos Mcs, took the stage. As I tuned in to the live performances, the powerful voice of Kaê Guajajara echoed through on the screen:

I am Indigenous, an Indigenous slum dweller  
I will not accept mere crumbs  
I will never be content with neglect, with hunger,  
With living on the fringes of a system we did not choose  
That has robbed, invaded, and imposed upon us

All this gold, all this wealth  
Filled with blood  
Built upon our bodies  
My mother taught me to listen and hide  
And the slum taught me to fight[[25]](#footnote-26)

With messages of Indigenous resistance, these events marked an unprecedented milestone in Brazil’s history, as Indigenous peoples had never played such a role in a presidential inauguration. The active involvement of Indigenous peoples represented not only the diverse dimensions of Indigenous perspectives but also posed a challenge to dominant narratives and power structures deeply ingrained in Brazilian politics.

## ACT 2 – Unmasking Colonial Violence: ‘What if it were us?’

[Figure 3]

Figure 3: The photo depicts Valda Ferreira de Souza, an Indigenous Sateré-Mawé woman, holding her baby while resisting a military operation to remove people from the land in Lagoa Azul, Manaus. Taken by Luiz Vasconcelos in 2008, the photo was awarded first place in the General News category of the 2009 World Press Photo Contest.[[26]](#footnote-27)

While the country rejoiced in the presidential inauguration, opposition forces were already plotting to dismantle the hard-fought democratic foundations. In a shocking turn of events, a violent mob clad in green and yellow stormed the Supreme Federal Court, the National Congress building, and the Planalto Palace at the Three Powers Square, leaving destruction in their wake. On the fateful day of January 8, 2023, a foreboding shadow of a coup attempt loomed over the streets of Brasilia. Their objective was clear: to incite military leaders into launching a coup d'état and disrupt the transition of power. The Planalto riots reverberated across the country, sending shockwaves that endangered the hopes of democracy.

During this tumultuous day, Indigenous peoples, who had long been a target of police repression, witnessed the invasion of the country’s most vital democratic institutions, as a green and yellow[[27]](#footnote-28) mob fearlessly infiltrated and carried out attacks with minimal opposition from the military police. Célia Xakriabá, the first Indigenous woman from Minas Gerais to be elected to the Federal Congress in 2022, promptly shared images of police violence against Indigenous peoples (Figure 3), accompanied by the words: ‘And what if it were us, Indigenous peoples and other social movements? Look at how we have always been treated’.[[28]](#footnote-29) The disproportionate use of police force against Indigenous peoples, compared to the response to the coup attempt, was further acknowledged by the Indigenous Peoples Articulation of Brazil (APIB):[[29]](#footnote-30)

For over 500 years, Indigenous peoples have resisted the establishment of a state that institutionally attacks, kills, and tears apart various Indigenous communities throughout Brazilian territory. In a politically significant moment, precisely when a democratically elected government gives prominence to the protection of Indigenous peoples, symbolically marked by the participation of Chief Raoni in the presidential inauguration on January 1, it is repugnant to witness the scenes of vandalism and terrorism that took place on January 8, 2023, in Brasília/DF.[[30]](#footnote-31)

In the aftermath of the failed coup attempt, the wounds inflicted on Brazilian democracy were not only physical but also symbolic. The Planalto riots exposed the deep-rooted colonial history and its lasting impact on Indigenous communities, laying bare the ‘open veins of Latin America’.[[31]](#footnote-32) As the country grappled with the aftermath and sought healing, it became clear that these events went beyond a battle for political power. They served as a stark reminder of the need to strengthen democratic institutions, confront historical injustices, and reshape subjectivities. The unfolding of the Planalto riots brought into focus the ongoing challenges faced by Indigenous movements and the aspirations for the indigenization of democracy, revealing the systemic repression and enduring presence of colonial power structures that continue to shape Brazil.

## ACT 3 - The Sacred Echo of the *Maracá[[32]](#footnote-33)*: ‘It is Time to Indigenize Politics and Reforest Minds’

[Figure 4]

Figure 4: Sônia Guajajara is lifted by Indigenous people at the end of her inauguration ceremony as Minister of Indigenous Peoples on January 11, 2023. Photo: Jacqueline Lisboa / WWF-Brasil.

