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Land Conflicts and Violence in the Brazilian Amazon Region

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I. Introduction

The Brazilian military government created the Land Statute at the beginning of its governance on 11/30/1964 by Law 4.504. This was the strategy used by the rulers to appease the peasants and reassure the great landowners. Its goals were basically two: (1) the implementation of agrarian reform and (2) the development of agriculture. Such goals seemed at first contradictory. After more than half a century of its creation, the Land Statute managed to achieve the second goal only, not carrying out a serious agrarian reform, which would distribute land to those who needed the most. Direction pointed to the continued concentration of land in the hands of big landowners, primarily the landowner and later large agribusiness conglomerates, since the call for state land distribution, especially in areas sparsely inhabited in the country, such as the Amazon region, was from '*land without men to men without land*'. However, it was not for the poor, but for businesses (usually from non-landowners) and large investors. Even so, many families without resources came to the region and settled on land as squatters, giving the necessary ingredients for land conflicts in the country[1].

Another change that was part of the goal of developing the country, especially in remote locations and close to borders, was the creation of a tax-free zone for industries in the city of Manaus, capital of the state of Amazonas, encouraging the mobility of people and companies to those regions, aiming to ensure safety for the Brazilian territory from aggressions coming from other countries or armed groups through the development and increase of the population. We must not forget the historical context where the Cold War was at its height and the military regime felt the need and the duty to protect against the communist threat and guerrillas that would be more hidden in places with low population density and the Amazon region.

From the mid-1980s onwards, the country became democratized and several governments signaled towards agrarian reform with timid measures since there were strong interest groups that wanted the *status quo* on this issue, including creating a ruralist bench by parliamentarians from various parties who were claiming privileges for owners of vast tracts of land who were opponents of agrarian reform. This group was formed by several political parties that comprised governmental alliances with the democratic administrations, passing through the governance of presidents Jose Sarney (1985-1989), Fernando Collor de Melo / Itamar Franco (1990-1994), Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) , Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010), Dilma Vana Rousseff (2011-2016). Therefore, there was ambiguity in voting on land distribution and agricultural activity in general as far as the National Congress (Chamber of Deputies and Federal Senate) was concerned. Just so to have an idea, in 1994 and 1998 there were about 150 parliamentarians who formed this Ruralist Bench with parties ranging from the ideological spectrum from the right to the center left, rendering agrarian reform unfeasible (HAMMOND 2009: 164).

Poverty affects more the rural population than the urban population, where three quarters of the world's poor live today and Brazil also follows the same path (BORRAS Jr. and FRANCO 2012: 36). Less industrialized regions are the poorest. For instance, in 1998, the average family income *per capita* in rural Brazil was R$ 102.90, representing only 35% of the *per capita* income of the urban area, which was R$ 292.40 (SCHNEIDER and FIALHO 2000: 120). However, because this population layer has low electoral weight, there are almost no public policies that reduce this disparity.

With the return of democracy, the representation of previously excluded groups came to have an effect. The rural poor were organized and demanded a better redistribution of land, with only 1% of

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[1] Based on interviews in 2007 with agrarian leaderships and representatives in the sector.

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rural owners controlling 50% of arable land in the country (WOLFORD 2010). Social movements and popular movements such as the Landless Workers Movement (MST), the National Confederation of Workers in Agriculture (CONTAG), the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), and others were established or strengthened. Even so, we see in the following table that those benefited by the various democratic governments in Brazil were a few.

Table 1: Agrarian Reform and democratic governments, 1985-2015.

Democratic Governments	Settled families	Average number of settled families / year
Sarney (1985-90)	82.689	16.538
Collor/Franco (1991-4)	35.600	8.900
FHC (1995-2002)	584.655	73.082
Lula (2003-10)	614.088	76.761
Dilma (2011-15)	133.635	26.727
Total (1985-2015)	*1.450.667*	*46.796*

Source: By the author (based on data from CPT 1985 - 2015 and IBGE).

The vast majority have been left out and are fighting for better survival conditions, since the number of families who live in the countryside and support them but are not the formal owners of the land is far greater than those benefited by the state redistribution of land. This includes small owners who own insufficient space to survive than they produce.

II. The Amazon Region and Agricultural Violence

We cannot talk about Brazil on the subject of agrarian violence, without addressing the data from the Amazon region, which presents 64% of all the deaths caused by land disputes in the country during the democratic period. This situation derives from what has been mentioned previously and encompasses, in addition to the growing concentration of land, a distribution of land by governments of the military regime to large companies that did not belong to the agrarian sector. The poor mass of rural dwellers barely benefited from this policy. And yet, in democratic governments, the correction was small and even in governments considered center-left and left with strong social and popular appeal, many[2] were left out. Among the regions with unproductive land and distribution potential, the Amazon region stands out, and is where a good part of the conflicts occurred in the country, as suggested in the table below.

Table 2: Agrarian deaths in the *Legal Amazon* and Brazil (1985 - 2015).

