

## **Lula returning to Brazil presidency after beating Bolsonaro in closest vote in decades**

*Leftist former leader promises to restore Brazil in wake of Bolsonaro's tenure*

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Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has done it again: Twenty years after first winning the Brazilian presidency, the leftist defeated incumbent Jair Bolsonaro Sunday in an extremely tight election that marks an about-face for the country after four years of far-right politics.

With more than 99 per cent of the votes tallied in the runoff vote, Lula had 50.9 per cent and Bolsonaro 49.1 per cent, and the election authority said Lula's victory was a mathematical certainty.

It is a stunning return to power for Lula, 77, whose 2018 imprisonment over a corruption scandal sidelined him from that year's election, which brought Bolsonaro, a defender of conservative social values, to power.

"Today the only winner is the Brazilian people," da Silva said in a speech at a hotel in downtown Sao Paulo. "This isn't a victory of mine or the Workers' Party, nor the parties that supported me in campaign. It's the victory of a democratic movement that formed above political parties, personal interests and ideologies so that democracy came out victorious."

Lula is promising to govern beyond his leftist Workers Party. He wants to bring in centrists and even some leaning to the right who voted for him for the first time, and to restore the country's more prosperous past. Yet he faces headwinds in a politically polarized society where economic growth is slowing and inflation is soaring.

His victory marks the first time since Brazil's 1985 return to democracy that the sitting president has failed to win re-election. The highly polarized election in Latin America's biggest economy extended a wave of recent leftist victories in the region, including Chile, Colombia and Argentina.

As Lula spoke to his supporters — promising to "govern a country in a very difficult situation" — Bolsonaro had yet to concede the election.

It was the country's closest election in over three decades. Just over two million votes separated the two candidates with 99.5 per cent of the vote counted. The previous closest race, in 2014, was decided by a margin of 3.46 million votes

Lula's inauguration is scheduled to take place on Jan. 1. He last served as president from 2003 to 2010.

Thomas Traumann, an independent political analyst, compared the results to U.S. President Joe Biden's 2020 victory, saying Lula is inheriting an extremely divided nation.

"The huge challenge that Lula has will be to pacify the country," he said. "People are not only polarized on political matters, but also have different values, identity and opinions. What's more, they don't care what the other side's values, identities and opinions are."

Congratulations for Lula — and Brazil — began to pour in from around the world Sunday evening, including from U.S. President Joe Biden, who highlighted the country's "free, fair, and credible

elections." The European Union also congratulated da Silva in a statement, commending the electoral authority for its effectiveness and transparency throughout the campaign.

In a stunning political comeback, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva defeated incumbent Jair Bolsonaro after a tight presidential election that went to a runoff vote. Lula has governed Brazil before, last serving as president from 2003 to 2010.

Bolsonaro had been leading throughout the first half of the count and, as soon as Lula overtook him, cars in the streets of downtown Sao Paulo began honking their horns. People in the streets of Rio de Janeiro's Ipanema neighbourhood could be heard shouting, "It turned!"

Lula's headquarters in downtown Sao Paulo hotel only erupted once the final result was announced, underscoring the tension that was a hallmark of this race.

"Four years waiting for this," said Gabriela Souto, one of the few supporters allowed in due to heavy security.

Outside Bolsonaro's home in Rio de Janeiro, ground zero for his support base, a woman atop a truck delivered a prayer over a speaker, then sang excitedly, trying to generate some energy. But supporters decked out in the green and yellow of the flag barely responded. Many perked up when the national anthem played, singing along loudly with hands over their hearts.

Most opinion polls before the election gave a lead to Lula, though political analysts agreed the race grew increasingly tight in recent weeks.

For months, it appeared Lula was headed for easy victory as he kindled nostalgia for his 2003-2010 presidency, when Brazil's economy was booming and welfare helped tens of millions join the middle class.

But while da Silva topped the Oct. 2 first-round elections with 48 per cent of the vote, Bolsonaro was a strong second at 43 per cent, showing opinion polls significantly underestimated his popularity. Many Brazilians support Bolsonaro's defence of conservative social values and he shored up support in an election year with vast government spending.

Bolsonaro's administration has been marked by incendiary speech, his testing of democratic institutions, his widely criticized handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the worst deforestation in the Amazon rainforest in 15 years. But he has built a devoted base by defending conservative values and presenting himself as protection from leftist policies that he says infringe on personal liberties and produce economic turmoil.

### **Political comeback**

Lula is credited with building an extensive social welfare program during his 2003-2010 tenure that helped lift tens of millions into the middle class as well as presiding over an economic boom. He left office with an approval rating above 80 per cent; prompting then U.S. President Barack Obama to call him "the most popular politician on Earth."

But he is also remembered for his administration's involvement in vast corruption revealed by sprawling investigations. Lula's arrest in 2018 kept him out of that year's race against Bolsonaro, a fringe lawmaker at the time who was an outspoken fan of former U.S. President Donald Trump.

Lula was jailed for 580 days for corruption and money laundering. His convictions were later annulled by Brazil's top court, which ruled the presiding judge had been biased and colluded with prosecutors. That enabled Lula to run for the nation's highest office for the sixth time.

Lula has pledged to boost spending on the poor, re-establish relationships with foreign governments and take bold action to eliminate illegal clear-cutting in the Amazon rainforest.

He hasn't provided specific plans on how he will achieve those goals, and faces many challenges. The president-elect will be confronted by strong opposition from conservative lawmakers likely to take their cues from Bolsonaro.

### **Brazil's 'huge' political divide**

Carlos Melo, a political science professor at Insper University in Sao Paulo, compared the likely political climate to that experienced by former president Dilma Rousseff, Lula's hand-picked successor after his second term.

"Lula's victory means Brazil is trying to overcome years of turbulence since the re-election of President Dilma Rousseff in 2014. That election never ended; the opposition asked for a recount, she governed under pressure and was impeached two years later," said Melo. "The divide became huge and then made Bolsonaro."

Unemployment this year has fallen to its lowest level since 2015 and, although overall inflation has slowed during the campaign, food prices are increasing at a double-digit rate. Bolsonaro's welfare payments helped many Brazilians get by, but Lula has been presenting himself as the candidate more willing to sustain aid going forward and raise the minimum wage.

Lula has also pledged to put a halt to illegal deforestation in the Amazon, and once again has prominent environmentalist Marina Silva by his side, years after a public falling out when she was his environment minister. The president-elect has already pledged to install a ministry for Brazil's original peoples, which will be run by an Indigenous person.

In April, he tapped centre-right Geraldo Alckmin, a former rival, to be his running mate. It was another key part of an effort to create a broad, pro-democracy front to not just unseat Bolsonaro, but to make it easier to govern. Lula also has drawn support from Sen. Simone Tebet, a moderate who finished in third place in the election's first round.

"If Lula manages to talk to voters who didn't vote for him, which Bolsonaro never tried, and seeks negotiated solutions to the economic, social and political crisis we have, and links with other nations that were lost, then he could reconnect Brazil to a time in which people could disagree and still get some things done," Melo said.