

## Why so long?

Categories : [Reportagens](#)

### Em português

Leia matéria [Saída calculada](#) sobre a demissão de Marina Silva.

The sudden resignation of Brazil's environment minister Marina Silva this week left the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva badly wrong-footed. Lula himself faced the embarrassment of having to respond to the announcement during a press conference with the visiting German chancellor Angela Merkel, and the process of naming a successor was messy and confused, with the result that the new environment minister Carlos Minc appeared to be the president's second choice.

The prominent coverage given to the resignation, not just in Brazil but around the world, is testament to the influence and respect Marina Silva has earned during her period in office. Yet in a sense, the real surprise was not that she left the government, but that she remained inside it for so long.

At one level, Silva has been at the core of Lula's administration. Their political association goes back more than thirty years, and when the new president took office in 2003, hers was one of the first ministerial appointments to be announced. It was a highly symbolic choice -- the charismatic leader of the rubber-tappers association from the remote Amazonian state of Acre, and former close associate of the assassinated activist and environmental martyr Chico Mendes. For the green movement, it seemed a dream come true. A child of the struggle against destruction of the rainforest was now in charge of government policies to protect it.

What was more, Marina Silva took with her into the environment ministry (Ministério do Meio Ambiente, or MMA) a group of advisers drawn from green NGOs, including a former director of Greenpeace in Brazil. On the sidelines for so long, Brazilian environmentalists now even seemed to have their own headquarters in the heart of power, one of the brutalist 1960s blocks that house the ministries marching up Brasilia's esplanade towards the presidential palace, the Planalto.

It did not take long, however, for tensions to emerge between Silva and other members of the Lula administration. Despite his obvious affection and respect for Silva and the struggle she represents, Lula is anything but green. The former metalworkers' union leader takes what might be termed an old-Left view of development -- progress for him and the majority of his colleagues is grounded in industry, jobs and infrastructure. If trees and rivers get in the way of roads and dams, the "tree-huggers" are cast as the enemies of development.

So Marina Silva's MMA has been in a constant series of battles with other, more powerful

ministries such as Mines and Energy, and Agriculture. From the start, the ambitious multi-ministerial plan to combat deforestation in the Amazon has been caught in the contradiction of government incentives for an expanding export-based agricultural commodities sector, and a programme of roadbuilding and new hydro-electric dams in the region.

At times, Silva has had to ride out public and somewhat humiliating defeats, for example in the government decision to accept the legalization of commercial growing of genetically-modified crops. This was one of several points at which she was widely expected to resign – but she took the view that it was better to fight battles inside government so long as she could still have a significant influence.

### **“Programme of Accelerated Growth”**

Equally, Marina Silva was frequently among the names listed by the media as likely casualties of government reshuffles, most notably when Lula began his second four-year term at the beginning of 2007. The complaints against her ministry were growing louder from industrial lobbies that saw the environmental licensing system as a major constraint holding back big developments – a serious charge from the point of view of a president grounding his second mandate on a “Programme of Accelerated Growth” in which environmental concerns are often portrayed as an inconvenient handicap.

Yet Lula kept his environment minister on, probably because in the end it was better for him to have her there than outside the government, despite the complaints. It brings to mind the words of the late US President Lyndon Johnson with regard to the FBI chief J Edgar Hoover – “I’d rather have him inside the tent spitting out than outside the tent spitting in.” Actually he did not use the word “spitting”.

So long as Marina Silva was inside the government tent, criticism of the Lula administration’s environmental policy was always going to be muted, because green groups felt they had a powerful ally with unquestioned integrity doing her best to fight their battles from within. Lula knew this, and even if her presence could be inconvenient at times, it was a price well worth paying if she could deflect the full force of that criticism, especially on the international scene where she commanded such obvious respect.

In recent months, however, Silva’s position looked increasingly uncomfortable as Lula seemed at times to be undermining her position in public. This was clearly the case following the publication in January of the alarming satellite data indicating a sharp upturn in Amazon deforestation in the final months of 2007. While Marina Silva headed the press conference announcing the figures and blamed the expansion of cattle and soya production, Lula appeared to side with his political ally Blairo Maggi, governor of the state of Mato Grosso and big-time soya producer. Maggi accused the government space research institute INPE of lying about the data – and while Lula did not go that far, he did attack critics for jumping to conclusions about the figures, and called on NGOs to “go

back and plant trees in their own countries.”

### **Action against deforestation**

Even though the government has announced significant action this year to act against deforestation, Marina Silva has seemed increasingly marginalized. This was painfully the case last week when she was passed over for overall control of the government’s Sustainable Amazon Programme – with the coordination instead being given to the minister of strategic affairs Mangabeira Unger. Significantly, this programme puts the fight against illegal deforestation and protection of biodiversity behind guaranteeing national sovereignty and territorial integrity in its list of priorities.

With her departure, Marina Silva could make president Lula’s life very difficult, if she so chose. With a platform in the Senate, and a formidable reputation both inside Brazil and abroad, any direct criticisms she makes will be widely heard and respected. And from now on, the environmental movement will not pull any punches.

In fact, her first public statements following her resignation were measured and fell short of open criticism, speaking only of a sense of “stagnation” in her ability to influence things, and wishing well to her successor. But in a sense, she did not need to attack government policy, since the very act of her resignation had been so widely interpreted as a blow to the credibility of Lula’s environmental policies.

The new minister Carlos Minc, until now environment secretary for the state of Rio de Janeiro, has fine credentials as far as the green movement is concerned – he was, for example, among the founders of the Green Party in Brazil. However, he suffers from one major disadvantage. He is not, and never will be, Marina Silva.

*\* Tim Hirsch is former BBC environmental correspondent and lives in Brazil. Read also his blog – The life at Atlantic Forest.*