As a result of the repercussions caused by the Planalto riots, the National Museum of the Republic, along with the exhibition *Brasil Futuro: As Formas da Democracia*, had to undergo a temporary closure. Amidst the turmoil, Indigenous Federal Deputy Sônia Guajajara emerged to embrace the historic role as Brazil’s first Minister of Indigenous People, in a joint ceremony alongside journalist and activist Anielle Franco,[[33]](#footnote-34) who assumed the position of Minister of Racial Equality. With great anticipation, I followed their historic inauguration through a live stream on YouTube.[[34]](#footnote-35)

The ceremony took place on January 11, 2023, at the Planalto Palace, a poignant venue that still bore traces of the destruction that occurred on January 8. This significant event brought together numerous representatives from Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities. As part of the opening proceedings, a bilingual rendition of the Brazilian National Anthem was performed, partly in the Tikuna language by Indigenous singer Djuena Tikuna, and partly in Portuguese by Afro-Brazilian singer Marina Íris. The ceremony was further enriched by the presence of ancestral songs and dances performed by the Guarani and Terena peoples, along with the participation of the Candomblé group Afoxé Ogum Pá.[[35]](#footnote-36) Their performances brought a sense of cultural heritage and spiritual resonance to the event.

Guajajara was the first to be sworn in. Her impactful swearing-in speech took us back to a significant moment in her life. At the age of 17, she got called in by her aunt Maria Santana, a spiritual leader and midwife, urging her to visit Aldeia Lagoa Quieta in the Araribóia Indigenous territory. There, her aunt bestowed upon her two gifts – a necklace and a maracá, designating her as the spokesperson for their people:

I want to give you these gifts, symbols of leadership. I pass on to you the power of words. You will have the gift of communication, and everyone will listen to you. You will grow, and your voice will be heard. This *maracá* will echo, and you will be the spokesperson for our people.[[36]](#footnote-37)

Holding her sacred *maracá* (Figure 4), Minister Sônia Guajajara recognized that her appointment as minister was a testament to the ancestral and spiritual strength of the Guajajara Tentehar people, the centuries-long resistance of Indigenous peoples, and her own unwavering determination. She acknowledged the significance of this moment of historic transition, drawing parallels to the unique Indigenous collaboration witnessed during the National Constituent Assembly in 1987,[[37]](#footnote-38) which ultimately led to the inclusion of Articles 231 and 232 in the 1988 Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil,[[38]](#footnote-39) formally recognizing Indigenous rights and marking a transformative milestone after 21 years under military rule (1964-1985).

However, even with the advent of the new democratic Constitution signifying a departure from the authoritarian and colonial mindset, Indigenous territories continued to be targets of invasions and attacks perpetrated by groups involved in illegal activities. These incursions have led to widespread deforestation, contamination of rivers, loss of biodiversity, and destruction of sacred sites. The consequences extend beyond environmental concerns, as Indigenous peoples have endured violations of basic human rights, forced displacement, spread of diseases, and mass deaths. In her inauguration speech, Guajajara addressed these issues and affirmed her commitment to protect Indigenous rights and strengthen environmental legislation.

Soon after the establishment of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, came the harsh reality of the humanitarian crisis experienced by the Yanomami people. Accusations of genocide committed against the Yanomami were directed at Bolsonaro’s administration (2019-2022).[[39]](#footnote-40) This accusation comes in the wake of public outrage after images of emaciated Yanomami people spread globally and the newly elected government declared a medical emergency on January 21, 2023.[[40]](#footnote-41) With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the insufficient responses of the state,[[41]](#footnote-42) the Yanomami Indigenous territory (TIY)[[42]](#footnote-43) faced its most severe wave of invasion since its demarcation over thirty years ago. A report by the *Hutukara Yanomami Association* provides a comprehensive account of the growth of illegal mining in the TIY during 2021.[[43]](#footnote-44) The report elucidates how mining activities within the TIY have resulted in systematic violations of human rights. Apart from deforestation and the destruction of water bodies, illegal mining has led to a surge in malaria cases and other infectious and contagious diseases, including COVID-19. Additionally, there has been a distressing escalation of violence against Indigenous people in the region.

