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Brazil

An Indigenous Reconstruction in Brazil

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An interview with Sã'nia Guajajara, an indigenous woman running for Brazil's presidency. Interview by Sabrina Fernandes for Jacobin.

518 years ago, the territory now known as Brazil was invaded by a Portuguese fleet and colonized. Many of the indigenous peoples who inhabited the land died from diseases, were killed, or enslaved. The indigenous population was reduced to less than a million, and their land was taken away and exploited. These land seizures didn't just effect insurmountable damage to the native ecosystem; they also, by concentrating property in the hands of a very few, wrote inequality into the foundations of modern Brazil.

This is why, more than five centuries later, Sã'nia Guajajara, a Guajajara indigenous woman from northeast Brazil's Arariboia region, says her pre-candidacy for the presidency in this year's elections represents a paradigm shift. Brazil's indigenous population may number less than a million in a population of over two hundred million, but their political struggle has reached a strength and visibility in recent years that makes it hard to deny their importance in struggles over class, imperialism, and financial capital. Their struggle is an urgent one; in 2016 alone, 118 indigenous people were murdered. These assassinations tend to be connected to the continued attempts by agribusiness to push onto indigenous land, though they are also rooted in racism.

Guajajara, who has been a member of the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL) since 2011, will formally run as PSOL's vice-presidential candidate alongside Guilherme Boulos of the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST). However, the party and the campaign have pushed for a "co-candidacy" arrangement in place of the traditional presidential/vice-presidential ticket. In this way, they're hoping to dispute the hierarchy of the traditional ticket and promote an equal, three-way alliance between the PSOL, indigenous peoples, and the MTST.

A specialist in linguistics, a mother of three, and the best-known indigenous leader at home and abroad, she forms part of the coordination of Brazil's most notable indigenous organization, the National Articulation of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB).

Both Guajajara and Boulos present a leftist political project that is distinct from the one carried out by Workers' Party (PT) presidents Lula and Dilma Rousseff; in fact, they formed the leftist opposition during the PT governments. Nevertheless, in today's climate, they have stood in solidarity against the political-judicial persecution of Lula and the increasingly violent expressions of "(anti-petismo)" (anti-PT sentiment) in Brazil.

In this exclusive interview with Jacobin, Guajajara speaks about the current state of indigenous struggles in Brazil, the state of environmental politics, the relationship between indigenous organizing and the Left, and the meaning of her presidential candidacy with PSOL.

SF: Today, a central part of the indigenous struggle in Brazil is about land rights. But you often place this struggle in the context of the fight against racism, and as part of a centuries-old struggle for indigenous people's right to exist. Can you speak more about that?

SG :Yes, we're also fighting racism, especially institutional racism. In recent years, it's proliferated, and become more visible. For us, if we overcome these [barriers] we can finally enter other spaces too. If we have our lands, we'll have a fulfilled life, because it's through the land that you can exercise your citizenship as an indigenous people. To be able to live together with our people and with nature itself guarantees our culture, our traditions, our rituals.

[Today's] violence has arisen from the conflicts over land. The agribusiness sectors, animal farming, land and housing speculation; they want to access indigenous territories, leading to a lot of conflict and murders. And there's the racism, which is connected to the speeches made by public personalities, by conservative congressmen, by fascists. They've been saying [racist] things a lot, helping society feel backed up to be publicly aggressive towards others. This has intensified.

SF: So you'd say that the racist discourse employed by public personalities and congressmen has worsened in the recent period?

SG : It has worsened a lot. We've always felt a certain degree of indifference among Brazilians towards indigenous people. But it was a matter of ignoring us. It's a minority of society that knows about the existence of indigenous people in our country. They know that originally [during colonization] there were indigenous people in Brazil, but they don't know about our contemporary existence.

In the last few years, indifference and ignorance has decreased. But they also began to attack us. Today there are attacks through social media, but also violent attacks leading to deaths. Last year there were a lot of deaths. In the south, Victor Kaingang was decapitated in his mother's arms. This year there was a Xoclog teacher in Santa Catarina. There was a Guarani in Rio de Janeiro, a Tapirapé in Mato Grosso, and a Tremembé in Fortaleza. These four murders happened all in the first month of the year. This racism has become very evident, in a very brutal way. It's not just talk anymore, they're killing us.

SF: Would you say that these racist agitators are confronted more often by indigenous communities now? Are indigenous communities more organized now, more capable of voicing themselves against the structure of white supremacy in Brazil?

SG :We've always been around and doing our struggle, resisting to protect our territories. Our struggle against mega-projects and the current economic development model. For 518 years we've gone about our struggle to survive. The struggle to exist is something we have to undertake every day, day by day. But now we are mobilizing in a more systematic way. We've increased our mobilizations in Brasília and connected them to other regional struggles. If we go and have a big mobilization in Brasília, we'll do it at the same time in other states. If we call people to stop some anti-indigenous measure at the capital, we call and people come. APIB today has a good level of visibility, and it's very broad, beyond the national level.

