THE TRAJECTORY OF BRAZIL'S FOREIGN POLICY AND DIPLOMACY IN THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT (2015-2024)

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Abstract

This article examines how Brazil's foreign policy has addressed—or failed to address—the commitments made during the United Nations' First International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024). The objective is to examine Brazil's institutional and diplomatic stance during this period, with a focus on its participation in regional and multilateral events, as well as the policies and initiatives it supported or led to promote racial equality and the human rights of people of African descent. The article argues that the First International Decade for People of African Descent offered a strategic platform to advance racial justice and to reaffirm the contributions of the Durban Conference held in 2001. However, Brazil did not fully capitalize on this platform, largely due to shifts in foreign policy orientation resulting from a turbulent political context. As a result, the racial equality agenda was only resumed during Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's third term in office. From a methodological standpoint, the study adopts race as an analytical lens, using a cross-cutting approach to trace and interpret a range of interconnected phenomena. The study concludes that under the Lula administration, Brazil's foreign policy and diplomacy made

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significant progress in adopting affirmative positions, as the country began to reconstruct its international image as a committed advocate for racial equality. The study also highlights that the launch of the Second International Decade for People of African Descent (2025–2034) presents an opportunity for Brazil's foreign policy to adopt robust and consistent measures to combat racial hierarchies at a structural level.

Keywords: Brazil's foreign policy. First International Decade for People of African Descent. Racial equality. Racial hierarchies.

A TRAJETÓRIA DA POLÍTICA EXTERNA E DIPLOMACIA DO BRASIL NA PRIMEIRA DÉCADA INTERNACIONAL DE AFRODESCENDENTES (2015-2024)

Resumo

Este artigo problematiza como a política externa brasileira respondeu ou não aos compromissos assumidos na Primeira Década Internacional de Afrodescendentes (2015-2024) promulgada pelas Nações Unidas. O objetivo é compreender a postura institucional e diplomática do país durante esse período, com atenção especial a sua participação em eventos regionais e multilaterais, além de políticas e iniciativas apoiadas e/ou lideradas pelo Brasil para a promoção da igualdade racial e dos direitos humanos das pessoas afrodescendentes. Argumenta-se que a Primeira Década Internacional de Afrodescendentes proporcionou uma plataforma estratégica para potencializar a justiça racial e resgatar as contribuições da Conferência de Durban (2001). Contudo, essa plataforma não foi totalmente aproveitada pelo Brasil devido a flutuações diplomáticas resultantes de tensões políticas conturbadas, de modo que a agenda de igualdade racial apenas foi retomada com o terceiro governo de Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Metodologicamente, o estudo adotou o elemento raça como uma lente analítica para orientar a interpretação, para empregar uma abordagem transversal para rastrear um conjunto de fenômenos. Concluiu-se que a política externa e a diplomacia do Brasil, sob o governo Lula, avançaram significativamente em posturas afirmativas, ao passo que o país caminhou para (re)construir a imagem internacional de ator que abraça a pauta da promoção da igualdade racial. Ainda, destacou-se que o lançamento da Segunda Década Internacional de Afrodescendentes (2025-2034) representa oportunidades para a política externa brasileira adotar medidas robustas e consistentes para combater as hierarquias raciais em nível estrutural.

Palavras-chave: Política Externa Brasileira. Primeira Década Internacional de Afrodescendentes. Igualdade racial. Hierarquias raciais.

LA TRAYECTORIA DE LA POLÍTICA EXTERIOR Y LA DIPLOMACIA DE BRASIL EN EL PRIMER DECENIO INTERNACIONAL DE LOS AFRODESCENDIENTES (2015-2024)

Resumen

Este artículo examina cómo la política exterior brasileña ha respondido o no a los compromisos asumidos durante la Primera Década Internacional para los Afrodescendientes (2015-2024) proclamada por las Naciones Unidas. El objetivo es comprender la postura institucional y diplomática del país durante este período, con especial atención a su participación en eventos regionales y multilaterales, así como a las políticas e iniciativas apoyadas o lideradas por Brasil para la promoción de la igualdad racial y los derechos humanos de las personas de ascendencia africana. Se argumenta que la Década Internacional para los Afrodescendientes proporcionó una plataforma estratégica para mejorar la justicia racial y revivir las contribuciones de la Conferencia de Durban (2001). Sin embargo, esta plataforma no fue completamente aprovechada por Brasil debido a las fluctuaciones diplomáticas resultantes de tensiones políticas problemáticas, por lo que la agenda de igualdad racial solo se reanudó con el tercer gobierno de Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Metodológicamente, el estudio adoptó el elemento de la raza como una lente analítica para guiar la interpretación, empleando un enfoque transversal para rastrear un conjunto de fenómenos. Se llegó a la conclusión de que la política exterior y la diplomacia de Brasil, bajo el gobierno de Lula, han progresado mucho, ya que el país ha trabajado en (re)construir su imagen internacional como un actor que apoya la igualdad racial. Además, se destacó que el lanzamiento del Segundo Decenio Internacional de los Afrodescendientes (2025-2034) representa oportunidades para que la política exterior brasileña adopte medidas robustas y coherentes para combatir las jerarquías raciales a nivel estructural.

