

Brazil's Supreme Court nixes Jair Bolsonaro's effort to attend Trump inauguration

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"You have a nice country, Brazil. Are you sure you don't want to be a part of the United States?"

Then-U.S. President Donald Trump shakes hands with his Brazilian counterpart at the time, Jair

Bolsonaro, at the Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida, on March 7, 2020 [Tom Brenner/Reuters]

Brasilia, January 17 (RHC)-- As President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration approaches in the United States, one invited guest is unlikely to be in attendance: Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro.

On Thursday, Brazil's Supreme Court denied a petition from the former president to return his passport, which had been confiscated by federal police in February.

Bolsonaro, who led Brazil from 2019 to 2022, faces multiple investigations and legal proceedings, including for alleged efforts to overturn the results of the country's 2022 presidential election.

The former far-right president, nicknamed the "Trump of the Tropics", has denied all allegations against him. But police have deemed him a flight risk. On the social media platform X, Bolsonaro's office responded to the court's decision with displeasure, calling it evidence of "lawfare" — a term for the use of a weaponised legal system.

"President Trump's invitation to Bolsonaro symbolises the deep ties between two of the greatest democracies in the Americas," the office wrote in its statement.

"The decision to bar Bolsonaro from participating in this important event diminishes Brazil's standing on the global stage and sends a troubling message about the state of democracy and justice in our country."

The Supreme Court, however, ruled that Bolsonaro's current role as a private citizen — with no elected office — would not require him to travel to the US for the inauguration, as officials might do.

Brazil is expected to be represented at the inauguration by its ambassador to the U.S., Maria Luiza Viotti.

Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes signalled that the decision was based on the recommendation of Brazil's prosecutor general, Paulo Gonet Branco. Branco had indicated that there was a greater public interest in keeping Bolsonaro in Brazil than allowing him to travel abroad, where he might escape justice.

De Moraes cited previous statements Bolsonaro made to the media, where he "considered the possibility of escaping and requesting political asylum to avoid possible criminal liability in Brazil".

Trump's inauguration on January 20 is expected to bring together some of the world's most prominent right-wing leaders, including Argentinian President Javier Milei and British Member of Parliament Nigel Farage.

Other anticipated guests include social media magnate Mark Zuckerberg, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and billionaire Elon Musk, a close adviser to the incoming US president.

In a post to social media, the Republican majority on the Foreign Affairs Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives offered support to Bolsonaro after the court's decision.

"Jair Bolsonaro is a friend of America and a patriot. He should be allowed to attend President Trump's inaugural," the Republicans wrote.

But Bolsonaro has been mired in legal scrutiny since his defeat in the 2022 elections. In October of that year, left-wing leader Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva narrowly bested Bolsonaro in a run-off election, but Bolsonaro refused to publicly acknowledge defeat.

He had long stirred false rumours that Brazil's electronic voting machines were vulnerable to fraud, even before a single ballot was cast.

In the aftermath of his loss, hundreds of his supporters flooded the streets to protest the election results. Bolsonaro himself left the country for Florida in the lead-up to Lula's inauguration.

Shortly afterwards, on July 8, 2023, Bolsonaro supporters attacked the Three Powers Plaza in the capital Brasilia, ransacking buildings representing the presidency, Congress and the Supreme Court.

Bolsonaro has since returned to Brazil. But a court ruled that he cannot run for office until 2030, as a penalty for using government resources to undermine public confidence in the elections.

The former president also faces scrutiny for embezzlement, and he was indicted last year for publishing false information in a national database about his COVID-19 vaccination status.

In November, federal police also accused Bolsonaro and 36 allies of planning the "violent overthrow of the democratic state."

Bolsonaro has denied any wrongdoing in the cases. On Thursday, he drew a parallel between his situation and Trump, who has similarly accused his political opponents of "lawfare" and made false claims of election fraud.

"The Lula government has clearly learned from the mistakes in the United States, where the justice system was instrumentalised for political gain," Bolsonaro wrote. "But there, they did not act quickly enough to destroy their political opponent, Donald Trump, and he overcame this judicial activism. I will, too."

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