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Agri-bolsonarism: a movement led by agricultural elites and far-right politicians in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

As the balance of forces in Brazil shifted toward conservatism in the 2010s, regional agricultural elites and Jair Bolsonaro formed a political-economic movement. This article analyses the constitution and consolidation of this movement, here called *agri-bolsonarism*, considering its connections with national agricultural associations and transnational agribusiness corporations and its relations with agrarian and climate politics. The research is based on participant observation in business associations, corporate and state archives and interviews with private and political leaders.

KEYWORDS

Agrarian politics; climate change; agricultural elites; agribusiness corporations; Bolsonaro; Brazil

Introduction

Two sides joined forces across rural Brazil in the 2016–2017 period. On one side, cattle ranchers and soybean growers had strong local and regional bases that were being significantly mobilised by the rightward shift of the balance of forces in the country. On the other, Jair Bolsonaro was a politician capable of leveraging this change. Embedded in Brazil's authoritarian tradition (Reis 2020; Sauer 2022; Schwarcz 2019), this political development was considerably related to the worldwide ascent of a varying range of reactionary tendencies (Akram-Lodhi 2020; Borras 2020; Edelman 2020; Scoones et al. 2018).

These agricultural elites' strategic alliance with Bolsonaro gradually gave shape to a political-economic movement, referred to here by the neologism *agri-bolsonarism*. Associated in different degrees with segments of the leading bodies of agricultural employers and transnational agribusiness corporations operating in Brazil, the movement exerted enormous influence in the country. But *agri-bolsonarism* faced significant challenges too: its political coalitions involved heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory interests, resulting in conflicts among agribusiness elites and even defections.

This article critically analyses the emergence and consolidation of *agri-bolsonarism* and its influence over agrarian and climate politics in Brazil. On the one hand, it seeks to contribute to the literature on authoritarian and reactionary populism in general and to the scientific works that have concentrated on examining *bolsonarism* as a new political phenomenon in particular (see, for example, Feltran 2020; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2020; Rocha, Solano, and Medeiros 2021). These works centred on *bolsonarism*

recognise the importance of rural actors to the phenomenon but tend to emphasise its urban dimensions.

On the other hand, the present article intends to contribute to the literature on the political influence of agribusiness in Brazil. That agricultural elites have been key in the country's politics throughout its history cannot be disputed (Holanda 1936; Leal 1948; Prado Júnior 1979 [1960]; Martins 1979; Graziano da Silva 1996; Mendonça 1997; Bruno et al. 2009). Likewise, specialists largely converge in the understanding that, more recently, at the beginning of the 2000s, a pact was made between the Brazilian state and large landowners, industries and financial interests linked to agriculture (Delgado 2012).¹ Nonetheless, the affinities and connections between regional agricultural elites and the federal executive branch were substantially stronger during Bolsonaro's government (2019–2022) than they had been in the previous administrations in contemporary Brazil. Furthermore, besides being a historically specific movement, *agri-bolsonarism* was a durable one: it preceded Bolsonaro's election in 2018 and outlived his electoral defeat in 2022.

Focusing on the coalitions and conflicts involving *agri-bolsonarism*, its multiscale dimensions and its political consequences, the article is based on ethnographic research conducted in Brasília and Mato Grosso, especially through long-term participant observation in farmers' and corporations' forums, notes from 66 semi-structured interviews with business and political leaders operating at different scales, and corporate and state archives. Participant observation took place in Brasília from February to July 2019 and in some municipalities of the state of Mato Grosso in June 2022. Interviews were conducted from February 2019 to April 2023 (of which 28, or 42.4%, were conducted between 2022 and 2023). Access to agribusiness associations was negotiated by email and followed by in-person contacts; most interviews were scheduled and held virtually, but whenever possible they were held in person.

Mobilisation of the rural far-right

Shortly after Dilma Rousseff's re-election in 2014,² ranchers in the state of São Paulo formed Brazil's Productive Front (*Frente Produtiva do Brasil*, or FPB) (FPB 2015). Led by the Democratic Landowners Union (*União Democrática Ruralista*, or UDR), which was known for its extremist opposition to agrarian social movements³ (Bruno 2017), the FPB members embraced a version of nationalism (Anderson 2019; Edelman 2020) by wrapping themselves in Brazil's green and yellow flag to denounce allegedly unfair electoral procedures and attack corruption, taking their cue from Operation Car Wash (*Lava Jato*).⁴ This initiative helped strengthen forces opposed to Rousseff's second term in

¹This pact also involved distrust and growing friction, as happened, notably, during the administrations of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, or PT) in the 2000s and 2010s (Sauer 2019).

²Rousseff was a member of the PT.

³Concerning movements in Brazilian rural politics, a contrast is important to further situate *agri-bolsonarism*. Agrarian social movements like the Landless Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, or MST) often manifest a central characteristic that Tilly (2004) relates to social movements: their use of certain forms of political action to put pressure on the state. For example, land occupations by the MST are especially meant to incentivise the creation of rural settlements by the executive branch (Fernandes 2005). *Agri-bolsonarism* had a different relationship to the state: it was built around Bolsonaro, a federal deputy running for the presidency (2016–2018), and consolidated under his leadership as the country's president (2019–2022).

⁴This criminal investigation was focused on corruption; it resulted in the imprisonment of ex-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and afterwards led to him being barred from the 2018 presidential election. In 2021, Brazil's Supreme Court ruled

municipalities across the western region of the state of São Paulo while incentivising farmers' aversion to the PT, even though the latter's administrations had, since 2003, provided massive financial support for the main agricultural commodities (Pompeia 2021a). Such was the beginning of one of the agribusiness groupings that went on to align with Bolsonaro a few years later.

The FPB's cattle ranchers shared another attitude: disaffection from meatpacking corporations. Crucial for agrarian class politics (Bernstein 2016), these disputes between ranchers and agro-industries were also linked to the PT governments. Judging that the strategic international expansion of Brazilian-controlled corporations would require resolute state intervention, the PT administrations decided to mobilise substantial public funds to strengthen a few meatpacking industries, such as JBS and Marfrig. However, this decision prompted an unforeseen backlash. In May 2012, more than two years before Rousseff's re-election, the UDR and the Mato Grosso do Sul Livestock Association (*Associação dos Criadores de Mato Grosso do Sul*, or ACRISSUL) headed the National Movement Against the Meatpackers' Monopoly to challenge the oligopsony controlling Brazil's meat supply chain. According to the ranchers, this highly concentrated chain was lowering prices for beef, which was mostly sold domestically (UDR et al. 2012). Within 18 months, from 11 November 2010 to 11 May 2012, average prices for fattened beef cattle in Brazil had fallen 20.4% (calculation by the author based on Cepea 2022a). Many cattle farmers blamed the PT government for this concentration (anti-PT claims would later be a core element of *agri-bolsonarism*).⁵ At a meeting of the National Movement Against the Meatpackers' Monopoly, the UDR's president, rancher Luiz Antônio Nabhan Garcia,⁶ reported that he had heard the JBS's management say they would pay no more than R\$70.00 per *arroba* of fattened cattle.⁷ He remonstrated: 'Do we deserve to be treated like this? We must no longer let them control the market in such a way' (Capital News 2012).

