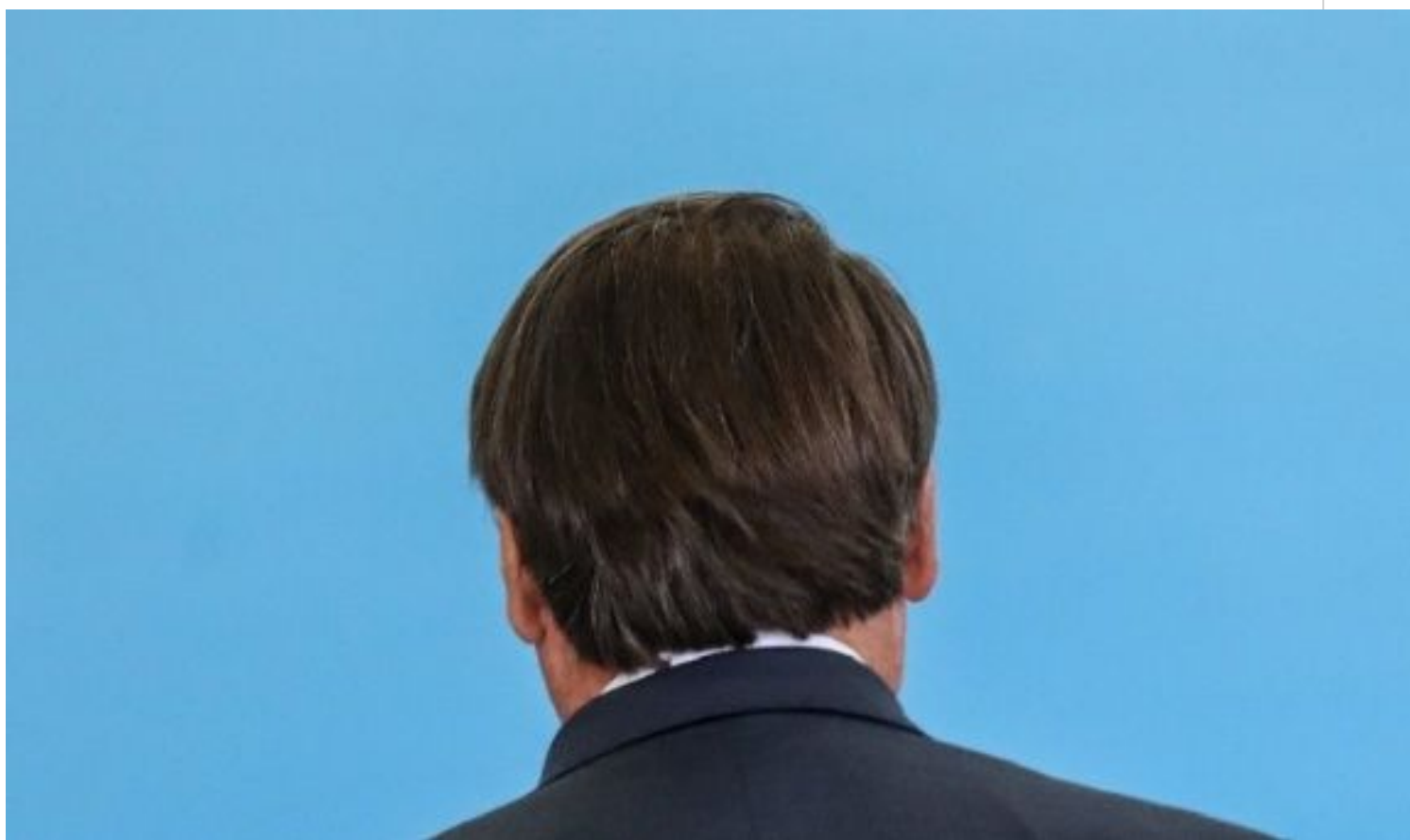


Jair Bolsonaro leaves Brazil for Florida, avoiding Lula handover on Sunday



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Brasilia, December 31 (RHC)-- Outgoing Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has left the country for the United States, avoiding the inauguration of incoming President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who defeated him in the country's October elections.

Bolsonaro left Brazil on Friday, reportedly flying to the U.S. state of Florida after giving a final address to his followers, some of whom have pushed for a military coup in the aftermath of his election loss. In a teary address, Bolsonaro said that he had "lost the battle but not the war" and tried to distance himself

from recent acts of political violence by his supporters, saying that he “did not encourage anyone to enter confrontation”.

The far-right leader has stayed mostly out of sight following his defeat, and his plans for the future remain unclear. The website FlightAware, which monitors air traffic, showed that the presidential plane left the capital Brasilia after 2 pm local time (17:00 GMT) and is on its way to Orlando, Florida.

Vice President Hamilton Mourao has temporarily become the country’s acting president and confirmed that Bolsonaro had left the country. Bolsonaro had repeatedly stated that he did not want to pass the presidential sash to Lula during the inauguration.

Ahead of Lula’s swearing-in ceremony on Sunday, officials have taken extra security precautions, including a temporary ban on firearms in the capital, as the transition of power takes place amid high tensions and concerns over potential violence.

For years, Bolsonaro spread anti-democratic rhetoric and sowed doubt about the integrity of Brazil’s election system, hinting that he would refuse to step down if he lost the election against his left-wing rival.

Following his defeat on October 30st, Bolsonaro did not explicitly concede but stated that he would follow the country’s constitution. He served a single term as president.

Some of his supporters have refused to accept the results, camping out in front of military barracks in a bid to prompt a military intervention to roll back the results of the election.

On December 12, members of one encampment attacked federal police headquarters in Brasilia following the official certification of the election results earlier in the day. And last Saturday, a man was arrested for allegedly trying to set off a bomb to protest Lula’s win. He said that Bolsonaro had inspired him to build an arsenal of weapons.

The far-right leader could also face a number of legal challenges once his time in office officially ends and his presidential immunity expires. The country’s Supreme Court is investigating him for allegedly releasing confidential information and improperly interfering with a police investigation.

Some have noted that, despite Bolsonaro’s loss, the country’s conservative movement performed well in the October elections and will remain a powerful force in Brazilian politics. “I am in flight,” Bolsonaro was quoted as saying by broadcaster CNN Brasil on Friday. “Back soon.”

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