

Brazilians protest for democracy as Bolsonaro threatens election

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People attend pro-democracy protests in Sao Paulo, Brazil, on August 11. Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro has hinted that he may not respect the result of the upcoming October election [Andre Penner/AP Photo]

Brasilia, August 12 (RHC)-- Thousands of Brazilians flocked to a law school Thursday in defense of the nation's democratic institutions, an event that carried echoes of a gathering nearly 45 years ago when citizens joined together at the same site to denounce a brutal military dictatorship.

In 1977, the masses poured into the University of Sao Paulo's law school to listen to a reading of "A Letter to Brazilians", a manifesto calling for a prompt return of the rule of law. On Thursday, they heard declarations defending democracy and the country's elections systems, which far-right President Jair Bolsonaro has repeatedly attacked ahead of his bid for reelection in October.

While the current manifestos do not specifically name Bolsonaro, they underscore the country's widespread concern that the far-right leader may follow in former US President Donald Trump's footsteps and reject election results not in his favour in an attempt to cling to power.

One manifesto read at Thursday's event garnered more than 800,000 signatures and warned that Brazilian democracy was under threat. "We are at risk of a coup, so civil society must stand up and fight against that to guarantee democracy," Jose Carlos Dias, a former justice minister who helped write the 1977 letter and the two documents read Thursday, told the Associated Press news agency.

In Sao Paulo, drivers stuck in traffic on one of the main roads to the law school applauded and honked as marching students chanted pro-democracy slogans. A huge inflatable electronic voting machine by the building's main entrance bore the slogan "RESPECT THE VOTE."

Bolsonaro's commitment to democracy has been scrutinized since he took office, in large part because the former army captain has insistently glorified the country's two-decade dictatorship, which ended in 1985.

For more than a year, in actions that appear to be lifted directly from Trump's playbook, Bolsonaro has claimed Brazil's electronic voting machines are prone to fraud, though, like Trump, he never presented any evidence. Bolsonaro has consistently trailed former President Luiz Inacio da Silva, known as Lula, in the polls ahead of the election.

Bolsonaro also began expressing a desire for greater involvement of the armed forces in election oversight. Last week, army officials visited the electoral authority's headquarters to inspect the source codes of voting machines. Bolsonaro has alleged that some of the authority's top officials are working against him.

At the law school on Thursday, Carlos Silveira carried a sign that read: "The military doesn't count votes." "We are here because it is riskier not to do anything," said Silveira. "Bolsonaro has suggested a big anti-democratic act before the election, and the military has remained on his side, it seems. We want to show them we are the majority, and that our quest for democracy will win."

When Bolsonaro launched his campaign, he called on supporters to flood the streets for the September 7th Independence Day celebrations. On that date last year, he declared before tens of thousands who rallied at his behest that only God can remove him from power.

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