At the same time, the different interests among agricultural elites were clearly expressed in conflicts: the UDR and other FPB members challenged the legitimacy of Brazil's Agricultural Confederation (*Confederação da Agricultura e Pecuária do Brasil*, or CNA) and its national leadership based in Brasília. As an officially recognised body for agricultural employers that speaks for some 2,000 associations at the municipal level (*sindicatos rurais*), the CNA has historically been dependent on the government, especially for financial matters.⁸ Those leaders' irate disapproval reached a boiling point in 2014

that the investigation regarding Lula had been biased and restored his political rights. In 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Committee found that Lula's prosecution had violated his rights to a fair trial and privacy and his political rights.

⁵Analysed throughout the article, *agri-bolsonarism's* ideology will be synthesised at the end.

⁶According to *Exame* (2019), one of the country's leading business magazines, Nabhan Garcia

'[...] became known for preaching the reactionism that resulted in several conflicts in Pontal do Paranapanema [a region in the state of São Paulo] in the mid-1990s. Later [...] his name was involved in a rumored arrest of a farmer accused of illegal possession and smuggling of weapons [...]'].

Exame added that the accused farmer, who was legally assisted by the UDR, later changed his statement and exempted Nabhan Garcia.

⁷This amount was equivalent to \$35.80 at the exchange rate on 12 May 2012, when the meeting of the National Movement Against the Meatpackers' Monopoly took place. An *arroba* is approximately 15kg.

⁸Succeeding another association, the Brazilian Rural Confederation (*Confederação Rural Brasileira*), the CNA was formally created in 1964 following its recognition by Brazil's president, according to a corporatist national law (Public Law 4214, approved in March 1963) stating that there would be one confederation of agricultural employers in the country

when President Rousseff teamed up with Senator Kátia Abreu, a cattle rancher and the CNA's chair (Pompeia 2021b). As well as personal affinities, these two female leaders shared strategic interests. The president sought to leverage differences between farmers' groups, while the CNA's leader saw Rousseff as reasonably sensitive to her agendas, an openness that added to Abreu's influence in Brasília. Therefore, Abreu agreed to become Rousseff's agriculture minister, thus prompting the wrath of UDR leader Nabhan Garcia, who accused her of betraying agricultural employers.

From late 2014 to early 2015, the FPB rapidly extended the outreach of its mobilisation to farmers in the states of Rio Grande do Sul, Paraná, Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul (O Progresso 2015). Furthermore, the FPB scored one of its biggest successes on 22 March 2015 by rallying 400 farmers in Dourados, Mato Grosso do Sul, to attack the Rousseff government and the CNA. On that occasion, the participants also condemned fines levied for breaching environmental regulations and complained about Indigenous peoples who were taking back their territories and about occupations led by social movements such as the MST. From 2003 to 2013, the number of cases of Indigenous peoples mobilising to repossess their lands had risen from 4 to 79 (Dataluta 2015). In contrast, the land occupations organised by agrarian social movements had been in decline in the same period. After the total rose for two years, to 535 in 2003 and 646 in 2004, 177 occupations occurred in 2013 (Dataluta 2015).⁹ The FPB's contestation of Indigenous territorial rights and the MST evidenced, among other aspects, a high operational dependency on continually expanding the agricultural frontier, a feature that would later be vital to *agri-bolsonarism*.

About a year after cattle ranchers had stepped up their mobilisations, the agribusiness caucus's leadership in Congress called for an early end to Rousseff's government (Sauer 2019). Officially named *Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária* (or FPA), this caucus was the most influential in the legislature (Bruno 2017; Sauer and Mészáros 2017). Although relevant since its informal creation in the 1980s, the caucus has gradually become more organised, specialised and powerful, particularly in the last 10 years (Pompeia 2020a). This change was strongly connected with the consolidation of the *Instituto Pensar Agropecuária* (IPA, or institute). Operated by three sets of actors, agribusiness associations, technical personnel and members of the board of directors of the caucus, IPA had become the main political forum for the negotiation and definition of the agendas that were advanced by the agribusiness caucus in the legislative branch. Alongside farmers, corporations had a decisive influence on the institute: in 2016, 38 associations funded it, 19 linked with agricultural actors and 19 linked with national and transnational corporations (Pompeia 2022).

The caucus' votes were crucial for the opposition's manoeuvre to oust the PT government before the end of its mandate.¹⁰ In this regard, Michel Temer,¹¹ who had been

(provided that certain requirements were met). Concerning corporatism in Brazil's rural politics, see Welch (2010) and Welch and Sauer (2015).

⁹Indigenous actions were excluded from these numbers of land occupations.

¹⁰Notwithstanding the high relevance of the caucus in the process, for Rousseff to be effectively ousted from power, a conjunction of actors was necessarily involved. The heads of Operation Car Wash, the party leaders in Congress and the owners of the mainstream media corporations should be highlighted (see Hunter and Power 2019; Limongi 2023; Rocha, Solano, and Medeiros 2021).

¹¹Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (*Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*, or PMDB). At the end of 2017, the PMDB changed its name to the Brazilian Democratic Movement (*Movimento Democrático Brasileiro*, or MDB).

elected as Rousseff's vice-president in 2014, actively engaged in negotiations with the caucus during the disputes in Congress. For instance, on 12 July 2016, he personally met leaders of the caucus and of the agribusiness associations at the IPA's headquarters (Pompeia 2021a).

Following Rousseff's removal from office on 31 August 2016, cattle ranchers led by the UDR were looking forward to a new scenario in the federal capital that would strengthen their influence over the next government. However, their hopes did not materialise, since criticism of the national agricultural associations and transnational corporations increased, particularly at IPA, the resistance to the leaders of the FPB. Moreover, these leaders were being sidelined in the major national debates and had difficulty getting access to newly sworn-in President Temer.

Just as the movement seemed to be heading toward demobilisation, it regained momentum: the spark that rekindled its fading members' will was a Supreme Court decision. In March 2017, the court ruled that the federal constitution allowed the government to charge individual agricultural employers to partly fund rural workers' retirement pensions through the Rural Worker Social Assistance Fund (*Fundo de Assistência ao Trabalhador Rural*, or Funrural) (STF 2017). By May 2017, the UDR and ACRISSUL leaders rallied over a thousand ranchers and farmers to protest the court's decision while the Senate was debating the issue (FAPE 2017).

In the aftermath of the hearings in Congress, the differences among agribusiness leaders concerning the Funrural came out into the open: the UDR and other associations representing agricultural bases wanted the debts totally forgiven, but the giant meatpackers, the CNA's national leadership and the majority of the members of the agribusiness caucus decided to pursue another option, which prevailed in the end: the reduction of employers' rates and the elimination of fines related to accumulated debts, among other changes concerning the Funrural (Brasil 2018).

Alliance with Bolsonaro

In 2016 and the first half of 2017, some municipal associations of agricultural employers in Mato Grosso, significantly influenced by the global rise of reactionary tendencies, were beginning to see Bolsonaro as a presidential candidate who was more in tune with them and invited him to speak at a few agricultural fairs in the state. During this period, Operation Car Wash was progressively taking its toll on traditional parties, particularly the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (*Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira*, or PSDB), a long-standing centre-right party. In this respect, close attention should be paid to Aécio Neves, the PSDB candidate for president who lost to Dilma Rousseff in 2014. Following Neves's defeat in 2014, the PSDB had questioned the electronic ballot devices used in the election, initiating a broad contestation of Rousseff's victory that included the FPB's cattle ranchers. However, as Operation Car Wash advanced, Neves himself became increasingly involved in accusations of corruption. Bolsonaro capitalised on the situation: his support shown in opinion polls for the presidential elections rose, especially in the first semester of 2017.¹²

¹²The change of evangelical actors' voting preferences played a key role in this context (see R. Almeida 2020; Rocha, Solano, and Medeiros 2021). Likewise, the literature points to substantial support for Bolsonaro growing in other segments prior to the 2018 elections, such as low-income urban communities (see Feltran 2020; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2020).