Region	State/Region	Deaths	Municipalities (deaths / municipality)	Deaths per 100,000[3]
Legal Amazon	RO (Rondônia)	104	52 (2.0)	25,17
	AC (Acre)	18	22 (0.82)	8,94
	AM (Amazonas)	54	62 (0.87)	7,41
	RR (Roraima)	28	15 (1.87)	26,51
	PA (Pará)	507	143 (3.55)	21,22
	AP (Amapá)	6	16 (0.38)	8,76
	TO (Tocantins)	43	139 (0.31)	14,66
	MT (Mato Grosso)	131	141 (0.93)	23,72
	MA (Maranhão)	148	217 (0.68)	6,07
Total Legal Amazon		1039	808 (1.29)	14,47
Total other regions in Brazil		587	4756 (0.12)	2,59
Total Brazil		1626	5563 (0.29)	5,45

[2] Of what we call the *Legal Amazon*, which includes the states of Rondônia, Acre, Amazonas, Roraima, Pará, Amapá, Tocantins, Mato Grosso, and the western portion of Maranhão.
[3]Data estimated by IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) for the rural population- year 2010.

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Certainly the states of Pará, Maranhão, Mato Grosso and Rondônia stand out negatively for agrarian violence, where 890 (or 55% of the deaths) occurred in the last 31 years of democracy. In Pará, this number is much higher when compared to the others. In order not to compare states of different size or with discrepant populations, we included two more indexes: deaths by municipalities and deaths per 100,000 people. The first one is related to territories and the second one is related to population size. In Pará, this number is still higher in both cases amongst Mato Grosso, Rondônia and Roraima with high rates of deaths from land disputes.

However, besides the number of deaths per state and also the Legal Amazon, who is dying in these conflicts? The Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) publishes an annual report with disaggregated data. The report allows us to slightly understand these numbers. The following table gives us a description of this phenomenon.

Table 3: Number of deaths[4] in land conflicts in the Amazon region (1985 - 2015) by category / profession

Category / Profession														
Lawyer, civil servant	Settled	Miner	Indigenous people	Leader	Other	Small tenant	Small owner	Politician	Squatter	Religious figure	Rural unionist	Rural worker	Landless	Total of deaths
8 0,77%	65 6,26%	41 3,95%	62 5,97%	94 9,05%	45 4,33%	8 0,77%	74 7,12%	6 0,58%	284 27,33%	9 0,87%	56 5,39%	151 14,53%	135 12,99%	1039 100%

Source: Based on data from the Pastoral Land Commission (1985 - 2015).

The largest group of those who die from land disputes are squatters. Even this percentage is higher than the Brazilian average of 22 points. In the Legal Amazon region itself, squatters represent 27.33 percent of the victims of agrarian violence. Recovering from interviews with leaders of social movements, it is very likely to say that a large part of these victims arrived in the region because of the distribution that the then military government gave to companies and big investors and simply took possession of a piece of land without any formal documentation and began to work on it. Such a feat caused conflicts with the formal owners, who hired security guards and were threatened and even killed by them, even if such lands were unproductive. Moreover, the new Federal Constitution of 1988, Article 186, requires proof to the owners that the land performs its social function and is not unproductive, not to be expropriated and redistributed to peasants without (or with little) land (FEDERAL CONSTITUTION 1988).

Such a fundamental law contradicts the Brazilian Civil Code that defends private property. Courts often rule in favor of property owners. These legal contradictions can intensify conflicts over land disputes (ALSTON et al., 1999: 137), and encourage the use of violence as a means of defending each side in this current model. On the side of the large landowners, many of them in the Amazon region, there was a part that falsified documents with the help of local notaries, placing them in drawers with crickets (*grilos* as in Brazilian Portuguese) to give an old and yellowish appearance to the supposed documents, and which became known as *Grilagem de Terra*, equivalent to Land Grabbing (ZIMERMAN 2012: 45).

However, apart from squatters, other categories that add to the number of victims of these conflicts are rural and landless workers, leaders of social movements, small landowners and settlers, among others. The boundaries of the agrarian units generate a lot of conflict, since there is usually no fence in the entire land belonging to an owner, and the pressure of the large is strong for the small ones to feel threatened. There are even small conflicts with victims as well. The landless are organized in movements that have strategies to influence the distribution of land, occupying unproductive areas to be expropriated by the State and later indemnified and transformed into settlements.

It attempts to explain the large number of deaths from land conflicts justifying that land is a valuable natural resource just like in other conflicts which result in many deaths in order to possess other precious resources. Examples in this regard may be the extraction of valuable minerals (diamond, gold, silver), fossil fuel wells (oil), extraction of wood, extraction and production of illicit drugs (coca leaves, cocaine; *cannabis sativa* leaf, marijuana and *hashish*; poppy, opium) and several other items that have a high added value for criminals to appropriate and fight for such resources / products (ZIMERMAN 2016). The Amazon region is very rich in several ores (Vale exploits a good part of them in the area in question), besides legal and illegal extraction of wood. That is, there is much to explore and there is marked deforestation, where state control is small. There is no basic structure for government agencies to account for monitoring and avoiding such delicts and offenses.