Palabras clave: Política exterior brasileña. Primera Década Internacional de los Afrodescendientes. Igualdad racial. Jerarquías raciales.

Introduction

Approximately 210 million people of African descent—also referred to as Afro-descendants—live in the Americas, accounting for about 20% of the region's population (PAHO 2024). As a result of the exploitation of African bodies during slavery and Afro-Atlantic colonialism, along with the enduring impacts of racism and racial discrimination, Afro-descendant populations remain among the most marginalized groups in Brazil and elsewhere in the world. This has had negative impacts across multiple areas of their lives, including education, health, employment, and beyond. In this context, global debates on equity and racial justice, as well as efforts to promote the human rights of Afro-descendant populations, have gained prominence in recent decades. Notable examples include the 2001 Durban Declaration and Programme of Action; the United Nations General Assembly's proclamation of the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024); the 2021 report by UN High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet, which officially recognized the existence of systemic racism; and the African Union's designation of "Justice for Africans and Afro-descendants through Reparations" as the theme for 2025.

On December 17, 2024, the United Nations, through Resolution A/79/L.25, proclaimed the Second International Decade for People of African Descent, covering the period from 2025 to 2034 (UNGA 2024). According to Volker Türk, the coordinator of the International Decade, the objective is to build on progress made over the past ten years in norms and policies and to develop and adopt a draft United Nations declaration guaranteeing the respect, protection, and fulfillment of the human rights of people of African descent (UNHRO 2024). Türk emphasized that this goal must be pursued through collective action to combat racial injustice, address colonial legacies, dismantle systemic racism, and implement reparative justice, as these issues remained unresolved during the First Decade (UNHRO 2024). The resolution for the Second Decade was proposed by Brazil, in partnership with Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Bolivia, Burundi, Colombia, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and the United States. This reflects Brazil's commitment to (re) constructing its image, (re)positioning its role, and reshaping its narrative, in contrast to centuries of racial erasure and exclusion.

Although Brazil welcomed the First International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024), proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on December 23, 2013, with Resolution 68/237, little is known

about how Brazil's foreign policy and diplomacy operated during this period. A search conducted in the CAPES journal database (Portal de Periódicos CAPES) on August 3, 2025, using the Boolean command "Brasil AND década AND afrodescendente" and filtering results from 2015 to 2024, retrieved a total of 16 articles. A thorough analysis to determine which of these articles focused specifically on the First Decade revealed that only two addressed the topic: "A população negra brasileira e a proteção deficiente de direitos fundamentais", by Jorge Luis Terra da Silva (2019); and "Ações afirmativas na Lei n. 12.888/2010 e na Década Internacional Afrodescendente", by Patrícia Gonçalves de Jesus *et al*. (2022). However, neither of these studies examines the topic within the context of Brazil's foreign policy.

Considering this gap, the article asks the following question: how did Brazil's foreign policy address—or fail to address—the commitments undertaken during the First International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024)? For the purposes of this article, foreign policy is understood as the set of actions, discourses, and decisions through which a country pursues its interests and objectives in the international system and in its relations with other actors, including states and international organizations (Barnabé 2010; Oliveira 2015). Diplomacy is considered a key instrument for implementing this policy.

The objective is therefore to examine Brazil's institutional and diplomatic stance during this period, focusing on its participation in regional and multilateral events and on the policies and initiatives it supported or led to promote racial equality and the human rights of people of African descent. Although General Assembly resolutions—such as the one establishing the International Decade for People of African Descent—are not legally binding, they carry important political and symbolic weight. Accordingly, countries are expected to develop national action plans, implement public policies, participate in international forums, submit voluntary reports, and cooperate with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

This article contributes to filling a gap in the literature on Brazil's foreign policy, which is marked by a lack of systematic analyses of the country's actions during the First Decade, as evidenced by the database search referenced above. In addition, given that Brazil is home to the largest Afro-descendant population outside Africa, it holds a unique position to develop and project a meaningful and representative diplomacy aimed at promoting racial equality globally. According to data released in 2022 by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 55.5% of Brazil's population identifies as Black, totaling approximately 112.7 million people (Belandi and Gomes

2023). It is important to note that in Brazil, individuals of African descent are socially identified as Black, a category that, according to the current IBGE classification, includes both Black and *pardo* individuals. This article also offers insights that may assist those involved in developing initiatives to strengthen the institutional foundations of Brazil's foreign policy in the current phase of the global agenda, marked by the launch of the Second Decade. Therefore, an examination of the concrete actions undertaken during the First Decade aligns with the current priorities of Brazilian diplomacy and reinforces its commitment to racial equity and the multilateral frameworks that support it.

