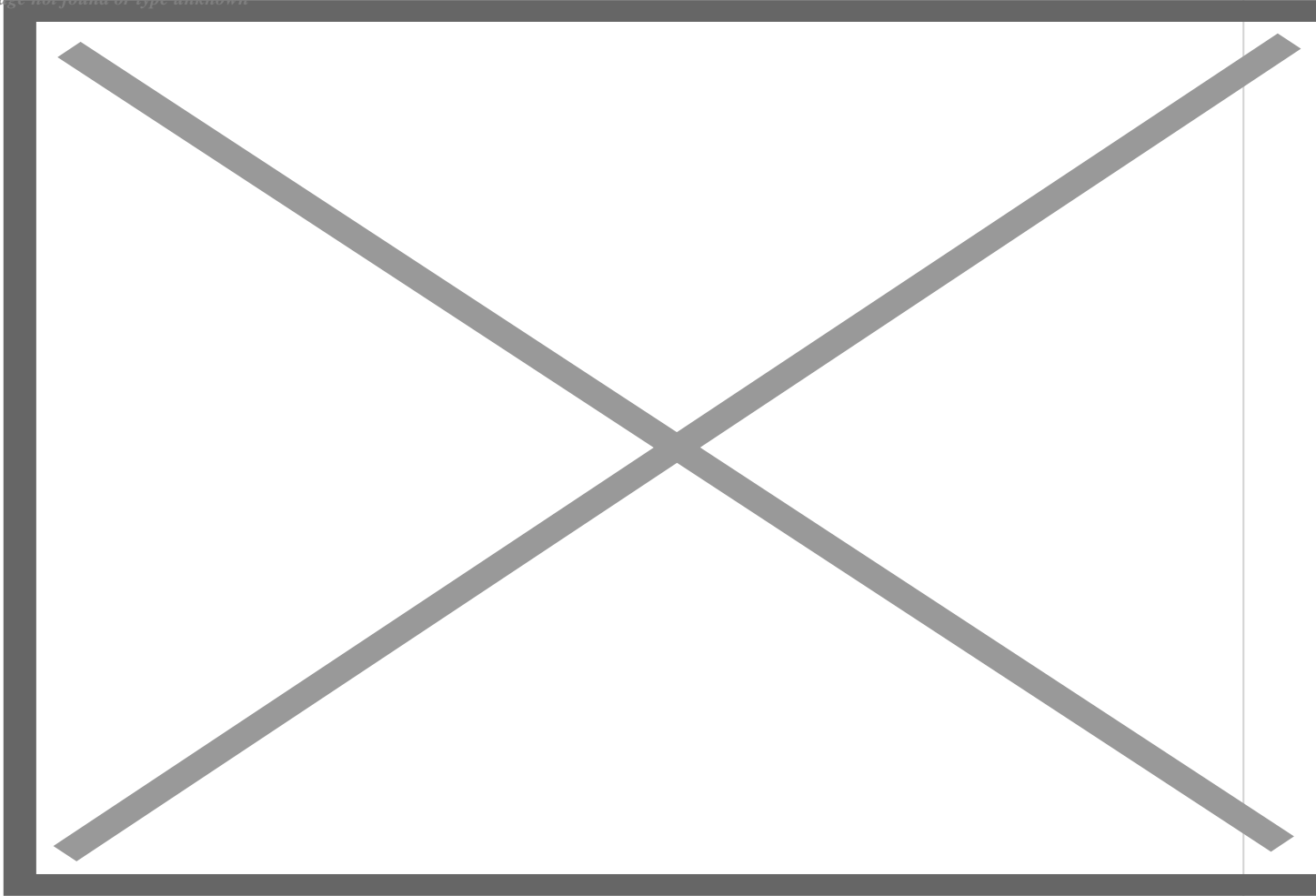


Brazilian presidential candidates face off in first debate of run-off

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Lula and Bolsonaro stare at each other on the blue-backed stage of Sunday's TV debate in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

The first televised debate of the run-off for the presidency in Brazil was heated with the two candidates trading personal insults [Mariana Greif/Reuters]?

Brasilia, October 17 (RHC)-- Far-right incumbent Jair Bolsonaro and left-wing rival Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva traded jabs and insults as they squared off in their first head-to-head debate in the second and final round of Brazil's presidential election.

Lula attacked Bolsonaro as a “little dictator” and the “king of fake news,” while Bolsonaro accused Lula of lying, corruption and a “disgraceful” record in a two-hour televised debate on Sunday night.

Voters go to the polls on October 30th to choose the man who will become Brazil’s next president with 76-year-old Lula, the charismatic but tarnished former president, holding the lead over Bolsonaro.

Lula criticised Bolsonaro over his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, attacking his resistance to vaccines and embrace of unproven medications such as hydroxychloroquine. “Your negligence led to 680,000 people dying, when more than half could have been saved,” the former metalworker told the president.

Bolsonaro later took the offensive and targeted Lula for corruption scandals during the 14 years that his Workers Party governed Brazil. Dozens of business leaders and politicians, including Lula, were arrested in a sweeping crackdown on corruption, and Lula spent time in jail on a bribery conviction that was later overturned by Brazil’s Supreme Court.

“Your past is disgraceful ... You did nothing for Brazil but stuff public money in your pockets and those of your friends,” the 67-year-old former army captain told Lula.

Lula won 48 percent of the votes in the first round of the election, with Bolsonaro securing 43 percent, far more than opinion polls had suggested. His unexpectedly strong performance set the stage for a hard-fought run-off with both candidates ramping up their rhetoric and unleashing bruising personal attacks in TV commercials.

“This is a nail-biting election,” said Al Jazeera’s Brazil correspondent Monica Yanakiew. “Both candidates are fighting for every single vote although Lula is still the favourite.”

The free-wheeling debate rules allowed the candidates to roam the stage and approach the cameras, which both did frequently although they rarely looked at each other, with the notable exception of one tense silence that Bolsonaro finally interrupted by putting his hand on Lula’s shoulder with a smile.

As has been the case for much of the campaign, far more time was spent on personal attacks than substantive discussion. “Policy proposals have lost their central role, and accusations have taken their place,” political scientist Christopher Mendonca told the AFP news agency.

Bolsonaro’s campaign was counting on Sunday’s debate to help close the gap with Lula, who still has a lead of roughly 5 percentage points, based on surveys by pollster Datafolha.

Neither candidate detailed in the debate how they would raise the money to extend a more generous welfare program, which both have promised to do without breaking federal budget rules.

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