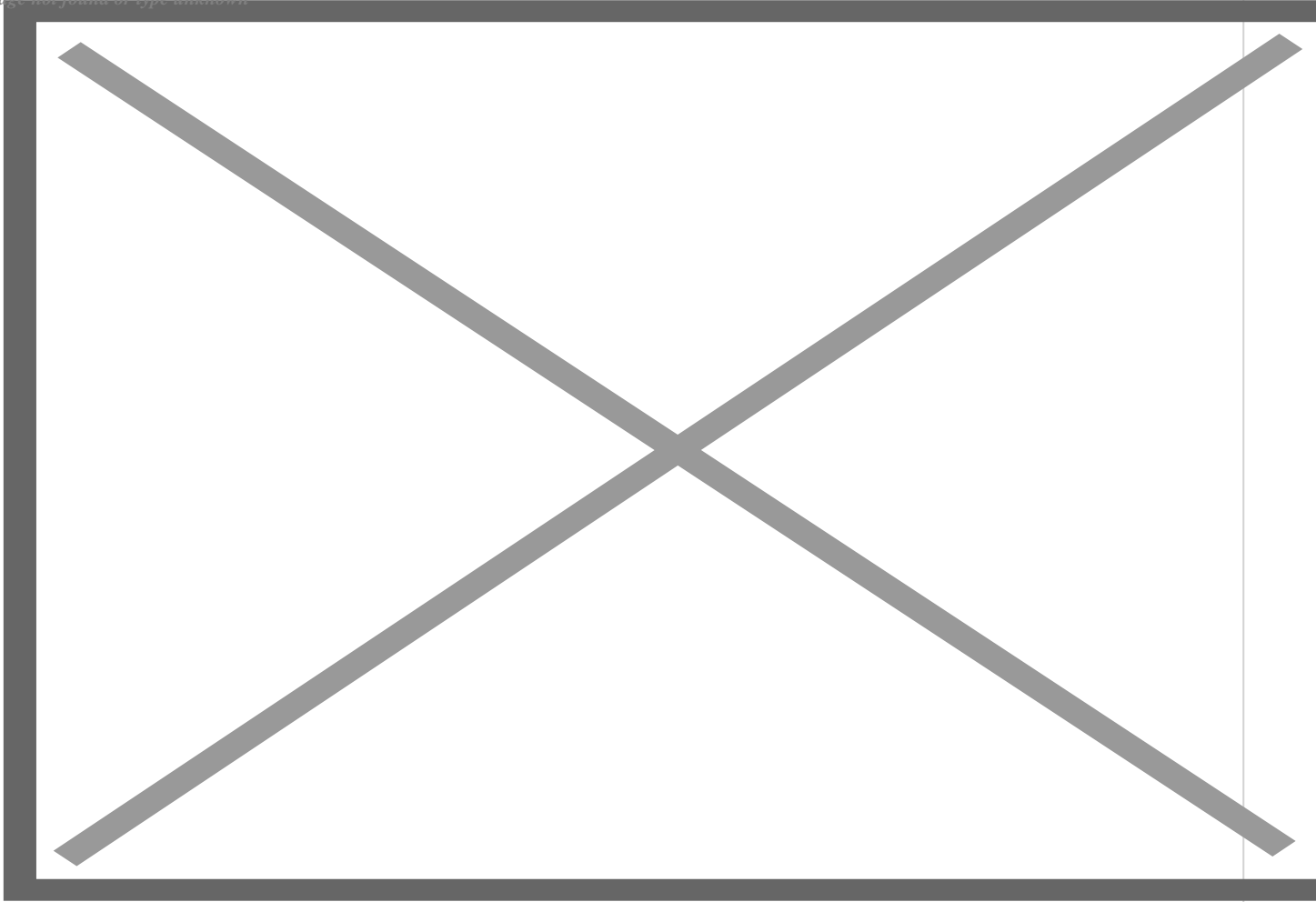


Brazilian president leads motorcade of maskless supporters

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Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro heads a motorcade rally with his supporters in Rio de Janeiro on May 23 [File: Andre Borges/AFP]

Brasilia, May 24 (RHC)-- Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro joined thousands of his supporters in a motorcycle rally in Rio de Janeiro on Sunday, as the far-right leader remains defiant in the face of ongoing pressure over his government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The motorcyclists travelled about 40 km (25 miles) along the city's famous Ipanema and Copacabana beaches, before reaching Flamengo beach where Bolsonaro stepped down from his motorcycle and

greeted the crowd.

“My army will never go into the streets to force you to stay home,” the former army captain said. “Without any scientific proof, governors and mayors have imposed confinement or curfews ... We are ready to take all the measures necessary to guarantee your freedom,” Bolsonaro added.

The president has been widely criticised for eschewing coronavirus-related measures, such as lockdowns, that public health experts say could help stem the spread of the virus in Brazil, which has been hard-hit by the pandemic.

Earlier in the crisis, Bolsonaro dismissed the virus as a “little flu,” touted the use of anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19, and slammed local leaders who sought to impose health restrictions.

More than 448,000 people have died due to the coronavirus – the second-highest death toll in the world after the United States – and over 16 million cases have been confirmed to date, according to a Johns Hopkins University tally.

But Bolsonaro continues to dismiss the need for public health measures to tackle the virus – even as the Brazilian Senate conducts an investigation into his government’s handling of the pandemic. Al Jazeera’s Monica Yanakiew, reporting from Rio de Janeiro, said approximately 10,000 motorcyclists took part in Sunday’s rally, which was organised by one of Bolsonaro’s close friends.

“They want to show that President Jair Bolsonaro still has supporters despite what polls show. Recent polls show that Bolsonaro would be defeated in the [2022] elections by former President Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva,” Yanakiew said.

Lula, who served as Brazil’s president from 2003 to 2011, was disqualified from running in the 2018 presidential election after he was convicted of corruption. But a Supreme Court judge threw out his conviction in March, opening the door for Lula’s return to politics. The top court upheld the decision in April. While the left-wing leader has not said outright that he plans to run in next year’s elections, recent polls show that he would defeat Bolsonaro if he does.

“I ran eight kilometres before this interview ... and I usually run 9 km a day, Monday to Friday, because walking around Brazil is going to be very tough, very tiring and I need to get my legs ready to fix this country’s problems,” Lula said during a recent interview with The Guardian.

“I’ll be 77 [by next year’s election]. I thought that was old. But then I saw Biden win the elections at 78 and said: Well, I’m a boy compared to Biden so perhaps I’ll be alright.”

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