We've managed to cross borders, denounce what's going on internationally too. We've been denouncing products produced in unsettled indigenous territories and conflict areas, and called for the international boycott of these products. We've been denouncing ecocide, like what happened at Rio Doce and is now happening at Bacarena, Belo Monte.

We continue to reference Belo Monte as an attack against indigenous peoples, because today we're already suffering its consequences. The consequences are real and we show them as negative examples of hydrodams. I think that this has impacted the legal structures and the agribusiness sectors that we're confronting.

Even if the public sees us as "just" the indigenous peoples, our struggle isn't small. We're really confronting the Brazilian state, its negligence, its denial of rights. To do this we have to confront the agribusiness owners, the business elite, the media itself, the traditional press. Social media has really helped us with this. Today we don't need traditional media as much to have the reach we do. All of this is going to reach the ears of the people. This growing visibility is definitely bothering those in power a bit more.

SF: Is there a difference between when indigenous issues were translated through a white lens, as with the traditional media, and now, when it can be your voice directly?

SG: It makes a difference. In the traditional press we say things, and they cut and edit to take away what's not in their interest or what could hurt their allies. Sometimes what we say gets taken out of context and obtains a different meaning. Sometimes what we say in the traditional media ends up interpreted against ourselves. It's very dangerous depending on who interviews you.

SF: How have you and APIB been received internationally? How do they react to the stories you tell? Are the reactions different from the ones you get when trying to be heard in Brazil?

SG: Here our ability to denounce things and to speak out is still very restricted. But today we're getting more visibility. Some of it is negative visibility, related to discrimination and hatred. But among social movements, the understanding of the importance of indigenous struggles "how they impact us, the environment, and life in general" is growing.

But it's still difficult to get people to understand the meaning of being indigenous. Most people can't translate it, they look at us as the "other." People make some room for the "Indian" to speak, but most of the time we're just invited to sing and dance; as exotic beings to embellish the place. So we feel that even as social movements try to include us, they still end up expressing a certain kind of prejudice.

SF: Did the Left forget about the indigenous people for some time?

SG: It did, it totally did. It isolated us. They'd call us to go to certain places, it looked good, we took pictures, they could say they were supporting us. But it was very isolated in general. I think that one way we found to break through this was to get closer, as APIB, to artists and celebrities. They have a different audience, sometimes shared with our own, but it's way broader. The singers, actresses, they'd come closer and understand our cause; the importance of the territories, of the forest, ecosystems like the Cerrado. How protecting these territories would also protect the water. The discussion worldwide about climate change is also important because it relates to things that us as indigenous peoples have been saying all along.

SF: So people who wouldn't usually listen to indigenous peoples suddenly become interested when it's coming from a celebrity's mouth?

SG: People don't want to listen to us. They don't want to understand. When we get an artist to say it, then they go "Wow, that guy said this. He supported it!" It's almost as if we get credibility through it.

SF: This reminds me of the response to the mobilizations against the Belo Monte dam. That dam was a longtime project that went through different phases and under different names, depending on the government behind it. And through all those phases, the indigenous resistance was always there. But the visibility of the resistance depended on others embracing it, no?

SG: Yes, [the Belo Monte project] used to be called Karara'á. And it's curious that people only remember the Belo Monte struggle, because there were many other struggles, that were just as important, that didn't reach the same level of visibility. The biggest struggles "those that reached a high level of visibility and achieved international support" were Belo Monte and Raposa Serra do Sol [an indigenous reservation that landowners tried to reclaim]. Raposa Serra do Sol we won; we got our land settlement. Belo Monte we lost, and now we have Belo

Monte stuck in our throats.

In 1989, under a right-wing "Euros" I'd say far-right "Euros" government, we stopped the Belo Monte dam project. This time was under a leftist government [that of the Workers' Party (PT)] but we couldn't stop the project. It went through anyway and we had to swallow it. It's really complicated when you see so many political contradictions. [With these contradictions] we can't really tell which noise we have to make to be effective.

SF: What was the logic behind the PT pushing through with a project like this?

SG: In the beginning we had a guarantee by the government that they wouldn't just go ahead with Belo Monte. They were going to consult us. But later [the attitude was] it happens, or it happens. There wasn't another option. It was a project seen as very important for the country, for the nation, and they couldn't go back on it. It was, in a way, "Well, you don't matter. Whatever the consequences, we'll go through with it." It was very, very bad what happened in the end with the construction of the Belo Monte dam.

SF: On the one hand, there's the developmentalist view that pushes projects like the Belo Monte dam and views indigenous people as standing in the way of progress. On the other, there are environmentalists that value indigenous people for your role in conservation "Euros" but their support stops there. How do you relate to these environmentalist groups?