Certainly, the task of confronting the deep-rooted harm caused by centuries of colonization goes beyond political efforts in the quest to indigenize politics. It requires a profound epistemic-ontological shift, a commitment to ‘reforest minds’, as Guajajara puts it.[[44]](#footnote-45) Her inauguration as a minister, along with the appointment of Indigenous lawyer Joênia Wapichana as the first Indigenous woman to lead the National Indigenous Peoples Foundation (FUNAI), adds an additional layer of significance to these debates. These initiatives mark a notable shift in the government’s approach towards Indigenous issues and stand out for presenting alternative, counter-colonial strategies to 'womanize' and 'indigenize' politics, as frequently advocated by Indigenous Federal Deputy Célia Xakriabá.[[45]](#footnote-46)

The creation of the Ministry of Indigenous People marks a pivotal moment in reshaping power dynamics and prompts a reconfiguration of Brazil’s historical trajectory by addressing the legacies of colonization, slavery, and systemic inequalities. Consequently, the inaugurations of Franco and Guajajara hold immense significance in the debates surrounding national culture, history, and identity, signifying a departure from exclusionary narratives and a reclamation of the ancestral roots of Brazil’s diverse populations. As Guajajara underscored in her closing statements: ‘Never again a Brazil without us!’[[46]](#footnote-47), leaving a resounding message on the importance of Indigenous political participation in shaping Brazil’s future.

## EPILOGUE – ‘Indigenous Future is Today: Without demarcation, there is no democracy!’

[Figure 5]

Figure 5: Mobilization at the 19th Edition of Camp Terra Livre 2023 organized by APIB (Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil) between 24 and 28 April, Brasília. Photo Kamikia Kisêdjê/APIB.

It has been nearly four months since the presidential inauguration took place. On April 24, 2023, the 19th edition of *Camp Terra Livre* 2023[[47]](#footnote-48) initiated in Brasília, centered around the theme *The* *Indigenous Future is Today: Without demarcation, there is no democracy!*[[48]](#footnote-49) (Figure 5). A significant moment during the gathering was the official declaration of a Climate Emergency, which emphasized Indigenous peoples’ commitment to protect the country’s ecosystems. Furthermore, it reinforced the transformative potential of demarcating Indigenous territories as a vital policy to address the climate crisis. The primary focus remained on advocating for land demarcation and opposing pending legislative proposals that pose threats to Indigenous peoples, particularly the controversial legal theory regarding Indigenous land rights known as the *Marco Temporal* (Temporal Milestone).

Regarded as anti-Indigenous, the Temporal Milestone theory asserts that Indigenous peoples can only have their land demarcated if they can provide evidence of their physical presence on their ancestral territory on the precise date of the Constitution’s promulgation on October 5, 1988. This requirement places a burden of proof on Indigenous communities that is difficult to meet and undermines their legitimate claims to ancestral lands. In addition to the difficulty of providing evidence of physical presence on a specific date from decades ago, many Indigenous communities were dispossessed of their lands during the period leading up to and following the Constitution’s promulgation. Violent conflicts and historical injustices have resulted in forced displacements and loss of ancestral territories.

Land demarcation is of paramount importance for Indigenous people, as it serves as a crucial mechanism to ensure the legal recognition and protection of ancestral territories, safeguarding them from invasions, exploitation, and illegal activities. The importance of demarcation extends beyond the mere assertion of land rights; it is intricately tied to the preservation of cultural heritage and the safeguarding the environment and its biodiversity. Indigenous territories often serve as vital ecological reserves and contribute to the sustainable management of natural resources. Therefore, the demarcation process not only protects Indigenous rights but also has broader implications for environmental preservation.

