

Bolsonaro supporters rally in Brazil, demand amnesty for January 8th riots

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**Supporters gather around former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro at Copacabana beach, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil [Pilar Olivares/Reuters]
The former leader seeks political comeback despite ban from public office, echoing Trump's strategy to regain office.**

Rio de Janeiro, March 17 (RHC)-- Several thousand supporters of Brazil's former President Jair Bolsonaro packed Copacabana beach in Rio on Sunday to show their backing for the right-wing firebrand, who is accused of attempting to overthrow his left-wing successor.

Bolsonaro, 69, has called for a million-strong demonstration on the famous beach on Sunday in a show of strength ahead of elections next year in which he hopes to be a contender.

The rally's stated purpose was to demand amnesty for hundreds convicted over the January 8, 2023 riots in the capital Brasilia, when Bolsonaro backers stormed the presidential palace, Congress and Supreme Court.

"I want to tell all those who don't like me in Brasilia [Brazil's capital]: elections without Bolsonaro is a denial of democracy in Brazil," the former far-right leader told his supporters on Sunday, referring to a ban on him seeking re-election in 2026.

Brazil's 2019-2022 president is hoping to emulate US President Donald Trump's political comeback. On the stage, a banner showed Trump with his fist raised following the attempt on his life on the campaign trail last year in Pennsylvania.

"I am here because I want to leave a better Brazil for my children. We are living in a dark time," 64-year-old former military officer Jose de Souza Vitorino, who was among the demonstrators, told AFP.

In January 2023, the rioters demanded that the military oust leftist President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who defeated archrival Bolsonaro in the October 2022 elections and was sworn in just a week earlier.

The violent rampage evoked the storming of the U.S. Capitol building in Washington by Trump's supporters almost exactly two years earlier. Prosecutors believe the riots were part of a criminal plot hatched by the then-former President Bolsonaro to overthrow Lula and return to power.

On March 25th, Brazil's Supreme Court will consider whether there is sufficient evidence to try Bolsonaro, who risks a prison term of more than 40 years.

Dubbed the "Trump of the Tropics," Bolsonaro claims, like Trump, to be the victim of political persecution aimed at excluding him from seeking a second term in the 2026 presidential elections.

He has been declared ineligible to hold public office until 2030 for having made unsubstantiated claims of fraud in Brazil's electronic voting system, but is hoping to have the ban overturned to make a Trump-like comeback.

Independent political analyst Andre Rosa told AFP the real purpose of calling for protests Sunday was so Bolsonaro could "send a message to his competitors on the right ... and reaffirm his intention to be a candidate in 2026".

"For now, I am a candidate," Bolsonaro told journalists in Brasilia this week.

There are also continuity concerns in Lula's camp, with worry over the 79-year-old president's health and his popularity dragged down by consumer inflation.

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