This opened the way for even more support from regional agricultural elites, which materialised in connection with the organised groups opposing the payment of the Funrural debts. On 31 July 2017, Bolsonaro attended a farm-related event in Gramado, Rio Grande do Sul. On that occasion, the UDR leader, Nabhan Garcia, harshly criticised the taxation of farmers, agribusiness corporations and environmental regulations while seizing the opportunity to argue that Bolsonaro would be the ranchers' and farmers' ideal candidate, unlike the politicians connected with the agribusiness caucus and the CNA (Pompeia 2021b).

A co-dependent relationship was being established. Realising that cleavages among agribusiness actors could be leveraged in his favour, Bolsonaro's campaign speeches highlighted issues that particularly (but not exclusively) appealed to politically and economically subordinated groups of agricultural employers. He pledged to cancel the Funrural debts, lower taxes on agriculture and weaken environmental regulatory enforcement. Concomitantly, the former paratrooper promised to facilitate landowners' possession of firearms (Saad-Filho 2020), suggesting their use against Indigenous peoples reclaiming traditional territories and social movements struggling for access to land. His speeches also contained extremist anti-left stances (often contrasting the green and yellow of Brazil's flag with the red used by the PT candidates) and vows to defend the family and other conservative values. This was exactly what many of the farmers wanted to hear.

Momentum built for extremist positions in Brazil's rural areas due to distrust of the previously dominant right-wing political parties, discontent over tighter corporate control in the main commodity chains, reaction to the state's recognition of traditional territorial rights, dissatisfaction about the enforcement of environmental and labour regulations and perplexity caused by rising crime in the form of theft of animals, inputs, machinery and implements (Anderson 2019; Hunter and Power 2019; Pompeia 2021b). Bolsonaro's messaging materialised in two key campaign tactics. On the one hand, he arranged to systematically visit rural and agricultural festivals and fairs. On the other hand, he used a tactic that Cesarino (2019) called digital populism: leading a huge shared virtual space set apart from the dominant public sphere, operated mainly by large WhatsApp groups, in which one-way discourses bolstering reactionary positions were circulated in rural areas.¹³ Rancher Nabhan Garcia played an important role in both of Bolsonaro's tactics.

Bolsonaro's ideas, however, did not initially find favour with most of the actors operating within IPA. Although the agribusiness caucus's leaders were pleased by Bolsonaro's criticisms of the MST during his visit to the institute's headquarters on 28 November 2017, some of them considered his proposals for distributing rifles to farmers and outlawing social movements as terrorists as over the top (O Estado de S. Paulo 2017). Concerning this reaction, the PSDB had a marked influence in the multi-party bloc. Moreover, opposition arising from the national and transnational corporations funding IPA influenced members of Congress. They thought that some of Bolsonaro's proposals, such as the dismissal of global warming, could negatively affect their exports and repel investors, as leaders of agribusiness associations stated during interviews with the author. The caucus's internal differences continued for most of the electoral period, and it only

¹³This initiative was partially inspired by Trump's use of social media in the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States (Akram-Lodhi 2020; Feltran 2020).

announced official support for Bolsonaro five days before the first round of the 2018 elections (FPA 2018). By that time, he was well ahead in voting intention polls.

However, to conclude that the reluctance concerning Bolsonaro at the IPA's headquarters showed that none of the agricultural elites funding the institute supported his ideas would be wrong. In the context of the far-right strengthening its bases in different rural areas around the world (Balz 2017; Montenegro de Wit et al. 2021; Scoones et al. 2018), some Brazilian soybean grower associations leaders were also gradually leaning toward more extremist positions. In this respect, the political rise of a leader named Antonio Galvan was instrumental. When he campaigned to be elected head of the Mato Grosso's Soy and Corn Producers Association (*Associação dos Produtores de Soja e Milho do Estado de Mato Grosso*, or APROSOJA-MT), his combative attitude toward seed corporations and state and federal governments drew support from small and medium-sized soybean growers (APROSOJA-MT 2017). Unlike the giant soybean producers (planting tens or hundreds of thousands of hectares), the relatively smaller soybean farmers were acutely affected by losses as corporations muscled in on their share of the proceeds. They were also rankled by the difficulty of negotiating with the federal government. On taking over as head of APROSOJA-MT, Galvan started controlling incomparably greater financial and political capital than the UDR did and gradually got more soybean farmers to support the mobilisation led by cattle ranchers that had emerged in 2017 to challenge the contributions being charged to them regarding the Funrural.

A political coalition of the two groupings, one led by the UDR and the other by APROSOJA-MT, provided the impetus for a large joint demonstration in Brasília on 4 April 2018. Around two-thirds of state-level soybean grower associations mobilised for the event, which was strategically named for the Brazilian flag's green and yellow colours (*Abril Verde e Amarelo*) (Fries 2018).¹⁴ Joining the protests in Brasília were local and regional associations representing dairy farmers, coffee planters, sugarcane, rice growers and even medium-scale meat processors, in addition to approximately 170 municipal associations of agricultural employers, led by those from Mato Grosso (Fries 2018). Meanwhile, more farmers in the states of Brazil's North region were turning to right-wing populism, largely reflecting the rise of a new cattle-based culture in the Amazon (see Hoelle 2015; Kröger 2020).

Once Bolsonaro won the 2018 elections (see Anderson 2019; Hunter and Power 2019; Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2020; Saad-Filho 2020),¹⁵ leaders of the abovementioned 'Green and Yellow April' protest backed Nabhan Garcia for agriculture minister (Pompeia 2021a). Furthermore, these leaders intended to exert influence on climate politics (Fraser 2021). To this end, they boosted climate denialism, a narrative framing climate change debates that could contribute to the classification proposed by Borrás et al. (2021). An essential characteristic of *agri-bolsonarism*,¹⁶ this narrative was resolutely defended on different occasions. In one instance, as Bolsonaro was close to victory in

¹⁴A symbolic dispute was in motion, since at that time, the MST was organising its 2018 'Red April' mobilisations.

¹⁵When Bolsonaro was elected in 2018, he was a member of the Social Liberal Party (*Partido Social Liberal*, or PSL). After a period between 2019 and 2021 without a party affiliation, he joined the Liberal Party (*Partido Liberal*, or PL). A right-wing party with ideological malleability, the PL leaned further to the right after Bolsonaro's affiliation.

¹⁶If *agri-bolsonarism* can be understood as a component of *bolsonarism* (see, for example, Feltran 2020; Rocha, Solano, and Medeiros 2021), the former's ideology clearly presents specificities, the centrality of climate politics being one of them.

the elections, Nabhan Garcia harshly criticised the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, stating that.

It's time to be just like the Trump administration [...] [He] has put the United States in line, brought progress and development back to the United States and does not care about the Paris Agreement [...]. Now, are we going to stick with the hypocrisy of this Paris Agreement, which benefits no one? What benefits does the Paris Agreement bring to us Brazilians, to Brazil and to Brazilian landowners? Nothing! (O Estado de S. Paulo 2018)

Another example was the 'Green and Yellow April' leaders' public contestation of climate science, arguing that the 'global warming theory' was 'completely questionable' (MBVA and Andaterra 2021, 1). Some of them contended that such claims simply reflected grassroots opinions on climate change, but initiatives were underway to produce denialists (Latour 2014) in rural areas. One example of this took place in Mato Grosso, where APRO-SOJA-MT started funding speeches delivered by a researcher who challenged the influence of 'humans' on climate change.¹⁷ Denialism was a cause that suited the interests of APROSOJA-MT, which wagers on fast-growing Asian markets (particularly the Chinese) and what soybean producers view as their weaker regulations for importers concerning deforestation (Wesz Junior, Escher, and Fares 2021) compared to European ones.