The article's central argument is based on two key points. First, while Brazil's foreign policy has historically neglected or sidelined racial issues—often projecting a stereotyped "international racial image" (Nascimento 1978, 88), particularly before the 1988 Federal Constitution—the First International Decade for People of African Descent offered a strategic platform to advance racial justice and reaffirm the contributions of the 2001 Durban Conference. Second, this platform was not fully leveraged due to shifts in foreign policy orientation driven by a highly turbulent political context, resulting in the racial equality agenda only being resumed in Brazil's foreign policy and diplomacy during the third administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2023–present). From a methodological standpoint, the study adopts race as an analytical lens within a cross-cutting approach to guide interpretation. The aim, therefore, is to map and analyze a set of phenomena, without seeking to produce a totalizing or historicist account.

The article is divided into two main sections, in addition to the Introduction and Conclusion. The first section examines how slavery, racism, and colonization constitute foundational elements of international relations (Acharya 2022) and highlights that Brazil's foreign policy has been shaped by racial dynamics from its origins, even though this aspect has historically been overlooked in academic studies. This discussion provides the historical and political foundations necessary to understand the contemporary challenges of integrating the racial equality agenda into Brazil's foreign policy. The second section analyzes Brazil's involvement in the First International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024), aiming to identify key initiatives, discourses, events, and institutional positions related to the recognition and promotion of racial equity.

Brazilian-Style International Relations: The Silenced Racial Contours of Foreign Policy

Race is a global construct of social classification based on perceived biological traits, such as skin color and hair texture, as well as ethno-cultural characteristics, including religion, language, and geographic origin (Thompson 2017). However, these differences are neither predetermined nor self-evident; rather, they have been constructed and reinforced through language in a "play of similarity and difference" (Hall 2017, 47). As Europe expanded beyond the Atlantic during the colonial period, it interpreted and represented the world through its own frames of reference. With the consolidation of the slave regime, the noun "Black" came to be used more intensively to designate the "Other" (Mbembe 2014) within a system of differences, together with acts of subduing, marking, and silencing the body, so as not to give voice to the cruelty of the European colonizer. Language therefore functioned as a mechanism of knowledge production rooted in the hierarchization of differences, through which the dominant culture racialized bodies, knowledge, and experiences as "inferior."

This process of constructing the meaning of race is known as racialization, which operates by (re)producing meanings around two central positions: those who are subjected to racialization as a means of subjugation and objectification, and those who avoid responsibility for it to benefit from privilege (Nascimento 2019). Therefore, racialization is not only a discursive process but also a social and political one. This is because African people and their descendants have historically been subjected to "ongoing processes of deterritorialization, spoliation, dispossession, expropriation, discontinuity, vilification, and extermination" (Pires 2021, 293, free translation), all of which have contributed to their marginalization and social exclusion.

The argument advanced here is that international relations are—and have always been—expressed through racial dynamics, which are, by nature, forms of power relations (Acharya 2022; Du Bois 1925). Major transnational movements of modernity, including the global slave trade, abolitionism, eugenics, the anti-apartheid movement, the rise of human rights, and twenty-first-century counterterrorism policies, are deeply intertwined with the issue of race (Thompson 2017). The very foundation of the modern world (dis) order is rooted in historical processes of slavery, racism, and colonization (Acharya 2022).

As Karine de Souza Silva argues, the Atlantic trade of enslaved African people was "the first international regime of Modernity" (Silva 2025, 39, free translation). Alongside the naming and objectification of the Black body as a marketable commodity, a set of transnational arrangements—international norms, public organizations, companies, and cooperation strategies (Silva 2025)—facilitated the extraction and production of commodities in the Americas to satisfy European demand for food and raw materials during industrialization (Gonçalves and Costa 2020). As a result, this regime produced enormous profits and solidified capitalism as the dominant racialized international system.

During colonization, Brazil played a role in this international dynamic. Starting in the seventeenth century, the city of Rio de Janeiro became the largest importer of African labor in the Americas (Honorato 2008). During the slave period, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, around 5 million enslaved Africans arrived in Brazil, according to data from *Slave Voyages* (n.d.). Brazil thus played a key role in connecting and sustaining "the trade routes that linked Europe, Africa, and the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Americas" (Gonçalves and Costa 2020, 38), helping to maintain the flow of goods essential to global accumulation. Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery, doing so in 1888. As a result of this long historical and political process, colonial influences shaped all areas of Brazilian society—including law, politics, and the economy—reinforcing the privileges of white people at the expense of Black and Indigenous populations. Racial logic therefore shaped the formation of Brazil as a nation (Maia and Zamora 2018), rooted in racism as a system of discrimination and invisibilization of Afro-descendant populations. This situation persists today because of low political representation and the lack of public policies for historically marginalized groups (Carneiro 2011).

