

# The indigenous Brazilian congresswoman who is standing up to Bolsonaro



Right: Jaénia Wapichana plans to speak up for the country's 500,000 indigenous people

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This indigenous lawyer has made history as the first native woman ever to be elected to Brazil's congress. She faces a host of obstacles – but is used to overcoming challenges

Words by Rita Lobo

Jaénia Wapichana was the first person in her family to go to university, the first to study law and the first to qualify as a barrister. Now she has become Brazil's first indigenous congresswoman.

Born in Koratana – Brazil's northernmost state, deep in the Amazon rainforest – to the Wapichana tribe from which she gets her name, she attended a small public school in the reservation where her family lived. After graduating from high school, she worked as an office manager by day, while studying law by night. By 1997, at the age of just 23, Wapichana had qualified as the first female indigenous lawyer in Brazil.

Her credentials sit in stark contrast to those of Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's new president. He is a figurehead for the far right and is known for treating women, minorities and indigenous groups particularly poorly.

Since qualifying as a lawyer, Wapichana has made a name for herself internationally as a human rights lawyer and conservationist. In 2018, she won the UN Human Rights Prize for her work to end violence against indigenous peoples in northern Brazil. For decades, they have been persecuted for not giving up their ancestral lands to powerful agribusiness companies.

"I see myself as a pioneer," she says, speaking to *Positive News* from her home in Boa Vista, the capital of Roraima. "I was the first female indigenous lawyer in Brazil, the first to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court and the first to receive this award from the UN. I'm opening these doors so that other women, other people of colour, can follow me. This is my responsibility."

The UN Prize came just as Wapichana was wrapping up her successful campaign for public office. Out of the 131 native candidates running in governor, senator and congress races, Wapichana was the only one to win nationwide.

She is the first indigenous woman, and the second native person ever, to hold a seat in Brazil's chamber of deputies – congress's lower house.

"I am the first, but I do not intend to be the only one of the last," says Wapichana. "We are working to get more indigenous representatives at the municipal, state and federal levels, and this should already be happening."

Just as Wapichana won her seat, Bolsonaro was campaigning on a conservative, pro-agribusiness platform. Described by some as the 'Trump of the tropics', Bolsonaro repeatedly promised to roll back environmental protections, in order to boost mining and farming businesses.

Though Brazil will remain in the Paris agreement on climate change, Bolsonaro signed an executive order removing land demarcation responsibilities from the National Indian Foundation, the Brazilian government body that establishes and carries out policies relating to indigenous peoples. Instead, he placed it with the Ministry for Farming, which is tasked with promoting agribusiness and is under the firm grip of lobbyists.

According to Wapichana, this is a shocking attack on indigenous rights, as native reservation lands are protected in the Brazilian constitution. "When we defend indigenous land rights, we are not only protecting the Indians. That land is a resource for conservation that benefits non-indigenous people, too."

"Reservations are public lands. We discuss mining in Indian lands as the only possible way to save the country's economy, and that is simply not true. Together we must find more sustainable options," she says.

Wapichana considers land demarcation rights as human rights, and leads the charge to halt what she sees as a presidential assault on her people and their land. She refuses to stay silent about the fact, for example, that 118 indigenous people were murdered in Brazil in conflicts over land in 2016.

"Have the experience. I know the history of my people, I know their struggles and I know their leaders and activists – this is what I am bringing into government!"

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