Climate politics between conflicts and alliances

Some national agricultural leaders and agribusiness corporations operating in Brazil felt that climate denialism might be threatening what they call their 'reputations' and backed a process of selective programmatic differentiation regarding environmental issues. After reaching an agreement within IPA, those leaders and corporations persuaded Bolsonaro to hold back some of the *agri-bolsonarists'* recommendations related to the climate. An example was the continuation of Brazil's negotiations concerning the Paris Agreement. However, these agricultural leaders and agribusiness corporations did not mobilise to rein in the government's pursuit of several other anti-environmental agendas (Pompeia 2023a), which were well represented by Ricardo Salles, Bolsonaro's environment minister between 2019 and 2021. These included downgrading environmental inspections and enforcement, weakening public participation in government-organised spaces for discussion of environmental policies, attempting to discredit Brazil's Space Research Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais*, or INPE), which had been monitoring deforestation in the Amazon (a key factor regarding Brazil's greenhouse gas emissions) and undermining protected areas, many of which were Indigenous territories.¹⁸

In addition to the current that was pushing for climate-denial policies, henceforth referred to as 'denialist', the author classified three other dominant business currents of climate positions active in IPA following participant observation at the institute (Pompeia 2023b). One consists of a current that can be called 'conservative': its members had not declared unconditional support for Bolsonaro but decided to publicly back some of his government's policies, such as the environment-related ones. In this

¹⁷For a critique of the depoliticisation of the debate around climate change, see, among others, Haraway and Tsing (2019), Latour (2014) and Moore (2017).

¹⁸As of 2023, Indigenous lands represented roughly 13% of Brazil's total area, while agricultural lands corresponded to 33% of the country's total area (Mapbiomas 2023).

respect, two of the most active associations were the CNA and the Brazilian Sugarcane Industry and Bioenergy Association (*União da Indústria de Cana-de-Açúcar e Bioenergia*, or UNICA), which saw the far-right government as an opportunity to push for environmental deregulation, as in the case of Bolsonaro's decision allowing sugarcane plantations to expand in the Amazon and the Pantanal wetlands.

Another influential current is led by associations whose positions concerning climate politics can be called 'volatile'. Represented, for example, by the Brazilian Association of Vegetable Oil Companies (*Associação Brasileira das Indústrias de Óleos Vegetais*, or ABIOVE) and the Brazilian Beef Exporters Association (*Associação Brasileira das Indústrias Exportadoras de Carnes*, or ABIEC), linked to grain traders and meat processors respectively, the 'volatile' actors are more susceptible to international pressure related to deforestation, particularly from investors or importers. Consequently, these associations and the corporations that fund them are required to make calculated changes in their commodity chains. For example, ABIOVE and grain traders are central agents for the Amazon's soy moratorium, a private agreement by which signatory companies vowed not to buy soybeans grown on land deforested after mid-2008.

Behind the scenes, however, both ABIOVE and ABIEC have sometimes operated in tandem with associations linked with the 'denialist' and 'conservative' currents, offering support, for instance, for bills in Congress that aim at profoundly weakening environmental licensing regulations (see Bronz, Zhou, and Castro 2020). In other subjects, such as the those linked with the so-called 'land regularisation' (comprising bills that could foster land grabbing),¹⁹ the two associations have preferred to avoid the creation of obstacles for the 'denialist' and 'conservative' currents. As evidenced by fieldwork within IPA, the avoidance of conflicts among the currents seeks to protect consensus on issues that are crucial for all of the agribusiness groupings, such as the agreement to keep taxes low in Brazil for activities related to the main agricultural commodities (Pompeia 2022).

The 'decarbonising' current is the last of the four currents operating in IPA concerning climate politics ('denialist', 'conservative', 'volatile' and 'decarbonising'). Their paradigmatic representation was the Brazilian Agribusiness Association (*Associação Brasileira do Agronegócio*, or ABAG), which gradually lost some of its clout inside IPA when hardline anti-environmental positions were fostered by Bolsonaro. Led mainly by actors from industrial and financial enterprises, ABAG is the association that best symbolises the corporate-driven, technological narratives identified by Borras et al. (2021): speaking a 'low-carbon' language, ABAG publicly opposed some of the anti-environmental initiatives advanced by the government and the agribusiness caucus's leadership, especially when these actions implied increasing deforestation in the Amazon. ABAG's more sophisticated profile, which selectively appropriated some of the social movements' climate-related claims, in the sense noted by Friedmann (2005), pushed messaging for its positions mainly in press interviews and manifestoes. These, nonetheless, did not lead to many concrete political measures being brought before Congress. In any case, dissent over these positions convulsed the association internally and triggered a backward shift in its positions from 2022, when more conservative proposals on environmental issues started to prevail. According to an influential businessperson linked with ABAG

¹⁹In relation to land grabbing, see Borras et al. (2011), Hall et al. (2015) and Sauer and Borras (2016), among others.

(Association 1, interview, 14 July 2022), the climate agenda is being ‘ideologised’ by ill-intentioned international trading partners for their purposes, and Brazil’s elites should tread more carefully.

Agrarian agendas

When Bolsonaro was elected president, certain national and transnational agribusiness elites operating in Brazil quickly moved to influence not only climate change issues but also agricultural policies. They lost no time mounting a counteroffensive when the *agribolsonarist* base sought to have one of its leaders appointed as agriculture minister. Given their power to influence IPA and the agribusiness caucus and therefore the votes of a substantial number of members of Congress, these national and transnational elites were quick to warn Bolsonaro that the agricultural segments supporting Nabhan Garcia could not ensure adequate congressional support to the new government (Pompeia 2021a). This pressure persuaded the president to drop the idea of appointing the UDR’s leader to fill the ministerial position. Instead, he nominated Tereza Cristina, a federal deputy who was leading the agribusiness caucus.

To avoid an impasse with the leaders of the Green and Yellow Brazil Movement (*Movimento Brasil Verde e Amarelo*, or MBVA), as the group opposed to paying the Funrural debts came to be called, Bolsonaro named Nabhan Garcia head of a specially created bureau attached to the ministry with a wide-ranging portfolio related to land matters, a post the rancher held from 2019 to 2022. Bolsonaro’s move displeased certain IPA members, as some of the associations’ leaders noted in interviews with the author. For instance, one of them, connected with Brazil’s National Coffee Council (*Conselho Nacional do Café*, or CNC), stated that Nabhan Garcia had been imposed by the president and was ‘not the ideal name’ (Association 2, interview, 13 February 2019).