In 2021, the United Nations acknowledged that racism is a systemic issue. According to report A/HRC/47/53 from 2021, systemic racism is a complex system of laws, policies, practices, and behaviors across the state, private sector, and social structures that discriminate against and exclude African people and their descendants, driven by stereotypes, prejudices, and biases rooted in the legacies of slavery, the Atlantic trade, and colonialism (UNGA 2021). Therefore, racism drives and structures power relations on a global scale (Grosfoguel 2019), and as a result, foreign policy can (re)produce processes of racialization as a country advances its interests on the international stage.

However, studies of international relations and foreign policy are marked by "a calculated forgetting, an obstruction of discourse, language

and speech" (Thompson 2017, 45), intended to conceal racial dynamics and sustain oppression, domination, and inequality. Silva (2021, 42) argues that hegemonic theories exhibit a "selective blindness," aiming to sustain the non-recognition of the "Other", who is portrayed as a "threat" to the rights of the group that presents itself as universal. In this context, it becomes clear that academic studies often select and prioritize certain events, while others, especially those that challenge dominant narratives, are excluded from official accounts.

A brief examination of the creation and history of Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reveals its elitist foundations. Currently known as Itamaraty, the ministry was one of the first bureaucratic institutions created after Brazil's independence in 1822. It became a central bureaucratic force, closely aligned with the interests of white elites connected to the monarchy and to rural and urban aristocracies. In its early years, from 1822 to 1934, the ministry was consolidated during Brazil's imperial period (1822–1889) and the First Republic (1889–1930) by informally recruiting white men from Rio de Janeiro's upper classes—the country's capital at the time—who were fluent in European languages and had access to exclusive political and military networks (Gobo and Santos 2022). The actions of the Baron of Rio Branco (1902–1912) reinforced this elitist model: his distinctive and charismatic approach to Brazilian diplomacy helped institutionalize bureaucratic insulation, distancing the ministry from other parts of the state and society and contributing to discriminatory selection practices that further deepened racial exclusion (Costa e Silva, 2005; Sodré 2023).

In the next phase, between 1934 and 1994, Brazil restructured its bureaucracy through a series of administrative reforms. The Administrative Department of the Public Service was created in 1936 to standardize civil service examinations, and in 1945, the Rio Branco Institute was established to professionalize the selection and training of diplomats as part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' recruitment process. However, according to Gobo and Santos (2022), this new recruitment and rationalization process did not lead to significant changes in the candidate profile, which continued to reflect a predominance of highly educated white men. Moreover, it was within the context of the military regime and its internal demands to "technicize and enhance the studies that would enable Brazil to achieve a better position in the international system" (Oliveira 2019, 382) that International Relations programs were established. According to Oliveira (2019), the first undergraduate program in International Relations was established in 1974 at the University of Brasília. The program was established there because of the university's

proximity to the decision-making core of national politics, where professors, predominantly white men, were involved not only in educating university students but also in training diplomats at the Rio Branco Institute, thereby reproducing the same profiles and institutional networks (Oliveira, 2019).

Brazil's foreign policy and diplomacy are therefore structured by power asymmetries that inform priorities, frames, and perceptions across both policy formulation and implementation, rooted in the links between slavery, racism, and colonization (Acharya 2022). For example, Brazil participated in the First Universal Races Congress, held in London in 1911, which brought together representatives from more than fifty countries to debate relations between Western and Eastern peoples, and between white people and people of color—as they were then referred to—to promote international understanding and cooperation on racial issues in the name of science. The Brazilian João Baptista de Lacerda—a physician and anthropologist who was then director of the National Museum—was appointed to represent the Brazilian delegation and present his thesis on whitening. According to him, promoting the immigration of white foreigners and sexual "selection" through marriages between Black and mixed-race individuals and white people would lead to the extinction of the Black element in Brazil within one hundred years (Souza and Santos 2012). Decades earlier, in 1850, during Brazil's imperial period, the Land Law was enacted, facilitating land acquisition by Europeans interested in settling in the country. The law aimed to encourage white immigration, while land ownership titles were denied to racialized groups (Hernández 2017). During the Estado Novo, Decree-Law No. 7,967/1945 regulated the entry of white immigrants to preserve and promote the development of the Brazilian population with European ancestry (Nascimento 1978).

Despite these efforts to whiten Brazilian society, foreign policy for a long period upheld the image of a mixed-race, harmonious Brazil, marked by equal opportunities for Black, white, and Indigenous people. This conception originates in the book *Casa-grande & Senzala* (1933) by sociologist Gilberto Freyre, which romanticized relations between masters and enslaved people and portrayed racial mixing as a cultural symbol of the country. Freyre's ideas shaped the imagination of Brazilian political and intellectual elites from the 1940s through the 1950s and into the 1970s, becoming consolidated as a national ideology known as racial democracy, grounded in the denial of racism in the country (Guimarães, 1999; 2004).