Indigenous communities faced yet another severe setback as the National Congress passed Provisional Measure 1154/23, removing the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples’ crucial authority over the land demarcation process. This decision has raised significant concerns among Indigenous peoples who recognize the vital role of the ministry in protecting their ancestral lands. The detrimental actions did not stop there. The approval of the urgency request of Bill 490/07, which allows water, energy, and mining exploitation in Indigenous territories without consulting affected Indigenous communities, poses the risk of legalizing the exploitation of their lands and resources without their consent. Additionally, the approval of Provisional Measure 1150/2022 can intensify the threat to the environment and vulnerable populations, as it facilitates increased deforestation in the Atlantic Forest.[[49]](#footnote-50)

As one reflects upon the process of indigenizing democracy in Brazil, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges that lie ahead. The issue at hand extends far beyond promises and political calculations. The task of indigenizing politics, and challenging patriarchal and colonial legacies, in a country where the political and economic elites predominantly adhere to such perspectives, presents a steep uphill battle for any leader who seeks to prioritize the rights of Indigenous peoples. While Lula has expressed his commitment to standing alongside Indigenous peoples, he faces significant hurdles in navigating the delicate balance between Indigenous rights and the interests of powerful economic forces. Nevertheless, Lula’s ability to address this urgent matter holds immense importance not only for Indigenous peoples but also for upholding Brazil’s standing on the global stage.

Environmental protection has become a cornerstone of the process of indigenizing democracy, informed by the vital role of Indigenous knowledge in preserving the planet. In Brazil, Indigenous peoples have emerged as the guardians of the Amazon rainforest, advocating for its protection, and taking a leading role in combating deforestation and addressing climate change. The increasing political participation of Indigenous peoples, particularly women, has been pivotal in amplifying environmental justice initiatives on both national and international platforms, challenging patriarchal norms in the process. Through their active engagement in international arenas, Indigenous leaders have forged alliances and raised awareness about the importance of Indigenous knowledge in tackling global challenges.

While advancements have been made, this epilogue serves as a compelling call to action, urging individuals, communities, institutions, and governments to actively dismantle colonial structures, confront systemic injustices, and create spaces where Indigenous voices can thrive. In this decolonial journey towards indigenizing democracy, the words of Davi Kopenawa’s cosmo-ecological manifesto resonate through the *hori* of Daiara Tukano: ‘Earth is the mother of all struggles!’. The echoes of Sônia Guajajara’s *maracá* resound: ‘It is time to indigenize politics and reforest minds.’ Célia Xakriabá has urged us to womanize politics, further reinforcing the transformative journey ahead. From a distant land, I bear witness to the winds of change sweeping across Brazil, carrying with them the reverberations of Indigenous peoples’ maracás and the determination to forge a future where no democracy exists without the demarcation of Indigenous territories. As the Indigenous leader and thinker Ailton Krenak significantly expresses, the future is ancestral![[50]](#footnote-51)