Notwithstanding some members’ objections, Bolsonaro’s gesture was convenient for most associations at the institute, and no consistent attempt was made to veto it. This was the case because Nabhan Garcia was a fierce defender of the belief in the untrammelled rights of holders of rural properties (Bruno et al. 2009), and land-related interests often favour political convergence among most agribusiness actors operating in Brazil. By the way, before Bolsonaro’s presidency, their highly unified agrarian political action had obtained two major victories. First, in the 2000s, state-sponsored expropriations that paved the way for rural settlements gradually lost momentum as a national policy (Sauer 2019; Sauer and Mészáros 2017).²⁰ Then, in the 2010s, the recognition of Indigenous territories almost ground to a halt (Carneiro da Cunha et al. 2017).²¹

Strengthened by his appointment in a government that was openly opposed to Indigenous peoples and agrarian social movements, Nabhan Garcia diligently worked with

²⁰While 872 rural settlements were created by the PT government in 2005, only 81 had been set up in 2015: a decrease of 90.7% (Dataluta 2020). Among other factors, de-prioritising was influenced by political pressure (particularly through the agribusiness caucus), higher land prices (since market prices are used to benchmark expropriated land payments), and landowners resorting to litigation (Sauer and Mészáros 2017; Sauer 2019).

²¹Especially from 2013 on, political pressure against Indigenous territorial rights was stepped up in Brasília, where the agribusiness caucus made threatening moves, including one to amend the country’s constitution so that the power to demarcate these areas would be transferred from the executive branch to the legislative one. Protests organised by Indigenous communities in Brasília were key in avoiding the amendment of the constitution at that period, but Rousseff’s government was significantly affected by the caucus’s manoeuvres, and demarcations were almost completely stopped as of 2014 (Carneiro da Cunha et al. 2017).

the local agricultural elites. In this respect, he often travelled around the country to mobilise and support farmers and ranchers, particularly in regions where land-related disputes involving ethnic groups and social movements were prevalent.²² On these occasions, he acted as the representative of farmers and ranchers in Brasília.²³ In the federal capital, Nabhan Garcia started to operate as an ally of the same agribusiness caucus he had previously criticised.

The alliance between Nabhan Garcia and the 'conservative' current, which heavily influenced the caucus, was the driving force for a set of agrarian strategies that gathered momentum during Bolsonaro's term of office. One of the strategies concerned bills in Congress that had a high potential to benefit medium- and large-scale invaders of public areas. A second strategy was the almost complete interruption of land expropriations to constitute rural settlements, coupled with the repression and criminalisation of land occupations. A third was the assignment of land titles to small farmers who had obtained areas due to settlement initiatives, a measure that facilitated the sales of these areas and favoured the re-concentration of land ownership. A fourth strategy was the empowerment of soy producers and ranchers to make use of already demarcated Indigenous lands, a process coordinated from Brasília that could be described as a version of 'internal colonialism', per the expression suggested by Borrás et al. (2011, 209).

During fieldwork in June 2022, the author closely witnessed this process on Xavante Indigenous lands in Mato Grosso. The results varied. In one of them, Sangradouro/Volta Grande,²⁴ the main leaders had been persuaded to authorise the use of some areas for a few big farmers to grow soybeans and corn. In another land, Pimentel Barbosa, the results were completely different. Although the government pressured them to allow a part of their territory to be used by non-Indigenous farmers, they decided it was not in their best interests and skilfully rejected the idea, not by confronting state officials, which would have led to retaliations, but by delaying decisions until the next presidential election.²⁵

Anti-democratic demonstrations and initiatives from the left

In addition to appointing Nabhan Garcia, Bolsonaro had moved to consolidate another pivotal alliance, with APROSOJA-MT. This coalition intensified the advancement of highly reactionary positions in soybean growers' associations across other states. Consequently, the Brazilian Association of Soybean Producers (*Associação Brasileira dos Produtores de Soja*, or APROSOJA BRASIL), which represented the different state-level associations on the national level, would become a target of disputes.²⁶ The growing membership of soybean producers of different sizes was leveraged to bring a substantial

²²According to the Pastoral Land Commission, during Bolsonaro's term, there were 7,925 conflicts in rural areas, most of them initiated by landlords or land-grabbing actors, and 136 murders occurred (CPT 2023).

²³The cattle rancher's presence in the federal bureaucracy led to another relevant development: the government began to closely manage criticisms of the Funrural debts. Having been sworn in as secretary, Nabhan Garcia soon fudged his position as a staunch opponent of paying the debts and went on to say that Bolsonaro could not cancel this charge.

²⁴For a historical analysis of the expansion of agricultural commodities in this Indigenous land, see Ribeiro (2023).

²⁵In April 2022, months before the presidential election, approximately 7,000 Indigenous people convened in Brasília during the Free Land Camp (*Acampamento Terra Livre*), where they defended their territorial rights and criticised Bolsonaro's administration. Held annually since 2004 under the leadership of the Indigenous communities, the Free Land Camp is the most important national gathering for their political struggles.

²⁶Among other changes unfolding in this context, APROSOJA BRASIL publicly tried to overturn the soy moratorium (APROSOJA-MT 2019).

part of the agricultural bases under Bolsonaro's political control and in some cases even to push them toward agendas unrelated to food systems, such as anti-democratic manifestations.

Then the pandemic reached Brazil, reducing the chances of holding demonstrations mobilising tens of thousands of farmers, the main aspect of *agri-bolsonarism's* politics of appearances (Borras 2020).²⁷ As a consequence, only scattered public initiatives occurred during 2020. Meanwhile, Bolsonaro prioritised negotiations with the agribusiness caucus, whose members drove harder bargains in their relations with the government, which needed them to build support in Congress. Therefore, the co-dependence between the president and certain agribusiness actors extended beyond private agricultural leaders, encompassing members of Congress too.

The movement's nationwide re-wakening happened in early 2021, when the Supreme Court annulled former president Lula's convictions, thus making him eligible to run for president in 2022. In reaction, the Green and Yellow Brazil Movement organised a large demonstration in Brasília on 15 May 2021. Under the banner of 'Agribusiness and the people for democracy', the demonstration was led by soybean growers, especially Galvan, who had just taken over as president of APROSOJA BRASIL, and supported mainly by cattle ranchers and sugarcane producers. These agricultural groups were accompanied by evangelical ones, who represented another segment decisively supporting Bolsonaro's administration.

The demonstrators' demands were not focused on the Funrural debts anymore, but fully absorbed into Bolsonaro's power-grabbing agendas: challenging the legislative and judicial branches and the use of electronic ballot devices. On that occasion, the former army captain addressed the crowd to emphasise these agendas and laud the importance of the military for his government.²⁸ In fact, alongside agribusiness and evangelical groups, the military formed a fundamental supporting triad for the far-right politician (see Feltran 2020; Hoffmann 2020; Hunter and Power 2019).²⁹ Not casually, the president asked retired general Walter Braga Netto, his defence minister, to speak from the podium during the event. Braga Netto's short but scathing speech sought to assure farmers that Brazil's armed forces were ready and willing to protect them.³⁰

Months later, when opinion polls showed Lula favoured to win the presidential election, Bolsonaro participated in a massive pro-government mobilisation organised by the Green and Yellow Brazil Movement on 7 September 2021, Brazil's Independence Day. Before the demonstration, militants threatened to block the main highways in Brazil and to invade the Supreme Court to force the removal of its judges. Most of the IPA's agribusiness associations did not join the protest. They preferred line-by-line negotiations with the government, which gave them more room to manoeuvre and bring political pressure to bear. The CNA's leadership did not join the demonstration either, unlike many of the municipal employers' associations comprising its base. Although the CNA, an

²⁷Analysing characteristics concerning contemporary populism, Borras draws inspiration from Tsing's work to define the politics of appearances as '[...] the self-conscious making of a spectacle that is a necessary mechanism in gathering political support' (Borras 2020, 9).

²⁸The number of military personnel holding civil positions in the federal executive branch increased substantially during Bolsonaro's administration (see IPEA 2022).