For example, in 1966, during the 21st United Nations General Assembly, the Brazilian delegate Juracy Magalhães announced that Brazil was the first country to sign the International Convention on the Elimination of All

Forms of Racial Discrimination and stated that the country was "a true racial democracy, where many races live and work together and freely intermingle, without fear or favor, without hatred or discrimination" (Magalhães 2007, 221, free translation). He even went so far as to claim that, for this reason, the Convention was unnecessary for Brazil. In 1985, during the 40th Ordinary Session of the United Nations General Assembly, President José Sarney stated that Brazil was home to "a unified people on a vast continent who have managed to build a racial democracy and a unity of culture that is the invincible force of their destiny" (Magalhães 2007, 445). He further stated that Brazil "is a great mixed-race country that takes pride in its identity. Many of the highest creative expressions of our culture have emerged from racial mixing, from the mutual fertilization of ethnicities" (Magalhães 2007, 448).

According to Brazilian diplomat Irene Vida Gala, the ideology of racial democracy was well received by Itamaraty, which, as a spokesperson for the white elite, sought to shape the international arena by celebrating the "African presence in the formation of national identity" (Gala 2019, 43, free translation) through racial mixing. However, racial mixing was a coercive form of social control—marked by practices such as the rape of enslaved women and the encouragement of European immigration—aimed at diluting the physical and cultural characteristics of the Black population through racial mixing/intermarriage among different ethno-racial groups (Nascimento 1978). Abdias Nascimento, in turn, criticized Brazil's foreign policy for portraying the country as the greatest example of racial democracy, arguing that the construction of an "international racial image" is a "symptom of moral insensitivity and contempt for the human rights of Afro-Brazilians" (Nascimento 1978, 88 – free translation). This is because such an image does not reflect the country's social reality; instead, it offends the Black community to facilitate the alignment of Brazil's commercial interests with African countries and preserve the privileges of the dominant white classes (Nascimento 1978).

Moreover, for a certain period, Brazil's foreign policy was concerned with pleasing and serving the colonial powers (Silva 2021). Throughout the 1950s, Brazil positioned itself against African countries' demands for independence to avoid conflict with the interests of Portugal and other European powers. The country abstained from United Nations votes on the issue and even supported the apartheid regime in South Africa (Dávila 2011; Nascimento 1978; 2019; Silva 2021). Following the 1964 civil-military coup, movements that supported African independence were persecuted and their members imprisoned by the Castelo Branco government; moreover, in 1975, the Ernesto Geisel administration did not sign the International Convention on

the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid. In this regard, Abdias Nascimento (1978) argued that projecting Brazil's international racial image, anchored in the myth of racial democracy, helped obscure the country's shameful positions. Therefore, Brazil's diplomacy and foreign policy have historically neglected or sidelined the racial question, remaining disconnected from the interests of the Black population.

Brazil and the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024): Tensions, Agendas, and Reconstruction

The process of redemocratization, along with the promulgation of the 1988 Federal Constitution, established new institutional guarantees that enabled Black actors to access and participate in state structures. The debate over representativeness, long raised by the Black movement, gained greater prominence in the 1990s and early 2000s. A crucial moment that catalyzed the coordination and demands of Black movements in Brazil was the Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, held from August 31 to September 8, 2001, in Durban, South Africa. The Brazilian delegation also included Black women in prominent roles, most notably Edna Roland, who served as the Conference's Rapporteur-General.

The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action recognized racism as a violation of human rights and a concrete social problem, affirming the need for public policies across multiple areas to address it. Among the state obligations set out in the Durban Declaration are drafting national action plans against racism (arts. 99–100), reviewing legislation and public policies that perpetuate racial inequalities (art. 106), adopting affirmative action measures (art. 107), reforming curricula and training of public officials (arts. 95–98), and strengthening monitoring and accountability mechanisms (arts. 167–168), among others.

However, at the global level, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks and the subsequent U.S.-led "war on terror", the commitments agreed upon at the Durban Conference were quickly sidelined, as international priorities shifted toward security and counterterrorism. In Brazil, by contrast, the Durban Conference was a landmark for the racial equality agenda, bringing a range of issues into national politics and influencing the formulation of actions and public policies. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in particular, significant changes were made to the recruitment process, including

the creation of the Vocation for Diplomacy Fellowship in 2002—a financial support initiative aimed at Black applicants to cover the costs of preparatory courses for the civil service examination—and the introduction of racial quotas in the Diplomatic Career Admission Examination in 2011. Notably, the ministry was the first federal body to adopt quota policies for Black applicants, reserving 10% of positions in the first stage of the examination even before Law No. 12,990/2014, which expanded the quota to 20% across all three stages of the selection process.