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1. Bartira S. Fortes is a Brazilian performance artist, anthropologist, and Ph.D. candidate in Environmental studies at the Department of Environment, Development, and Sustainability Studies, Södertörn University, Sweden. E-mail: bartira.fortes@sh.se [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. ‘Cocar’ refers to the traditional Indigenous feather headdress. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) has called upon the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate former President Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022). According to APIB, since assuming office in 2019, Bolsonaro has implemented a deliberate, systematic, and explicit anti-Indigenous policy, amounting to crimes against humanity, genocide, and ecocide. To support these claims, APIB has compiled a comprehensive dossier containing substantial data and evidence about the Bolsonaro administration’s anti-Indigenous policies, see Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil (ed.), *International Complaints Dossier of Brazil’s Indigenous Peoples*,APIB, 2021. Furthermore, APIB had previously published a report on the devastating impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous communities, see Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil (ed.), *Nossa luta é pela vida: COVID-19 e povos indígenas, o enfrentamento das violências durante a pandemia*, APIB, 2020). The report underscored the dismantling of crucial support structures that previously aided native peoples, shedding light on the conflicts, murders, attacks, invasions, and persecutions that these communities have endured during the first year of the pandemic. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Brazil has endured significant political challenges since 2016, beginning with the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, a process that was widely regarded as a parliamentary coup. This political crisis sparked concerns about the potential implications of employing constitutional procedures such as impeachment to destabilize the democratic process in Latin America. The subsequent political imprisonment of Lula months before the 2018 presidential election, further exacerbated the political turmoil in the country. Lula’s imprisonment, surrounded by irregularities and questionable circumstances, prompted immediate reactions and ignited debates about the violation of his right to be tried by an impartial tribunal and the potential political motivations behind his conviction. On March 14, 2018, Brazil faced another challenge with the political assassination of Marielle Franco, a councilwoman and influential advocate for the black feminist movement. This event sent shockwaves throughout the country, shedding light on the risks faced by those championing social justice. Amidst these challenges, Brazil underwent a significant political shift during the 2018 elections, resulting in the victory of far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro. The presidential election was characterized by intense polarization, instances of violence, and widespread dissemination of disinformation campaigns on social media, raising concerns about Bolsonaro’s controversial rhetoric and policy positions. Collectively, these events have had a profound impact on Brazil’s political climate. See Bartira S. Fortes, *Democracy, a Tragic Carnivalesque Hero: The Narratives of a Transnational Social Movement Against the Coup in Brazil*, Master’s Thesis, Stockholm University, Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm/Sweden, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. ‘Lula da Silva presidential address at the Planalto Palace no Parlatório do Palácio do Planalto’, *Planalto*, 6 January 2023, *author’s translation,* https://www.gov.br/planalto/pt-br/acompanhe-o-planalto/discursos-e-pronunciamentos/2023/discurso-do-presidente-lula-no-parlatorio-do-palacio-do-planalto [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. ‘Decreto nº 11.355’, *Presidência da República*, 1 January 2023, http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\_03/\_ato2023-2026/2023/decreto/D11355.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Among them were Aline Sousa, a garbage collector and recycling activist; Francisco Carlos do Nascimento, a 10-year-old boy; Ivan Baron, a person with disabilities and anti-ableism influencer; Weslley Viesba Rodrigues, a metalworker; Murilo de Quadros Jesus, an educator; Jucimara Fausto, a chef; Flávio Pereira, an artisan; and the Indigenous leader Raoni Metuktire. In a heartwarming gesture, even the presidential couple’s dog named Resistência joined them as they ascended the Planalto ramp. Resistência had been adopted by Lula after faithfully remaining in front of the federal police headquarters in Curitiba for a significant part of the 580 days of his imprisonment. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Chief Raoni Metuktire, a leader of the Kayapó people, has achieved global acclaim as the ambassador for the protection of the Amazon rainforest and the rights of Indigenous peoples. Recognized for his efforts, he was nominated for the 2020 Nobel Peace Prize. His life story was captured in the film *Raoni: The Fight for the Amazon* (dir. Jean-Pierre Dutilleux and Luiz Carlos Saldanha, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Israel W. Charny (ed.) *Encyclopedia of genocide*, Volume II, Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 1999, p. 433. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Sonia Guajajara, ‘It’s Time to Indigenize Politics and Reforest Minds’, *Sumaúma*, 27 September 2022, https://sumauma.com/en/aldear-a-politica-e-reflorestar-mentes/ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Lilia Schwarcz, Márcio Tavares, Rogério Carvalho and Paulo Vieira (curators), ‘Brasil Futuro: as Formas da Democracia’, National Museum of the Republic, Brasília, 1 January to 26 February 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. *Arte Indígena Contemporânea* (Contemporary Indigenous Art), largely established and consolidated in Brazil by the Indigenous artist Jaider Esbell (1979–2021), is characterized by the protagonism of Indigenous artists. This artistic movement aims to rectify historical injustices from within the art realm itself, remaining deeply rooted in Indigenous cosmologies while engaging with the language and institutions of the dominant art establishment. By incorporating the term Indigenous, it challenges the western-centric view of Contemporary Art and highlights the importance of recognizing Indigenous art as contemporary, indicating that it is continually evolving and dynamically responding to current issues. See Jaider Esbell, ‘Arte indígena contemporânea e o grande mundo’, *Select*, 7.39 (2018): 98-103, https://www.select.art.br/arte-indigena-contemporanea-e-o-grande-mundo/. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Alessandra Simões Paiva, *A virada decolonial na arte brasileira*, Bauru, SP: Editora Mireveja Ltda, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. @daiaratukano, ‘A queda do céu e a mãe de todas as lutas’, Instagram post, 29 December 2022, *author’s translation*, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CmwWwO5hTW9/?utm\_source=ig\_web\_copy\_link. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *Añu* is a term from the Yepá Mahsã people, also known as Tukano, from the Upper Rio Negro in the Brazilian Amazon. In their language, *Añu* represents an expression of gratitude and appreciation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, trans. Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University press, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Jotabê Medeiros, ‘As Mirações de Daiara Tukano’, *Amazônia Real*, 3 February 2023, https://amazoniareal.com.br/especiais/daiara-tukano/. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. *The Falling Sky* is the result of a collaboration between Kopenawa and Albert developed through their close friendship since the 1970s. This influential book has significantly contributed to the comprehension of Indigenous cosmologies, serving as both a plea to respect native rights and a call for the preservation of the Amazon rainforest. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. According to Kopenawa, there are two instances of the sky falling in Yanomami cosmology: one that gives rise to the world as we know it, and a second one that would bring its impending end. The current earth is thus a sky fallen in the beginning of time. Previously, the *yarori*, who were the ancestral beings with animal names, inhabited the world. However, the forest became fragile, leading to the descent of the sky upon the *yarori*. Consequently, some of the inhabitants of this ancient forest assumed the form of game animals, while others transformed into *aõpatari*, which are carnivorous underworld spirits characterized by their sharp teeth. The sky fall in Yanomami cosmology thus serves a dual purpose: it functions as the myth of creation and the myth of the apocalypse. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. The Yanomami people have been engaged in a long-standing struggle against illegal mining in their territories. The incursion of illegal miners has brought about profound and detrimental effects on Yanomami communities. These communities are subjected to various forms of harm, including threats, intimidation, murder, and violent attacks perpetrated by armed groups associated with illegal mining operations. Moreover, illegal mining operations inflict substantial environmental damage, including deforestation, the pollution of rivers and water sources with toxic substances, and the disruption of ecosystems. The use of mercury in gold mining further compounds the issue, contaminating water and food sources and causing severe health problems for the Yanomami. Mercury poisoning results in detrimental effects on their physical health, including neurological and developmental issues, as well as an increased prevalence of diseases and illnesses. In response, the Yanomami people have been actively engaged in advocacy efforts alongside Indigenous organizations and allies to safeguard their territories, combat illegal mining activities, and raise global awareness about their struggle and the urgent need to protect their rights and preserve the Amazon rainforest. See Hutukara Associação Yanomami, http://hutukara.org/. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Only eleven Tupinambá feather cloaks from the 16th and 17th centuries exist today, all are held outside Brazil in the collections of European museums. Claims for repatriation have resulted in a recent donation from the National Museum of Denmark to the National Museum of Brazil. See ‘The National Museum of Denmark to Donate Rare Feather Cape to Brazil’, *Via Ritzau*, 27 June 2023, https://via.ritzau.dk/pressemeddelelse/the-national-museum-of-denmark-to-donate-rare-feather-cape-to-brazil?publisherId=13560791&releaseId=13700505 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. @daiaratukano ‘Brasil Futuro: As formas da Democracia – Parte 2’, Instagram post, 3 January 2023, *author’s translation*, https://www.instagram.com/tv/Cm9r8h\_he09/?igshid=NTc4MTIwNjQ2YQ==. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. In the Tukano language, *hori* represents the vision that gives rise to sacred drawings found in ceremonial and everyday objects. It encompasses the vibrant representation of the Tukano people’s stories and perspectives of the universe, the forest, and all beings that inhabit it. *Hori* captures the essence of art as a miracle, extending beyond mere visual perception to encompass the spiritual vision. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. PT - Partido dos Trabalhadores, ‘Ao vivo 01/01 | A posse do presidente Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva - Festival do Futuro’, YouTube, 1 January 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FjXGLTKg0k. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. The song ‘Ancestralizou (Interlúdio)’ by Kaê Guajajara is featured on the album *Kwarahy Tazyr*, which was released in 2021 under the Indigenous Artistic Label AZURUHU (*author's translation*). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo-contest/2009/luiz-vasconcelos/1 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. The green and yellow colors are symbolic of Brazil’s national flag. During Bolsonaro’s presidential campaign in 2018, his supporters began using these colors prominently to demonstrate their allegiance to him. The choice of green and yellow by Bolsonaro’s supporters represents their nationalist sentiments and endorsement of a conservative agenda, being displayed in rallies, events, and on social media platforms as a visual representation of their political affiliation. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. @celia.xakriaba, ‘E se fosse nós, povos indígenas e outros movimentos sociais? Vejam como sempre fomos tratados.’ 9 January 2023, *author’s translation*, https://www.instagram.com/p/CnLAxMZPU1v/?igshid=NTc4MTIwNjQ2YQ%3D%3D. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. APIB, the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, is a grassroots initiative that serves as a national reference for the Indigenous movement in the country. Formed in 2005, it aims to enhance the unity among Indigenous regional organizations, promote collaboration between diverse Indigenous regions and organizations, and mobilize against threats and violations of Indigenous rights. APIB, https://apiboficial.org/. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. APIB - Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil, ‘Há mais de 500 anos os povos indígenas resistem’, Facebook post, 9 January 2023, https://www.facebook.com/apiboficial/posts/3348975205372625/. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. See Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. Cedric Belfrage, London: Monthly Review Press, 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. *Maracá* is a musical instrument used in various Indigenous cultures. Typically made from a hollow gourd or a wooden cylinder with seeds or small objects inside, the *maracá* is shaken to produce rhythmic sounds. It holds cultural and spiritual significance for many Indigenous communities, often used in ceremonies, rituals, and traditional music. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Anielle Franco is the sister of Marielle Franco, a Brazilian human rights activist, feminist, and city councilor in Rio de Janeiro assassinated on March 14, 2018. Known for her vocal opposition to police violence and advocacy for marginalized communities, her murder shook the nation, sparking widespread outrage and demands for justice. Marielle Franco was a leading figure in Brazil’s black rights movement and a staunch critic of militia groups. These militias are paramilitary organizations consisting of retired and off-duty police officers, with roots in the death squads of the Brazilian military dictatorship. Shortly before her assassination, she was appointed to lead a commission responsible for monitoring potential abuses of force during the military intervention in Rio de Janeiro’s slums. Initial investigations revealed that the bullets used in her murder were purchased by the federal police. Following her death, her family established the Marielle Franco Institute, dedicated to seeking justice and continuing her work. Marielle Franco became a symbol of resistance and her murder coincided with a surge of intolerance in the country, notably during the presidential election that brought Jair Bolsonaro to power. Her assassination sparked global protests, with hashtags such as #MariellePresente (Marielle is here), #MarielleMultiplica (Marielle multiplies), and #QuemMandouMatarMarielle (Who ordered Marielle’s murder?). In this context, the appointment of Anielle Franco as the Minister of Racial Equality holds significant symbolic meaning. It not only pays tribute to Marielle Franco’s legacy but also serves as a powerful condemnation of the violence and oppression faced by activists and marginalized communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. APIBOFICIAL, ‘Cerimônia de posse da Ministra Sônia Guajajara’, YouTube video, 11 January 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SawBmzH8Fas. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion that emerged from the blending of traditional West African religions brought to Brazil during the Atlantic slave trade of the 16th to 19th centuries. The Candomblé group Afoxé Ogum Pá was created in 2014 by Mãe Dora Ti Oyá, a priestess of the Ilé Asé TOjú Labá *terreiro* (sacred house where the Candomblé religion is practiced). The group combines elements of music, dance, and religious rituals to celebrate and honor the *orisha* (deity) Ogum. The group’s name ‘Ogum Pá’ refers to the Ogum’s strong and protective nature. ‘Afoxé’ is a term used to describe Afro-Brazilian musical and dance groups that often participate in carnival celebrations and other cultural events performing traditional rhythms, often accompanied by percussion instruments. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Minister Sonia Guajajara inauguration speech, *UOL*, 11 January 2023, https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2023/01/11/leia-a-integra-do-discurso-da-ministra-sonia-guajajara.htm?cmpid=copiaecola. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. On September 4, 1987, Ailton Krenak, the spokesperson of the Indigenous Movement in Brazil, delivered a historic speech during the National Constituent Assembly, while covering himself in ritual face painting using *genipapo* dye. Krenak’s influential speech played a pivotal role in securing the approval of Articles 231 and 232 of the 1988 Federal Constitution, formally recognizing Indigenous rights for the first time in Brazil. See Ailton Krenak, ‘Discurso de Ailton Krenak, Em 04/09/1987, Na Assembleia Constituinte, Brasília, Brasil’, *GIS - Gesto, Imagem E Som - Revista De Antropologia* 4.1 (2019): 421-22. https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2525-3123.gis.2019.162846. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. *Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil*. Brasília: Senado Federal, Coordenação de Edições Técnica, 1988, https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\_03/constituicao/constituicao.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. On January 22, 2023, one day after visiting an overcrowded clinic for Yanomami patients in Boa Vista, the capital of Roraima, Lula expressed his observations on Twitter, stating, ‘More than a humanitarian crisis, what I saw in Roraima was a genocide. It is a premeditated crime against the Yanomami, committed by a government that is indifferent to the suffering of the Brazilian people’. @LulaOficial, ‘Mais que uma crise humanitária, o que vi em Roraima foi um genocídio’, Twitter post, 22 January 2023, 12:26 pm, *author’s translation*, https://twitter.com/LulaOficial/status/1617121512506511368?s=20&t=3gY6cpiy14UYBfsxZIkFwA [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. ‘Ministério da Saúde declara emergência em saúde pública em território Yanomami’, *Ministério da Saúde*, 21 January 2023, https://www.gov.br/saude/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2023/janeiro/ministerio-da-saude-declara-emergencia-em-saude-publica-em-territorio-yanomami [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on Brazil, resulting in 703,719 deaths, as reported by the World Health Organization, https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/br [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. The TYI, located in the states of Amazonas and Roraima bounded by the frontier with Venezuela, encompasses a vast area in the Amazon rainforest, with an area of 9,664,975 hectares (23,882,670 acres). The combined population of Yanomami people in Brazil and Venezuela is estimated to be around 26,000 individuals. In Brazil alone, there are approximately 17,000 Yanomami residing in 300 communities. See http://hutukara.org/index.php/hay/historia-dos-yanomami. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Hutukara Yanomami Association (Org.), *Yanomami Under Attack: illegal wildcat mining on Yanomami Indigenous Land and proposals to combat it*, Boa Vista: Hutukara Associação Yanomami, 2022, https://acervo.socioambiental.org/sites/default/files/documents/yal00067\_en.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Sônia Guajajara, ‘It’s time to 'indigenize politics and reforest minds'’, *Sumaúma*, 27 September 2022, https://sumauma.com/en/aldear-a-politica-e-reflorestar-mentes/. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Marcos Mondardo and Zane do Nascimento, ‘Povos indígenas, comunidades quilombolas e migrações’, *Revista Tocantinense de Geografia*, 12.26 (2023): 01–21, p. 5, DOI: 10.20873/rtg.v12i26.15747. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Sonia Guajajara speech, *UOL*, 11 January 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. The Camp Terra Livre (ATL) is the largest Indigenous mobilization in Brazil. The first ATL took place in 2004 when Indigenous communities from the southern region of Brazil occupied the Ministry of Justice at the Esplanade of Ministries in Brasília. This initial mobilization gained support from Indigenous leaders and organizations across the country, thereby strengthening the call for a New Indigenous Policy agreed upon during the electoral period that same year. As a result, the formalization of the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) occurred in November 2005, as a direct outcome of the decisions made during the first ATL. See APIB, https://apiboficial.org/. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. ‘Sem demarcação não há democracia!’, *APIB*, 28 April 2023, https://apiboficial.org/2023/04/28/sem-demarcacao-nao-ha-democracia/. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. See ‘Entenda as leis que promovem o desmonte dos Ministérios dos Povos Indígenas e do Meio Ambiente’, *Presidência da República*, 25 May 2023, https://www.gov.br/povosindigenas/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2023/05/entenda-as-leis-que-promovem-o-desmonte-dos-ministerios-dos-povos-indigenas-e-do-meio-ambiente. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. Ailton Krenak, *Futuro Ancestral*, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)