²⁹In relation to the current debates in Brazil about (neo)fascism, militarism has been particularly highlighted (Reis 2020; Rocha, Solano, and Medeiros 2021; Sauer 2022; Schwarcz 2019).

³⁰It is important to note that these forces were not monolithic.

archetypal representation of the ‘conservative’ current, had worked in tandem with soybean growers’ associations to protect Bolsonaro’s anti-environmental and anti-Indigenous policies, its stance was that joining the officially backed movement at that moment was strategically dangerous, particularly because of its permanent dependence on the government, which might be led by the PT from 2023 on.

At the same time, the agribusiness caucus was divided in its opinions. While fewer members were supporting the demonstration than on 15 May, some of its central leaders started to issue public criticism. For instance, Federal Deputy Alceu Moreira, a former president of the cross-party bloc, stated: ‘This gesture of voluntarism, in which there is aggression, only harms the economy, it harms agribusiness itself’ (O Estado de S. Paulo 2021). The internal division also influenced the caucus’s cautious approach to Bolsonaro in the 2022 election. Although some of its participants were tenacious supporters, the directing board of the caucus did not officially endorse him until the run-off election (O Globo 2022).

Among the agribusiness leaders who vocally opposed *agri-bolsonarism* was Blairo Maggi, a former agriculture minister under Temer, a large soybean farmer and one of the owners of the Amaggi, a grain trader. Maggi challenged what he understood as the practice of politicising soybean growers’ associations on party lines to favour Bolsonaro’s power intentions. From Maggi’s point of view, the government’s discourses and some of its anti-environmental measures would financially harm agribusiness. On one occasion, for example, an irked Maggi declared: ‘Over the last few years, the country’s exporters have done a great job of rebuilding Brazil’s image and showing that we have got deforestation and all environmental issues under control [...]. But now we will have to do this all over again’ (BBC 2019).

When Lula ran for president in 2022, he sought to work on this flank. On 20 January, he held an important meeting with Maggi and a small group of Mato Grosso agribusiness leaders, including Carlos Augustin, owner of one of the state’s major soybean seed companies. This negotiation in Mato Grosso was developed in conjunction with an agreement in Congress that involved Senator Carlos Fávaro, who has strong connections with some of the members of the Maggi family. Lula’s arrangement in Congress also attracted the Federal Deputy Neri Geller, a leading member of the agribusiness caucus who, due to Bolsonaro’s decisions, found that he no longer had substantial allies in the state of Mato Grosso who could lend weight to his campaign for the Senate in 2022.

As members of the PT’s alliance, their positions on environmental issues were contradictory. For example, Fávaro defended the widespread recovery of degraded lands as a means of diminishing pressure for horizontal expansion in the country,³¹ but as a rapporteur in the Senate, he had recently backed a bill that, according to analysts, could favour this expansion. Meanwhile, Geller was shepherding a bill in the Chamber of Deputies that had been drafted to remove Mato Grosso from Brazil’s Legal Amazon,³² thus adding more areas that could be legally stripped of vegetation and used for commodity production.

In addition, a representative of the moderate right, Geraldo Alckmin, who was close to certain cattle ranchers and sugarcane mills in the state of São Paulo, was brought in as

³¹Concerning the expansion of commodities in the *Cerrado*, see Cabral, Sauer, and Shankland (2023).

³²The Legal Amazon comprises the states of Acre, Amapá, Amazonas, Mato Grosso, Pará, Rondônia, Roraima, Tocantins and a part of the state of Maranhão.

Lula's candidate for vice-president as the PT's campaign sought ways of broadening dialogue with agribusiness and other economic segments.³³ Nevertheless, as governor of São Paulo, Alckmin had brought Ricardo Salles into institutional politics as the state's secretary of the environment well before Bolsonaro appointed Salles minister in the corresponding federal government post.

Agri-bolsonarism strikes back

The response to the PT's offensive was an implacable counterattack. In February 2022, shortly after the first public mentions of Lula's meeting with agribusiness leaders from Mato Grosso, billboards appeared in municipalities around this state carrying messages that slammed Lula as a 'bandit' and a 'convict' (Congresso em Foco 2022).³⁴ Carlos Augustin, too, was subjected to apocryphal attacks on the internet that called for viewers to boycott his seed business. Throughout the campaign, agricultural employers' leaders sought to encourage landowners' reservations concerning the PT by emphasising its ties with the MST. Although agrarian reform had undeniably lost momentum in Brazil during the previous PT administrations, the reiterated discourse of leaders defending rural properties was fruitful. Besides fears based on anti-left stances, the reasons for this efficacy included the contradictory relations between the party and the social movement (PT and MST), with both their differences and dialogues (Sauer 2019).

At the same time, Alckmin was to travel widely to hold encounters with agricultural elites, but his plans were thwarted when leaders of the main regional associations, as in Goiás and Mato Grosso, refused to meet any politician opposing Bolsonaro. In Mato Grosso, specifically, numerous municipal agricultural employers' associations published harsh criticism accusing Deputy Geller and Senator Fávoro of betraying the interests of their bases. In São Paulo, a ranchers' leader was severely censored after she attended a meeting with Lula.³⁵ In addition to these measures intended to block contacts with Lula's campaign, numerous formal complaints were made against certain farm employers, meat processors and agricultural machinery industries, claiming that workers were being coerced into voting for Bolsonaro, in states such as Mato Grosso, Pará, Pernambuco, Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul (Valor Econômico 2022).

While the PT had difficulty negotiating with local and regional agricultural elites, Bolsonaro was deepening his association with an ascending culture in parts of Brazil that is fostered by songs, images, numbers and phrases linking agribusiness to ideas such as modernity and affluence (Almeida 2021; Gerhardt 2021; Pompeia 2020b).³⁶ At Agrishow, a gigantic agricultural fair in Ribeirão Preto, state of São Paulo, he arrived on horseback. On his way to ExpoZebu in Minas Gerais, Brazil's top livestock exposition, he led a large motorcade. Bolsonaro also exercised his politics of appearances at important agricultural events in the states of Mato Grosso, Rio Grande do Sul, Paraná and Bahia.³⁷ Moreover, the

³³Before joining Lula's campaign, Alckmin left the PSDB and joined the Brazilian Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Brasileiro*, or PSB).

³⁴Central to *agri-bolsonarism's* anti-PT orientation was an extremist rejection of Lula, specifically.

³⁵Once more, the expression of extreme aversion to Lula from *agri-bolsonarists*

³⁶A culture that also operates to legitimise agricultural elites' interests and right-wing politicians.

³⁷On these occasions, he criticised the demarcation of Indigenous lands, attacked the MST and defended easier rules for the use of weapons in farms. By the way, during Bolsonaro's government, there was a significant increase in gun ownership in rural areas.

extremist leader again took over the 7 September Independence Day parade as his campaign event. In an unprecedented development, the city of Brasília's official ceremony in 2022 featured, alongside traditionally present military vehicles, 28 tractors brought by leaders of the Green and Yellow Brazil Movement.

These variegated multilevel initiatives created a favourable setting for members of Bolsonaro's close circle to ask farmers for more donations to his re-election campaign.³⁸ As Borras (2020) argues concerning populists, the aims of the politics of appearances are not only to gather political support and votes but also financial investments. The campaign was coming down to the wire, so his agricultural base of support made a significant difference in this respect. More than three-fifths (33 of 50) of the largest donations made to the Bolsonaro campaign through 25 October 2022 (four days before the second and final vote) came from agribusiness, especially from leaders in Mato Grosso.³⁹ The individual amounts ranged from \$37,000 to \$225,000 (Reuters 2022).⁴⁰ Therefore, the struggle to ensure continued dominance over the bases of the agricultural employers involved not only public support and votes but also money, used to gather more support in urban regions.