This section argues that the launch of the First International Decade offered Brazil a strategic platform to reposition itself in the international arena and strengthen its image as an actor committed to racial equality and to the promotion of the rights of people of African descent, thereby deepening the commitments undertaken at the Durban Conference (2001). However, as demonstrated below, this platform was not fully leveraged by Brazil due to shifts in foreign policy orientation driven by a deeply turbulent political context, and it was only taken up again during the third administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2023–present).

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the First International Decade for People of African Descent through Resolution 68/237, covering the period from 2015 to 2024. Under the theme "People of African Descent: Recognition, Justice and Development", the resolution set out the following objectives: 1. To promote the respect for, protection of, and fulfillment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of people of African descent; 2. To promote greater knowledge of and respect for the diverse heritage, culture, and contributions of people of African descent to the development of societies; and 3. To adopt and strengthen national, regional, and international legal frameworks in line with the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Brazil joined the International Decade and, on July 22, 2015, officially launched the initiative in partnership with the United Nations during the Afro-Latin American and Caribbean Women's Festival. On December 3 and 4 of the same year, Brasília hosted the Latin America and Caribbean Regional Meeting for the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024), attended by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein. Itamaraty played a central role in organizing and providing logistical support for the event; and by hosting an initiative of global scope at the regional level, Brazil reinforced its diplomatic role. This meeting was the first in a series of five regional events and sought

to bring together governments, human rights institutions, civil society, development agencies, and regional organizations to discuss the priorities of Afro-descendant populations, as well as the obstacles they face (MRE 2015).

However, following Dilma Rousseff's removal from the presidential office at the end of the impeachment process in 2016, the progressive agenda stalled, and policies addressing racial inequality saw little further advancement. With Jair Bolsonaro's rise to the presidency, the antiracist agenda and the promotion of the human rights of the Afro-descendant population came under direct threat, as several public policies were rolled back. These measures included discouraging the titling of *quilombola* lands; dismantling key institutions, such as the Articulation and Monitoring Committee of the National Plan for the Promotion of Racial Equality; politicizing the Palmares Foundation—a federal institution responsible for promoting Afro-Brazilian culture and heritage—to the detriment of the Black population; persecuting and attacking Black social movements; and denying the seriousness of racism in Brazil (INESC 2021).

Within Brazil's foreign policy, a discursive system of differences took shape, organizing the political field around a polarized logic of "friends" versus "enemies." This framework was strategically established to exclude the ethno-racial diversity of Brazilian society while simultaneously rendering persistent racial discrimination and social inequalities invisible. An example of this logic can be seen in the conference "The New Brazilian Foreign Policy", held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Paraguay on February 3, 2020, when Brazil's then foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo, stated that "there was an attempt to destroy the social fabric of Brazil, to destroy the family and national unity, by creating false conflicts, for example, around race or gender" (MRE 2020). By associating the term "race" with "false conflicts," this foreign policy discourse has denied the legitimacy of racial inequality as a political issue and framed the demands of the Black population as being contrary to the nation's own interests.

Later that year, on November 21, during a virtual meeting of the G20 Summit, former President Bolsonaro reinforced this narrative by stating: "Brazil has a diverse culture, unique among nations, we are a mixed-race people," and he added that "Whites, Blacks, and Indians built the body and spirit of a rich and wonderful people, and, within a single Brazilian family, we can observe a diversity greater than that of entire countries" (Bolsonaro 2020). Thus, miscegenation—as discussed in the previous section—became embedded in Brazil's international racial image through this foreign policy, now reframed as the notion of a "single Brazilian family," an image devoid of

any critical engagement with the violent historical processes of whitening imposed on the Brazilian population.

Moreover, according to Chade (2020a), Itamaraty was among the few delegations that sought to undermine efforts by the international community to pressure governments to confront racism. Following the murder of George Floyd Jr. on March 25, 2020, resulting from police brutality in the United States, African countries submitted a proposal to the United Nations Human Rights Council to establish a commission of inquiry to investigate racism within U.S. police forces. However, Itamaraty did not support the proposal, a position consistent with the close political alignment between Brasília and Washington (Chade 2020b). Later, more than one hundred Black movement organizations denounced to the Human Rights Council the government's failure to confront racism and Brazil's dismissive diplomatic stance toward the killing of young Black people in the country's urban peripheries (Chade 2020c). According to data from *Atlas da Violência*, in the first half of 2020 alone, more than 75% of those killed by police in Brazil were Black (Cerqueira e Bueno 2020). Thus, although Brazil's foreign policy addressed racial issues and racism, a racialized ideology was arguably present within Itamaraty under Ernesto Araújo, aimed at preserving the goals and interests of certain groups while simultaneously concealing the racial inequalities of Brazilian society.

