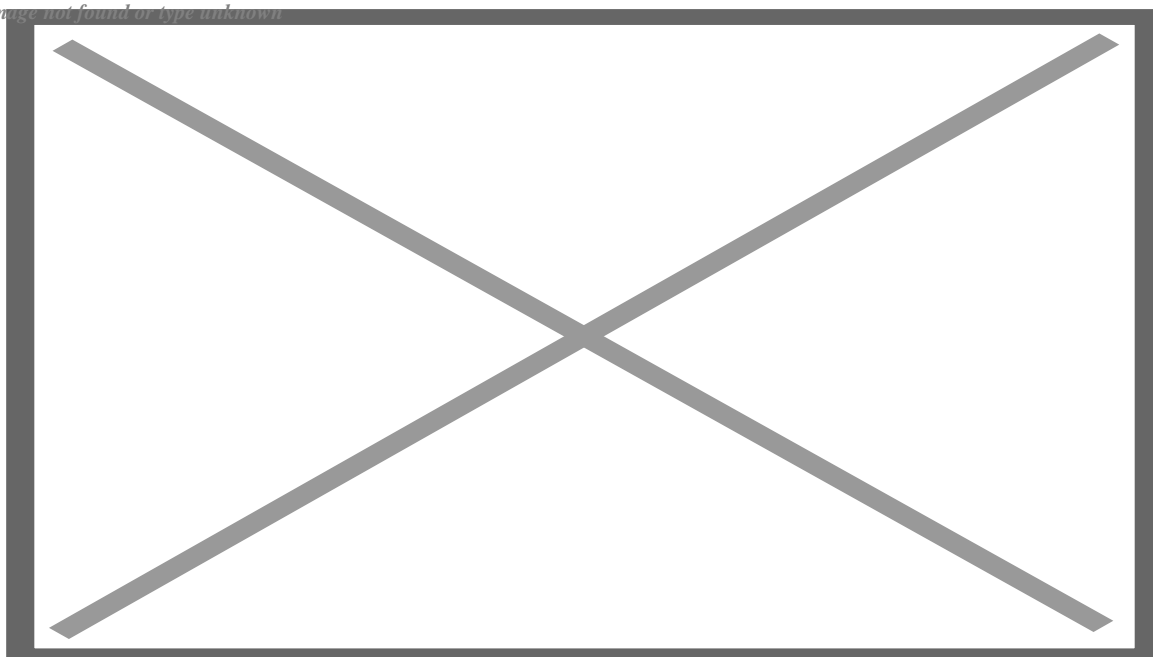


Lula holds lead as Brazil's election campaign officially begins

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Brazilian presidential frontrunner Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has called on people to elect him to 'rebuild and transform Brazil' and defeat a 'totalitarian threat' [Carla Carniel/Reuters]

Brasilia, August 16 (RHC)-- Brazil's former leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva holds a double-digit lead over far-right incumbent Jair Bolsonaro, a new poll has shown, as the country's tightly contested presidential election campaign officially kicks off.

Bolsonaro and Lula, who have in reality been on the campaign trail for months, held rival events on Tuesday in what experts say is one of the most polarised campaigns in decades.

The 67-year-old Bolsonaro launched his re-election campaign with a rally in Juiz de Fora, the small southeastern city where an attacker stabbed and nearly killed him during the 2018 campaign that he won.

Meanwhile, Lula, 76, started his bid for the presidency with a visit to a Volkswagen plant in Sao Bernardo do Campo, in the industrial heartland of Sao Paulo state, where he launched his political career as a

union leader.

The election on October 2nd will be the first since Bolsonaro -- a far-right former army captain who has seen his popularity plummet during the COVID-19 crisis -- came to power four years ago.

Fears of political violence should the results be contested are rising, as Bolsonaro without evidence has claimed for months that the country's electronic voting system is vulnerable to fraud -- an allegation rejected by legal experts.

The race is "the most polarising ... since the return to democracy" in Brazil in the late 1980s, said political analyst Adriano Laurenco of consulting firm Prospectiva.

"Bolsonaro has tried to build this narrative of divine selection around his presidency ... in which surviving the stabbing incident plays a central role," Laurenco told the AFP news agency. "Lula meanwhile always looks to return to Sao Bernardo at key moments in his political trajectory, casting himself as a man of the people."

A survey by IPEC, formerly known as IBOPE, on Monday showed Lula with 44 percent of voter support compared to 32 percent for Bolsonaro in the first round of the election.

In an expected runoff between the two men on October 30, should no candidate win 50 percent plus one of the valid votes, Lula would get elected with 51 percent versus 35 percent for Bolsonaro, a 16-point gap, the poll showed.

Lula's lead has fallen from 26 percent in December to 18 percent in July, according to Datafolha, another major polling firm, but Lula still had a 20 percent lead over Bolsonaro should the pair face off in a runoff.

Bolsonaro has increased spending on welfare for poor Brazilians, which may be improving his numbers. He has also pressed state-controlled oil company Petrobras to lower the price of fuel, a big factor in pushing up inflation.

For his part, Lula -- who served as president between 2003 and 2010 -- has called on Brazilians to elect him to help "rebuild and transform Brazil" and defend the country against a "totalitarian threat."

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