Changes concerning the CNA's stance

Throughout 2022, *agri-bolsonarism* considerably amplified its mobilisation in rural municipalities. Economic gains enjoyed by farmers during Bolsonaro's term were a substantial part of this political equation, and two major factors in this regard were the rising international prices of the country's main agricultural export commodities (see ABIEC 2022; Cepea 2022b) and the depreciation of the Brazilian real against the dollar (particularly since March 2020). The growing local mobilisation brought more pressure to bear on the CNA. As a result, ensuring the continuity of the association's selective strategy regarding Bolsonaro became more problematic. As noted above, the CNA's leadership sought to balance support for government measures that catered to its interests, which comprised environmental and agrarian policies, but simultaneously avoided involvement in Bolsonaro's power strategies, such as those that questioned the electoral process in Brazil.

In a context of rising animosity over this approach taken by the CNA's leadership, its president, João Martins, made a declaration that added more fuel to *agri-bolsonarism's* fire. On 8 December 2021, he stated that the confederation's support for some of Bolsonaro's policies had been a one-off decision. Martins stressed that the CNA was apolitical and would stay that way: 'We know that some statements were made, but this was for a certain point in time' (Correio Braziliense 2021). Shortly after Martins spoke, leaders of the Green and Yellow Brazil Movement issued a response: 'President Bolsonaro, the CNA does not speak for us' (MBVA 2021). Among local and regional agricultural elites, criticism of the confederation's leadership grew, especially from soybean producers who were influential in municipal associations (Association 3, interview, 17 June 2022).

By mid-2022, an attempt to change the CNA's line had started to gain momentum. Some state-level leaders of the confederation tried to downplay the turmoil among its

³⁸His son Eduardo Bolsonaro, a federal deputy, was directly involved in these initiatives.

³⁹Brazil's Supreme Court banned corporate campaign donations in 2015, but individuals can donate up to 10% of their income to parties and candidates.

⁴⁰At the exchange rate on 26 October 2022.

bases. For example, a leader in Mato Grosso described ‘a misunderstanding’ in this regard (Association 4, interview, 09 July 2022). However, an alliance had taken shape to oust Martins from his position as the CNA’s president. One of the ideas was to replace him with his vice-president, Federal Deputy José Mário Schreiner, a member of the agribusiness caucus’s board of directors. Schreiner went as far as to step back from his campaign to be re-elected to Congress and posted the following message on his social media: ‘Agri-culture needs me to take on more responsibilities in the CNA’ (Schreiner 2022).

The ensuing risk prompted a change of plans from Martins, who started showing more openness to the CNA’s bases. The defining moment in this direction was the organisation of a major event in Brasília on 10 August 2022, called the Agribusiness National Meeting (*Encontro Nacional do Agro*). The event was characterised by the implementation of two major changes. One was strengthening the role of the local ranchers and farmers in Brasília by enabling the direct participation of more than 3,000 delegates from municipal agricultural employers’ associations. This was a significant change from the CNA’s previous preference on these occasions, which happened through negotiations within the national and state leaderships (Pompeia 2021a). The other change was to openly take a side: Bolsonaro was offered the top speaker’s spot at the event to further his campaign, less than two months before the first round of the presidential election. Such a decision was a step away from the CNA’s usual tradition of setting aside a day for debates with all the main candidates from both the right and left parties. With the event underway, the confederation’s president sought to please *agri-bolsonarism* as he slammed Lula: ‘You have made it very clear that there is no more room in this country for a corrupt and incompetent team, even less for the return of a candidate who has been prosecuted and imprisoned as a thief’ (CNA 2022). To help hold the alliance together, Bolsonaro’s government had recently made sure the CNA’s proposals for the 2022–2023 Farm Bill were responded to positively, particularly concerning credit subsidies and rural insurance funds (Mapa 2022).

Consequently, at that time, Bolsonaro had been successful in persuading two leading agricultural forces in the country to accept his leadership: the main grassroots groupings, led by soybean farmers and cattle ranchers, and the CNA, the national body formally representing agricultural employers. The former were crucial when influencing voters, organising mass demonstrations and obtaining donations. The latter added its institutional weight in Brasília: any national agreement concerning agricultural employers would be incomplete without the CNA.

Agro-industries on the fence

Following Bernstein’s (2020) defence of combining rural and urban contexts in observations regarding support for right-wing populism, this section examines more closely the stances of some of the leading urban agribusiness actors concerning Bolsonaro, in particular national and transnational agro-industries. Most of these companies had undoubtedly been satisfied with his appointment of neoliberals to run the economy (Anderson 2019; Andrade 2020; Hoffmann 2020; Saad-Filho 2020), which helped ensure, among other corporate expectations, that agro-industrial corporations would be protected by the state in capital-labour clashes. However, similarly to what Friedmann (1993) observed in other contexts, the agribusiness corporations operating in Brazil had heterogeneous agendas based on political and economic factors. Sugarcane mills were

among the ones that publicly supported Bolsonaro, especially for his anti-environmental policies, as noted above. In 2022, moreover, one of the sugar and ethanol supply chain's millionaires, Rubens Ometto, founder and controller of the giant Cosan, was Brazil's largest individual donor in the elections. His donations were channelled mostly to candidates supported by Bolsonaro and helped, for example, to elect Tarcísio de Freitas as governor of the state of São Paulo and Ricardo Salles as a federal deputy.⁴¹

However, some of Bolsonaro's measures had displeased sugarcane mill owners. Two of them were raising Brazil's quota of ethanol imports without the regular tax for the product and then zeroing this import tax, both done to help Trump retain substantial support from corn farmers in the 2020 presidential election.⁴² Another decision was lowering taxes on non-renewable fuels, thus narrowing the price gap that had favoured gas stations' sales of ethanol. Given these points of contention and the possibility of Lula winning the 2022 elections in Brazil, Ometto also worked to build closer relations with the PT candidate, and the two met on several occasions. At the same time, leading ethanol producers who had previously been willing to praise Bolsonaro and criticise Lula started to hold back somewhat. This was noted in the author's interviews with two leaders who have long been active in the sugarcane chain and held important positions in ABAG and the Agribusiness Committee of the Federation of Industries of the State of São Paulo (*Federação das Indústrias do Estado de São Paulo*, or FIESP) (Association 1, interview, 14 July 2022; Association 5, interview, 8 July 2022).

The major grain traders and meatpacking industries also had some reasons for dissatisfaction with Bolsonaro's government. In that they were more exposed than farmers to strategic risks arising from international pressure, they did not feel comfortable with the climate denialism advocated by Ernesto Araújo, Bolsonaro's foreign affairs minister (2019–2021), or appreciate one the president's sons posting criticism of China. However, certain corporate leaders felt that problems like these were alleviated over time during Bolsonaro's administration, as noted in the author's interview with a member of ABIEC, an association led by JBS. In diplomatic language, he said that some ministers had 'not got a ten' as a grade, but that Bolsonaro, in response, had 'made changes and some positions were modified' (Association 6, interview, 4 July 2022). Ernesto Araújo was indeed replaced, and agriculture minister Tereza Cristina diligently worked to help (i) persuade China to reverse decisions to suspend imports from Brazilian meatpackers (the Chinese announced these measures as having sanitary reasons, but many of Brazil's meat chain leaders saw them as politically motivated) and (ii) ensure that more industrial plants would be eligible to export to the Asian giant. Furthermore, the new *boom* driving soybean and beef prices on international markets created favourable conditions for grain traders and meatpackers to play down losses due to diplomatic problems, since they were largely offset in their financial statements by the upturn related to *commodities* (Association 5, interview, 8 July 2022; Association 6, interview, 4 July 2022).