With the victory of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in the 2022 presidential election, commitments to racial equality and popular participation were reinstated on the government agenda, prompting Brazil's foreign policy and diplomacy to incorporate significant initiatives. For example, on November 9, 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs held, for the first time in its history, a seminar dedicated to racial equality. Entitled "International Relations, Foreign Policy, and Racial Equality: Reflections in Honor of Mônica de Menezes Campos," the event was structured around three discussion panels and featured the participation of institutional representatives and Black intellectuals (FUNAG 2023). In the opening address, Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira emphasized the importance of Black memory, problematized Itamaraty's historical symbols, highlighted the role of the Ministry of Racial Equality in foreign policy, defended the incorporation of racial and gender equality perspectives across all areas of this policy, and announced the strengthening of Brazil's relations with the African diaspora (Vieira 2023). He also paid tribute to Mônica de Menezes Campos, the first Black woman to enter the diplomatic career through the entrance examination, in 1978. The event also announced the mentorship program bearing the diplomat's name, which provides free support to Black candidates preparing for the entrance examination (FUNAG 2023).

At the institutional level, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs created the Course on the Promotion of Diversity and Inclusion in 2023, which was incorporated into the Rio Branco Institute's curriculum to discuss race relations in Brazil (MRE 2024a). In the same year, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established its System for the Promotion of Diversity and Inclusion (Ministerial Directive No. 454/2023) and subsequently created the unprecedented Ethnic-Racial Committee (Ministerial Directive No. 781/2023), a permanent consultative and collaborative body linking the administration and interest groups (MRE 2023). On December 4, 2024, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with the Ministry of Racial Equality, launched the Action Plan for the Federal Affirmative Action Program. Itamaraty was the first ministry to launch its action plan, following the federal government's mandate requiring all federal public administration bodies to implement affirmative action programs (Decree No. 11.785/2023). Itamaraty's Action Plan comprises thirty-four initiatives, of which eighteen are managerial measures intended to expand diversity within the ministry, while sixteen focus on promoting priority groups—such as Black and Indigenous peoples—in foreign policy (MRE 2024b).

In multilateral forums, Brazil proposed the creation of a new United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) focused on ethnic and racial equality. On September 18, 2023, at the opening of the 78th United Nations General Assembly, President Lula announced that Brazil would voluntarily adopt an eighteenth goal in order to place the fight against racism at the center of the 2030 Agenda (G20 Brasil 2024 2023). Subsequently, the proposal was formally presented at a G20 Social Summit side event in November 2024, with institutional coordination by the Ministry of Racial Equality, the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, and other government bodies, as well as the active participation of civil society actors (MIR 2024b).

In 2024, Brazil's foreign policy focused primarily on its G20 presidency. Under the theme "Building a Just World and a Sustainable Planet," Brazil identified the fight against hunger, poverty, and inequality as one of its three main priorities, alongside sustainable development and the reform of global governance (G20 Brasil 2024 2023). Upon assuming the presidency, Brazil invited Angola, Egypt, and Nigeria to join South Africa and the African Union, ensuring the presence of five African members in the G20 (Cravo and Dantas 2023). In 2023, Brazil formally supported the African Union's admission as a permanent member of the forum; in February 2024, President Lula attended the opening of the 37th African Union Summit, where he emphasized the importance of unity among countries in reducing inequalities, and also paid official visits to Egypt and Ethiopia (Planalto 2024). Within the Finance Track,

the core pillar of the G20, the Brazilian presidency organized the ministerial meeting "Africa and the G20" and the side events "Africa-Led Debate on Debt and Development Financing" and "Africa-Led Debate on Infrastructure" to expand the participation of African delegations in shaping solutions to the challenges of the global financial architecture and to promote the exchange of experiences and knowledge (Planalto 2024; MF 2024a).

Also noteworthy is the Conference of the African Diaspora in the Americas, held in August 2024 in Salvador, Bahia. The event brought together government representatives, African and American leaders, members of international and regional organizations, as well as researchers and representatives of social movements, the cultural sector, and other stakeholders. Organized in partnership with the African Union, the government of Togo, the Brazilian government, and other entities, the Conference sought to strengthen Brazil's ties with African countries and Afro-diasporic communities in the Americas and to promote cooperation and dialogue at multiple levels. The Conference marked an important milestone in Brazil's foreign policy, as the African Union now recognizes the African Diaspora as the continent's sixth region. With broad participation from civil society across multiple countries, the Conference produced a charter of recommendations focused on Pan-Africanism, memory, reconstruction, and reparation and restitution, which was formally submitted to representatives of the African Union (MIR 2024).

