

Tight security as Lula set to be sworn in as Brazil's president

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Supporters of Brazil's President-elect Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva arrive for his swearing-in ceremony in Brasilia [Amanda Perobelli/Reuters]

Brasilia, January 1 (RHC)-- Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva is set to be sworn in as president of Brazil under tightened security after alleged threats of violence by supporters of his far-right predecessor Jair Bolsonaro.

The ceremony in Congress is due to begin at 3 p.m. (18:00 GMT) on Sunday, after which Lula will go to the Planalto Palace to don the presidential sash before a crowd of 30,000 supporters, while some 300,000 are expected to gather to celebrate on Brasilia's esplanade.

Foreign dignitaries, including 17 heads of state, will be in attendance. Among them will be the king of Spain and the presidents of Germany, Portugal, and a raft of Latin American countries.

Lula, 77, narrowly defeated Bolsonaro in October to win an unprecedented third presidential term after a hiatus that saw him spend a year and a half behind bars on corruption convictions that were later overturned.

In his previous years as the president of the Workers' Party (PT) from 2003 to 2010, the former union leader lifted millions of Brazilians out of poverty during a commodity boom that buoyed the economy. "It is a comeback for the ages and Lula's political projecture has been a trajectory of improbable accomplishments," Gustavo Ribeiro, founder of the Brazilian Report, told Al Jazeera.

"He was a poverty migrant, worked as a shoe shiner, worked on a factory floor then rose to union leader. He lost three presidential races before he won two terms," he said.

Now, Lula faces the daunting challenge of improving Brazil's stagnant economy while also bringing together a country that has become painfully polarised under Bolsonaro. "It is a very divided nation that Lula will inherit, and one of his many challenges will be to unite the country once more," said Al Jazeera's Monica Yanakiew, reporting from a sit-in where Bolsonaro supporters have been camping out for more than two months.

Ribeiro echoes that sentiment. "I don't think Lula will benefit from that proverbial honeymoon period that new presidents enjoy. A big chunk of the country doesn't see him as a legitimate leader. He will take over a cash-strapped government with a lot of challenges ahead of him," he said.

Lula has promised, in his words, to "make Brazil happy again." But he faces many hurdles, from rising poverty to public services in crisis, including lack of investment in education and healthcare.

Bolsonaro's supporters have falsely claimed that the election was stolen and have protested for two months, calling for a military coup to stop Lula from returning to office in a climate of vandalism and violence. Last week, a Bolsonaro supporter was arrested for planting a tanker truck rigged with explosives near the Brasilia airport, a plot he said aimed to "sow chaos" in the country.

Bolsonaro left Brazil on Friday for Florida in the United States, avoiding having to hand over the sash to his rival, whose victory he has yet to recognise, while also removing himself from any immediate legal risks related to his time in office.

Before flying to Florida, Bolsonaro delivered a teary address to the nation in which he condemned the bomb plot as a "terrorist act," but praised protesters camped outside army barracks across the country.

In a thinly veiled dig, acting President Hamilton Mourao, who was Bolsonaro's vice president, criticised his former boss for failing to lead the country and allowing anti-democratic sentiment to thrive after his October defeat at the polls.

"Leaders who were supposed to reassure and unite the nation ... allowed silence or inopportune and deleterious protagonism to create an atmosphere of chaos and social disintegration," Mourao said in a speech on Saturday night.

Authorities have deployed 10,000 police and troops to reinforce security at Sunday's events and to search participants, who cannot bring bottles, cans, flag masts or toy guns. Carrying firearms by civilians has also

been temporarily banned.

Thousands of Lula supporters have been flooding the capital, travelling by plane, car and even bicycle to camp out near the Esplanade of Ministries.

After being sworn in before Congress, Lula will travel by car – traditionally a black convertible Rolls-Royce, though officials said that could be changed for security reasons – to the ultra-modern capital’s presidential palace. There he will walk up a ramp to the entrance and receive the gold- and diamond-embroidered presidential sash.

Organizers of the ceremony – led by First Lady-to-be Rosangela “Janja” da Silva – have maintained a mystery around who will give Lula the sash in Bolsonaro’s absence.

It will be the first time since the end of Brazil’s 1965-1985 military dictatorship that an incoming president does not receive the yellow-and-green sash from his predecessor.

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