SG: There are a lot of environmental institutes that say they support us, that they're with us, but they only really care about preserving a piece of forest so it remains intact. They stand up for the environment but sometimes don't care about who's in there; the people, their social rights. It's like only the environmental agenda matters.

In recent years this has improved, and they're finally understanding that to move forward with the environmental struggle, you can't be disconnected from the indigenous struggle. You have to fight for indigenous rights, and if you fight for indigenous rights, one of the results, because of our way of life, will be environmental preservation.

[The improved relationship with environmental groups] has given us a jump in visibility. So much that last year, through APIB, I was at Rock in Rio to send a message to the whole world about the rights violations in the Amazon. I also denounced the alliance between economic power and political power in Brazil, and called for land settlements.

This also means that in the capital, the annoyance with us has grown. The landowning representatives in Congress, the agribusiness, they're more worried. They realized that we gained some strength due to this web of support with the environmentalists and the artists. So they began to attack us more and incite more violence against us.

SF: Given this, is the Left itself becoming more aware? Is it waking up to the indigenous demands? Because on the other side, we can see that the Right is also trying to get some indigenous peoples on their side.

SG: Right-wing politicians pretend they're good guys, they get close, and they co-opt leadership by promising that they'll solve some of our crucial problems. They try to buy [indigenous] leadership out with small things or even by outright fooling them. Then they go and publicize that they have indigenous support for their own agenda. This is bad because it misleads the public about the positions defended by the indigenous peoples. The indigenous movement is invested in preventing this kind of co-optation, but we can't fix it everywhere because everyone is in need right now. We need social policies and support, so people are ready to believe the politicians that offer them that.

On the other hand, the Left is now realizing it needs to value us more. We have a new way of participating in the

political parties now, that goes beyond us just being members.

SF: Is the Left finally seeing you as not just indigenous leadership but as political leadership in general?

SG: Yes. It's important for us to be there not just for the photo ops; but also to overcome our underrepresentation in political and institutional spaces. It's a beginning. We're trying to put forward more indigenous candidates and get the parties to support them. It's complicated because the parties have difficulty with welcoming new leadership âEuros"whether they're indigenous or not. But it's harder when they're indigenous. There's an opening now, though.

SF: You're currently a pre-candidate for the presidency Brazil through PSOL, together with Guilherme Boulos in a co-candidacy arrangement. Does this signal a realization within PSOL that to go forward with the anticapitalist struggle, you have to bring in different types of knowledge from different social movements?

SG: Yes, and the recent discussion around global warming has favored this exchange. The whole world is seeking solutions, and in this context, there's no way of denying indigenous peoples. If you compare our way of life to any other, ours is the way that preserves the most, that takes care of nature the most. It's the way that avoids emissions. So there's no way you can ignore ancient knowledge and the traditional, indigenous way of living.

This helped to push people, and the party itself, to understand that as indigenous people we're not just fighting for ourselves, but can contribute a lot. The Paris Accord helped to promote [this idea], that we need to value scientific knowledge but also include traditional knowledges by first nations and indigenous peoples. Still, we have to fight to define how this recognition should happen in practice. We don't want that acknowledgement to mean commodification of the places we live in and defend.

SF: One of the themes of your campaign is "Brazil, 518 years later," referencing the start of colonization and the long history of indigenous struggle. Is this a way of reclaiming history from a dominant narrative?

SG: In Brazil, they've erased this genocide from the country's history. They talk about the "discovery" of Brazil by [Portuguese explorer] Pedro Álvares Cabral and then skip to us fighting for our land settlements today. The five hundred years in between is absolutely annulled. The history books still treat us like the ancient indigenous peoples that Cabral encountered, who were exotic and walked around naked and wore feathers everywhere. They don't really talk about the struggles and the resistance.

And then people, based on this, turn to us and ask "Are you a real Indian?" âEuros" I hear that every day. What do you mean by real? I'm real, I'm here. But people express ignorance about what it is to be indigenous. They think that if you're in the city, you speak Portuguese, and you use [modern products], then all of sudden you can't be indigenous anymore. Either you're stuck in the forest, never leaving, or you're not an Indian anymore.

The rest of our history âEuros" the killing, the genocide, the sexual violence against indigenous women âEuros" people just don't think about it. Sometimes you even hear people say proudly that they descend from indigenous peoples because their grandmother was "captured with a lasso." They don't connect this with the violence their grandmother and their great-grandmother suffered. And it's the same thing for black people in Brazil. That's why one of our goals is to fight for visibility, so that they know what really happened and that our existence today is the result of a lot of resistance. So to say "518 years later" is powerful because it carries a lot of history, a history that isn't really told.

SF: Do you think being a pre-candidate to the presidency of Brazil, as an indigenous leader, will make people

take notice of how your politics is important for changing society?

SG: I think so. Even those who didn't recognize us before have to really see us now. They have to understand that we're fighting for the highest institutional position of power. This is big. We're there not just to represent the indigenous and environmental struggles, but also the reconstruction of society that the world needs.

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