Therefore, this article argues that, under Lula's third administration, Brazil's diplomacy and foreign policy sought to (re)build the country's international image and (re)position Brazil as an actor committed to the agenda on racial equality and to promoting the human rights of Afro-descendant populations by advancing initiatives and issues that had been stalled under the previous government. After all, the Lula administration's platform centered on renewing dialogue with society and strengthening mechanisms of social participation. This made state structures once again permeable to the participation of social movements and other civil society actors in defining and formulating policies related to the rights reaffirmed by the Durban Declaration. In contrast to the previous government and to the period before the 1988 Federal Constitution, Brazil's current foreign policy can thus be characterized as affirmative, as it seeks to ensure and defend racial equality. Indeed, during Lula's first two administrations (2003–2011), the Black movement played a direct role in shaping Brazil's Africa-oriented foreign policy (Gala 2019). The First International Decade provided a strategic platform through which Brazil not only strengthened its focus on the African

continent but also prioritized racial equality, both within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in its diplomatic positions and foreign policy initiatives.

However, while quota policies and affirmative action have increased the presence of Black individuals in the diplomatic career, underrepresentation persists, especially in the highest-ranking positions. According to the Ethnic-Racial Statistical Bulletin of Brazil's Foreign Service (MRE 2024c), among Ministers First Class—the highest rank in the Brazilian diplomatic career—91.2% are white, while only 5.1% are *pardo* and 1.5% are Black. In the category of Ministers Second Class—the rank immediately below Ministers First Class—white individuals account for 88.4%, while *pardo* individuals represent 6.9% and Black individuals 0.6%. With regard to heads of missions, white individuals account for 90.8% of the total, while *pardo* individuals represent 4.6% and Black individuals 1%.

Conclusion

This article examined how Brazil's foreign policy responded—or failed to respond—to the commitments undertaken during the First International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024). It addressed dimensions that have been little explored in studies of Brazil's foreign policy during the First International Decade for People of African Descent, particularly those related to racial equality and the promotion of the rights of people of African descent. Rather than treating race as a marginal or secondary issue, the analysis approached it as a structural and constitutive element that permeates global politics, the formation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the orientations of Brazil's foreign policy.

This article has made two main arguments. First, Brazil's foreign policy has long neglected or marginalized racial issues, reflecting the historical links between slavery, racism, and colonization that shaped both the formation of the Brazilian nation and international relations (Acharya 2022). However, traditional analyses of Brazil's foreign policy have often silenced or rendered invisible its racial contours and colonial legacies. This study sought to show that Brazil's diplomacy and foreign policy have always been intertwined with racial dynamics, as Itamaraty historically positioned itself as a spokesperson for the white elite (Gala 2019), often showing disregard for the contributions and demands of the country's Black population.

The second argument is that after the promulgation of the 1988 Federal Constitution, the First International Decade for People of African

Descent provided a strategic platform to advance racial justice and renew the commitments made at the Durban Conference (2001). The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action established a set of commitments and institutional guidelines to promote public policies across multiple areas to combat racism. On the other hand, Brazil did not fully use this platform due to shifts in foreign policy orientation amid intense political turbulence.

Despite advances in debate and in policies targeting the Black population in the post-Durban period, such as the affirmative action policies institutionalized in Brazil, a rollback of the progressive agenda began with the removal of Dilma Rousseff from office and intensified under the Bolsonaro administration. This rollback weakened institutions that promoted policies for marginalized groups and hindered Brazil's ability to present itself internationally as a defender of the rights of people of African descent. With Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's return for a third presidential term, initiatives and agendas that had been stalled began to advance again, enabling the reconstruction of Brazil's international image through an affirmative foreign policy committed to promoting racial equality.

However, even as Brazil's diplomatic profile evolves and debates on racial equality become more present under the current Lula administration, the structural problems that shape both the country and global politics still need to be addressed. Although institutional mechanisms provide access to the diplomatic career for the Black population, Black diplomats are rarely represented at the highest levels. Moreover, confronting the silences and omissions surrounding the racialized dimensions of international politics is essential to move beyond purely affirmative stances. In other words, Brazil must move beyond mainly discursive and symbolic positions and adopt robust, consistent actions that confront the structural dynamics of international relations, as racial hierarchies continue to shape global governance and cannot be changed through gestures of recognition or representation alone (Grosfoguel 2019; Silva 2025). This poses a major challenge, as shifts in Brazil's foreign policy orientation driven by domestic political polarization have undermined the country's ability to sustain the commitments of the First Decade, which were effectively pursued only in its final two years.

In 2025, the United Nations proclaimed the Second International Decade for People of African Descent (2025–2034), and the African Union adopted the theme "Justice for Africans and People of African Descent through Reparations." Brazil's diplomacy and foreign policy therefore have a new opportunity to expand and strengthen cooperation with African countries and the African diaspora on key issues such as development, reparative justice, and the fight

against inequalities across areas including trade, science and technology, food security, multilateral institutions, the environment, and climate change. A Brazilian foreign policy genuinely committed to racial justice is needed, one that can link the country's historical and cultural heritage and the demands of Brazil's Black population to the current needs of the Global South.

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