We have shown data of fatal victims in conflicts over land disputes in Brazil and in the Amazon region specifically, in addition to the categories of victims. It is worth presenting data on the most violent municipalities, with the highest number of fatalities in the country. Therefore, there is a table with the Brazilian municipalities where 10 or more victims have died in land conflicts since the redemocratization process.

[4] The Pastoral Land Commission only considers the deaths of peasants or their supporters.

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Table 4: Brazilian municipalities with 10 or more agrarian deaths (1985 - 2015)

Position	25 Municipalities	State	Deaths	Deaths*100 thousand/estimated population in 2015[5]
1	Xinguara	PA	61	**142,41**
2	Marabá	PA	45	17,17
3	São Felix do Xingu	PA	35	30,12
4	Eldorado do Carajás	PA	30	91,84
5	Parauapebas	PA	25	13,16
6	São João do Araguaia	PA	23	**170,11**
7	Novo Repartimento	PA	22	31,06
	Rio Maria	PA	22	**124,03**
9	Mucajaí	RR	21	**128,21**
	Santa Luzia	MA	21	29,55
11	Benjamin Constant	AM	17	43,06
	Conceição do Araguaia	PA	17	36,64
	Aripuanã	MT	17	82,30
14	Alta Floresta	MT	16	32,01
15	Porto Velho	RO	15	2,98
	Vilhena	RO	15	16,34
	Tailândia	PA	15	15,44
18	Santana do Araguaia	PA	14	20,89
19	Anapu	PA	13	51,15
20	Curionópolis	MT	11	62,12
	Paragominas	PA	11	10,28
	Redenção	PA	11	13,61
23	Corumbiara	RO	10	113,10
	Lábrea	AM	10	23,11
	Jauru	MT	10	108,21

Source: Own authorship (based on data from IBGE 2015).

There are 14 municipalities located in the state of Pará, which include the 8 most violent in the country. Of all 25 municipalities, there is none outside the Amazon region. This impresses and places this region in prominence, making us wonder the reasons for this negative phenomenon. The death rate per 100,000 inhabitants was included to give the proportional notion of victims and to regulate the population size of each municipality.

III. Democracy and the Role in Reducing Agrarian Violence

There were many more fatal victims in the post-1985 democratic period than during the military regime (1964-1984), according to the data analyzed (LANDLESS WORKERS MOVEMENT 1986; CPT 1985-2015), and this goes against the logic of at least what it should be. The Democratic Peace Theory (RUSSETT et al., 1995) shows that democratic countries do not wage war against other democratic countries. But, they decide their differences based on dialogue and negotiation. The same is not true of countries that do not have a democratic regime. We could infer that the same should occur within countries with a democratic regime, with an emphasis on negotiation and internal dialogue, interest groups and the State and government. Thus, we would not have this violence that actually occurs in the countryside. However, the numbers show opposite tendency and how to explain such phenomenon?

However, if we use the quantitative literature of civil wars, we will see that rigid autocracies and consolidated democracies are not as vulnerable to the onset of civil war as hybrid regimes (known as *anocratic* in this literature), indicating a mixture of democratic and autocratic regimes which are located in the midst of a gradation of democracy (HEGRE *et alli* 2001; ZIMERMAN 2005), as some instruments that measure the democratic level do (eg, *Polity*). Clearly there is no civil war or danger of impending civil war in Brazil. But our democracy is not so consolidated and therefore, there is freedom of speech alongside repression against protests. Such contrasts can lead to escalating violence.

IV. Final Considerations

The Amazon region presents alarming data on agrarian violence due to land disputes and the difference between this part of the country and the rest in this area is very high and worrisome.

[5] The estimate is for the total population in 2015 and not rural population as we do not have this data, which would greatly increase the index in question.

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Clearly there is a behavioral pattern in this region that is peculiar in the production of violence resulting in land disputes:

1. Greater concentration of agribusiness, financial investors, and unproductive latifundia;
2. Production of raw materials for energy, such as sugar cane, and biodiesel material;
3. Severe deforestation, with livestock raising and burning, deteriorating the regional environment, besides projects to create hydroelectric plants with irreparable environmental damage;
4. Exploration of ores and large companies involved in this productive sector (Vale);
5. Acquisition of land by foreigners and directed to food sovereignty and production of energy (ZIMERMAN 2014);
6. Low population density and natural wealth, which makes it possible to distance authorities and impose force (almost) without resistance;
7. Social movements that organize groups to resist through varied strategies, increasing the level of conflict between opposing groups.

The State is the only entity that could avoid something worse and try to reduce violence between opposing parties. However, even in interviews conducted in the region, many inquired that the state is not present to avoid confrontation and impose negotiation and agreement with rival parties. Thus, there is the tacit green light that if the state is not present to impose order and propose alternatives (either through agrarian reform, reparation, legal enforcement, among others), each side will seek to strengthen and enforce its own rules. Thus, many more people should die by land conflicts and the violence will not end.

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