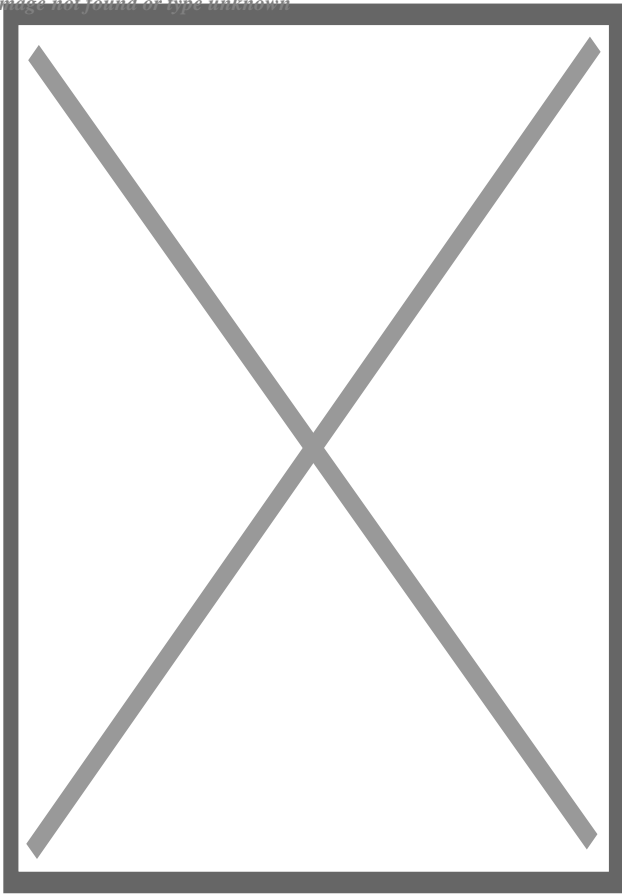


Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro requests passport return for Israel trip

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Brazil's former President Jair Bolsonaro attends an event at the Municipal Theatre in Sao Paulo, Brazil, on March 25 [Amanda Perobelli/Reuters]

Brasilia, March 29 (RHC)-- Brazil's embattled former President Jair Bolsonaro has requested the return of his passport in order to visit Israel, fuelling speculation that he could be seeking respite abroad from his domestic legal troubles.

Defense lawyer and Bolsonaro spokesperson Fabio Wajngarten addressed his request in a social media post on Thursday.

“The defense team of President [Jair Bolsonaro] petitioned the Supreme Court last Monday, on March 25, to request the return of the president’s passport, albeit for a fixed period, with a view to accept an invitation to visit Israel next month,” Wajngarten wrote.

“As is publicly known, international relations are a part of political activity, as well as building dialogue with global leaders.”

Bolsonaro, who served as president from 2019 to 2022, has faced a maelstrom of investigations and legal troubles since leaving office, resulting in the removal of his passport.

One of the latest involved allegations that Bolsonaro, a far-right leader, participated in crafting a draft decree that would have overturned the results of the 2022 presidential election, which he lost. The draft decree also called for the arrest of several high-profile officials, including Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes. Critics have compared it to the groundwork for a coup.

In response to the revelations, de Moraes issued an order calling for the seizure of Bolsonaro’s passport and other documents. Federal police carried out the operation early on February 8, arriving at Bolsonaro’s beach house in Rio de Janeiro and eventually finding the passport at his residence in the capital Brasilia.

Earlier this week, The New York Times reported that surveillance footage showed Bolsonaro arriving at the Hungarian embassy in Brazil shortly after the police raid, on February 12. He reportedly stayed overnight, leaving two days later on February 14. International law largely prevents police from entering embassies to conduct arrests.

Bolsonaro later acknowledged the two-day visit in an interview with the publication Metropoles, saying, “I’m not going to deny that I was at the embassy, yes. I’m not going to say where else I’ve been.”

But the surveillance video has raised questions over whether Bolsonaro is seeking support — and perhaps political asylum — from fellow far-right leaders, like Hungary’s Viktor Orban.

On Monday, Justice de Moraes ordered on Bolsonaro to account for his actions at the embassy.

Bolsonaro has since said he had no intention of evading possible arrest and that his visit was an effort to foster relations with Hungary.

Meanwhile, Bolsonaro has petitioned the court for his passport to be returned, on the basis that he received an official invitation from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The prospective trip would last from May 12 to 18.

It would not be the first time Bolsonaro travelled abroad during a time of mounting political pressure, though. As his term in office neared its end in late December, Bolsonaro abruptly left Brazil and flew to central Florida, leaving his vice president in charge.

The trip caught many by surprise — and came mere days before his successor, left-wing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, was slated to take office. At the time, Bolsonaro was facing criticism for casting doubt over the 2022 election results, which showed Lula narrowly prevailing in the second round of voting.

He claimed — without evidence — that the vote had been marred by fraud, through the use of electronic voting machines. Bolsonaro also did not publicly concede defeat, and his supporters had taken to the streets, attacking police facilities and blocking roads. One man, a gas station manager, was even accused of planning to explode a bomb.

Critics speculated that Bolsonaro's sudden trip to Florida could be a tactic to avoid accountability in Brazil.

While abroad, on January 8, 2023, thousands of his supporters attacked key government buildings in the capital Brasilia. Bolsonaro remains under investigation for any role he may have played in the attack.

Last June, he was barred from running for office until 2030 after a panel of judges found he had used his public office to sow doubt in the country's electoral system.

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