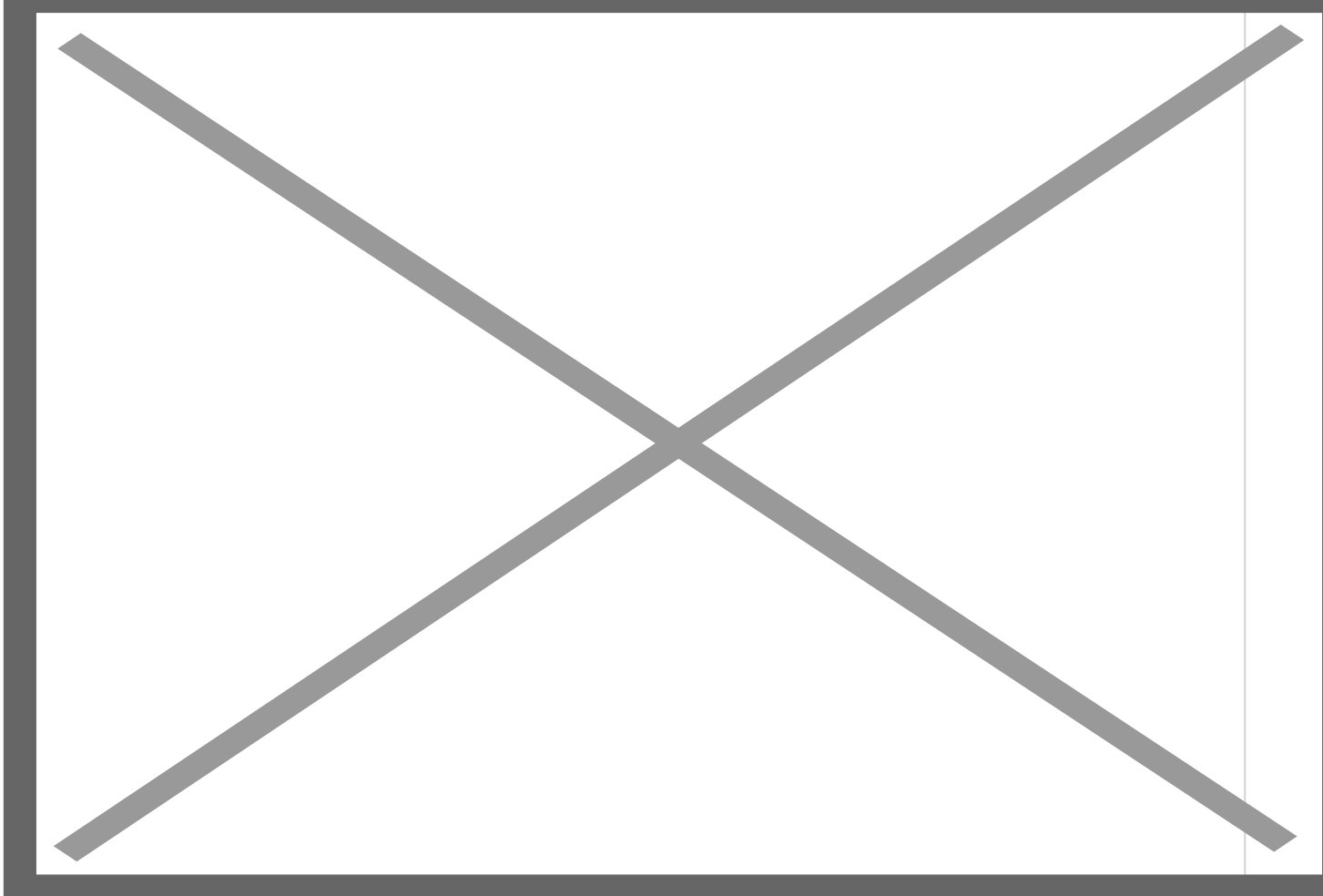


Lula appeals to Brazil's evangelicals before second round vote

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Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva attends a meeting with evangelical representatives in Sao Paulo, Brazil, October 19 [Carla Carniel/Reuters]

Brasilia, October 20 (RHC)-- Brazilian presidential frontrunner Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has published an open letter to the country's evangelicals, as he seeks to chip away at far-right President Jair Bolsonaro's

base in advance of a second round of voting in tightly contested elections.

The letter, read at a gathering with evangelical leaders at a Sao Paulo hotel on Wednesday, promised that Lula would respect religious freedoms if elected — as he did during his 2003-2010 presidency. “We are living at a time in which lies are used intensively with the objective of stoking fear in people of good faith, pushing them away from a candidacy that is defending them more,” the letter said. “That is why I felt a need to reaffirm my commitment to freedom of religion in our country.”

Brazilians will go back to the polls in less than two weeks, after a first round of voting on October 2nd saw Lula beat Bolsonaro but fall short of what he needed to avoid a second round. Lula continues to hold a lead over Bolsonaro before the October 30th vote, but Brazilian opinion polls have underestimated popular support for the far-right leader, who gets much of his backing from evangelicals and other conservatives.

Self-declared evangelicals make up almost a third of Brazil’s population, more than double their share two decades ago. Demographer Jose Eustaquio Diniz Alves, a former researcher at the National School of Statistical Sciences, projects they will approach 40 percent by 2032, surpassing Catholics.

Some of Brazil’s most popular evangelical pastors have campaigned for Bolsonaro, as they did four years ago when they help carry him to victory. And about 65 percent of evangelicals back Bolsonaro, compared with 31 percent for Lula, according to the latest poll from Datafolha, released last week. Polls indicate that Catholics, meanwhile, largely support da Silva, who is Catholic himself.

In the run-up to this year’s vote, Lula has faced a smear campaign from Bolsonaro backers accusing him of plotting to close churches if elected. He also has come under attack from Bolsonaro’s camp over abortion, after saying in April it should be a “right” – then backtracking in the face of widespread backlash in the South American country.

“Everyone knows there was never the slightest risk to churches when I was president. On the contrary,” Lula said in statement, “my government will in no way act against religious freedom.”

On the subject of abortion, which is opposed by more than 70 percent of Brazilians in most circumstances, Lula also sought to assuage fears. “To me, life is sacred, the work of God the creator, and my commitment always has been and will be to protect it,” he wrote, adding that while he is personally against abortion, “it is an issue to be decided by Congress, not the president.”

Meanwhile, observers continue to question whether Bolsonaro will accept defeat. For months, he has claimed without evidence for months that Brazil’s electronic voting system is vulnerable to fraud – raising concerns that he plans to contest the results, similarly to former US President Donald Trump, whom he has emulated. Judicial experts have rejected Bolsonaro’s fraud claims as baseless.

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