While most corporations kept their complaints concerning Bolsonaro's government to backstage spaces such as IPA, some agribusiness groups did issue frequent public criticism of his administration, as in the abovementioned case of ABAG and its 'decarbonising' positions. Moreover, many large paper and pulp corporations did not want Bolsonaro re-

⁴¹These two politicians also had staunch support from agricultural elites in the state of São Paulo.

⁴²Concerning the historical political interests of the Corn Belt in the United States, see Winders (2012).

elected in 2022, but that did not mean that Lula would be their preferred candidate. During the 2022 campaign, most of these industries gave their support to a third presidential candidate, who had to be a conservative, but not an extreme right-winger. As shown by a public letter (Focus.jor 2022), some of them decided to back Senator Simone Tebet.⁴³ They certainly realised that a third strong candidate in the presidential race was hardly feasible, but chose to support Tebet in order to favour a second round and have more influence over the elected candidate, as reinforced by an executive linked to the main association of pulp and paper companies, the Brazilian Tree Industry (*Indústria Brasileira de Árvores*, or IBÁ) (Association 7, interview, 21 June 2022). Tebet came third in the first round held on 2 October 2022. With 4.16% of valid votes, she contributed to the presidential election going to a second round (TSE 2022)⁴⁴ and then backed Lula. If Lula were elected, Tebet would be in a good position to exert considerable programmatic influence in the government.⁴⁵

Final considerations: *agri-bolsonarism* after Bolsonaro's presidency

Lula won the 2022 runoff election by a narrow margin: 50.90% of valid votes (TSE 2022). But although Bolsonaro undoubtedly kept the unwavering support of most of his electors throughout his administration and made extensive use of government machinery to favour his campaign, Lula's amalgamation of a broad alliance reaching well beyond the left showed that the far-right politician had not been able to construct a historical hegemonic bloc in the country, one that could neutralise opposing forces and establish ideological dominance, in the sense discussed by Gramsci (1971), Hall (1985) and Akram-Lodhi (2020). Moreover, after his defeat in the election, Bolsonaro is facing growing legal jeopardy as the target of multiple investigations. One of these is related to the suspicion of a conspiracy by Bolsonaro and some of his allies to embezzle expensive gifts he received from Saudi Arabia and other countries while he was Brazil's president. Besides the investigations, on 30 June 2023, the country's Superior Electoral Court made an especially consequential decision, finding Bolsonaro guilty of abuse of power and improper use of a public television channel to spread false claims undermining the election. As a result, the court barred Bolsonaro from seeking public office for eight years.

However, even if Bolsonaro is effectively banned from running for public office for a relatively long period, the ideology and mobilisation that *agri-bolsonarism* fostered may continue to play a relevant role in Brazil. The local and regional agricultural elites that constituted the backbone of this political-economic movement did not emerge from the 2022 elections as losers or defeated parties. The combined strength of their bases' votes, political clout, mass demonstrations and campaign funding was clearly shown by the presidential election results in areas in which agricultural commodities are economically dominant, especially in Brazil's Midwest and South regions and in parts of the Southeast and the North (TSE 2022).⁴⁶ The multiple influences of these elites were also largely reflected in the composition of new state governments elected in the same areas (TSE 2022).

⁴³MDB, state of Mato Grosso do Sul.

⁴⁴Lula fell less than 2% short of the number of valid votes needed to win the election in the first round (TSE 2022).

⁴⁵In January 2023, Tebet became Lula's planning minister.

⁴⁶Even though Lula was the overall winner in the presidential election.

In Congress, support by local and regional agricultural elites was pivotal in the further empowerment of the agribusiness caucus. After the 2022 elections, this cross-party bloc grew from 240 members to 324 in the Chamber of Deputies (up 35.0%) and from 40 to 50 in the Senate (up 25.0%) (FPA 2022, 2023). The caucus's membership in 2023 represents 58.3% of the total in the Chamber of Deputies and 62.0% in the Senate (FPA 2022, 2023; TSE 2022).⁴⁷ Incentivised by fiery bases, some of the caucus's members joined forces with members of Congress who are diehard followers of Bolsonaro to try to attack the MST through a parliamentary inquiry. Currently, the caucus leads a wide coalition in Congress to undermine Indigenous territorial rights.

To look beyond the elections and government branches (Bernstein 2020), local and regional agricultural elites have so far retained their ability to successfully mobilise their bases, and some of them may continue to advocate extremely reactionary agendas. For instance, the press indicated that certain agricultural leaders took part in, encouraged or financed the local manifestations (particularly roadblocks and gatherings held next to military facilities) that directly challenged Lula's victory in 2022. Some of these leaders also incentivised or supported the subsequent concentration of coup plotters in front of the Army Headquarters in Brasília (see, for example, Folha de Dourados 2022; G1 2022; Metr opolis 2022; O Popular 2022). From there, on 8 January 2023, a larger crusade comprising several social sectors set out to storm and ransack the presidential palace, the Supreme Court and the Congress.

After the defeat in the presidential election, Bolsonaro and local and regional agricultural elites are maintaining close relations. The 2023 Agrishow was telling in this regard. Instead of assigning centrality in the opening ceremony to Lula's agriculture minister, Carlos F avaro, the organisers of the event held in May preferred to have Bolsonaro as the main figure. The former president focused his speech on ranchers and farmers, arguing that they needed politicians who did not hamper them and criticising the demarcation of Indigenous lands. Months later, in August, in the most important rodeo festival of the country, in Barretos, state of S ao Paulo, Bolsonaro once again had a prominent role, making another strong political speech and being warmly applauded by spectators. Approximately 900,000 people visited the Barretos rodeo festival in 2023.

While this political equation involving local and regional agricultural elites is a complex phenomenon, one should acknowledge the decisive role of prominent national agricultural associations and transnational corporations. On the one hand, in certain issues, including agrarian ones, their interests largely coincide with those advocated by the abovementioned agricultural elites. On the other hand, these associations and corporations have distanced themselves from *agri-bolsonarism* on certain occasions. For example, some of them calculated that climate change denialism and anti-democratic claims were detrimental to their businesses and offered resistance around these agendas. Following Bolsonaro's defeat in the election and his exclusion from elections, their capacity to impose certain limits to *agri-bolsonarism's* ideology and practices can be expected to increase.

All things considered, agribusiness leaders are screening other potential right-wing presidential candidates, and in this regard, Bolsonaro can also be particularly influential. However, should some of these politicians gain national popularity in rural and adjacent

⁴⁷The Chamber of Deputies and Senate have 513 and 81 total seats respectively.

areas, they will in turn face the challenge of dealing with an ideology that is at the core of *agri-bolsonarism*: higher relative operational dependency on continually expanding the agricultural frontier, extreme opposition to Indigenous territorial rights and agrarian social movements, climate change denialism, animosity directed at agribusiness corporations, strong anti-Lula, anti-PT and anti-left sentiments, conservative 'defence of the family' stances, preference for mass demonstrations and openness to contest some of the basic procedures of liberal democracies.⁴⁸

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