

The Big Read Brazilian politics

The discreet US campaign to defend Brazil's election

Amid widespread speculation about a coup attempt, the Biden administration pressured politicians and generals to respect the result

Michael Stott in London, **Michael Pooler** and **Bryan Harris** in São Paulo JUNE 21 2023

As Brazil prepared to hold a presidential election last October, many governments around the world viewed the vote with a mounting sense of foreboding.

The far-right incumbent, Jair Bolsonaro, was openly flirting with subverting the country's democracy. He attacked the electoral process, claiming that the electronic voting machines used by Brazilian authorities were unreliable and calling for a paper ballot instead. He constantly hinted at the risk of the election being stolen, echoing claims made by Donald Trump in the US.

But in the end, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's win in October was accepted without serious challenge by Bolsonaro and the veteran leftwing politician was inaugurated on January 1.

The fact that the election was not seriously challenged is a testament to the strength of Brazil's institutions. But it was also in part the result of a quiet, year long pressure campaign by the US government to urge the country's political and military leaders to respect and safeguard democracy, which has not been widely reported.

The aim was to drum home two consistent messages to restive generals in Brazil and Bolsonaro's close allies: Washington was neutral on the election result but would not stand for any attempt to question the voting process or the result.

The Financial Times has spoken to six former or current US officials involved in the effort, as well as to several key Brazilian institutional figures, to piece together the story of how the Biden administration engaged in what one former top state department official calls a "very unusual" messaging campaign in the months leading up to the vote, using both public and private channels.

All were at pains to underline that most of the credit for saving Brazil's democracy in the face of Bolsonaro's onslaught belongs to the Brazilians themselves and to their democratic institutions, which held firm in the face of extraordinary challenges from a president bent on retaining power.

"It's Brazilian institutions that really made sure that the elections took place," says a senior US administration official. "What was important was that we conveyed the right messages and maintained policy discipline."

The US had a clear geopolitical incentive to want to demonstrate a capacity to shape events in the region. Long the dominant outside power in Latin America, it has seen its influence eroded in recent years by a growing Chinese presence.

The administration also had a more direct motivation. After the January 6 insurrection by Trump supporters at the Capitol in Washington attempting to overturn the results of the 2020 election, President Joe Biden felt very strongly about any attempt by Bolsonaro to question the outcome of a free and fair election, US officials say.



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The background Tanks on the streets of Rio in 1964 after a coup to overthrow the leftist president João Goulart. The left has long been suspicious of US involvement in domestic affairs

The campaign was not without risk. The US has been frequently criticised in the region for interfering in its internal affairs; in 1964 Washington backed a military coup in Brazil that overthrew the government of leftist president João Goulart and ushered in a 21-year dictatorship.

Those events fuelled longstanding scepticism of the US among the Brazilian left, including Lula, who in 2020 said Washington was “[always behind](#)” efforts to undermine democracy in the region.

The Biden administration had to find a way to get its message across without the US becoming a political football in a fiercely contested election.

The solution was a concerted but unannounced campaign across multiple branches of the US government, including the military, the CIA, the state department, the Pentagon and the White House. “This was a very unusual engagement,” says Michael McKinley, a former top state department official and ex-ambassador to Brazil.

“It was almost a calendar year of strategy, being carried out with a very specific objective in mind, not to support one Brazilian candidate over another, but heavily focused on the [electoral] process, on making sure the process worked.”

Supporting the electoral process

The effort began, according to former top state department official Tom Shannon, with the visit of Biden’s national security adviser Jake Sullivan to Brazil in August 2021. An embassy statement said the visit “reaffirmed the longstanding strategic relationship between the United States and Brazil” but Sullivan left his meeting with Bolsonaro worried, according to Shannon.

“Bolsonaro continued to talk about fraud in US elections and continued to understand his relationship with the United States in terms of his relationship with President Trump”, says Shannon, who is also a former US ambassador to Brazil and maintains close contacts in the country.

“Sullivan and the team that went with him came away thinking that Bolsonaro was entirely capable of attempting to manipulate election results or deny them as [Donald] Trump had done. So there was a lot of thought put into how the United States could be supportive of the electoral process without appearing to be interfering. And that’s how it starts.”





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2020-22 Bolsonaro remained close to Donald Trump after Biden took office, and throughout the summer of 2022 he cast doubt on the fairness of Brazil's electoral systems just as Trump had

As election season began, Brazil was a political tinderbox. The country was profoundly divided between Bolsonaro, a former army captain and close ally of Trump, and Lula, a leftwing icon whose achievements in reducing poverty in his first two terms had been overshadowed by a corruption conviction and a jail term. Lula was released early and his conviction was later overturned on procedural grounds.

The risks to Brazil's democracy were clear in a country with a modern history of military dictatorship. Bolsonaro had lionised the regime which ran Brazil from 1964 to 1985, and in his first term had showered the armed forces and police with praise and money, raising their budgets and handing key government positions to serving military officers.

In August 2021, he ordered tanks to roll past congress and the supreme court in a parade on the day legislators were voting on his ultimately unsuccessful proposal to reinstate paper ballots.

Some generals were uncomfortable with Bolsonaro's attempts to politicise an institution which had tried to stay out of politics since returning power to civilians in 1985 and were worried about the risks of the military stepping outside the constitution. Hamilton Mourão, Bolsonaro's vice-president, was one of those.

Shannon recalls a visit by Mourão to New York for a private lunch with investors last July, while tensions were running high. After batting away questions about the risks of a coup, repeating that he was confident Brazil's armed forces were committed to democracy, Mourão entered a lift to leave and the former ambassador joined him.

"As the door was closing, I said to him: 'You know your visit here is very important. You heard from people around the table regarding their concerns. And I share those

you heard from people around the table regarding their concerns. And I share those concerns and, quite frankly, I'm very worried. Mourão turned to me and he said: 'I'm very worried too.'" Mourão's spokesman declined to comment.

Electronic voting

That same month Bolsonaro formally launched his bid for re-election. "The army", he told supporters, "is on our side."

A few days before the campaign announcement, the president redoubled efforts to cast doubt on the electoral process. He summoned around 70 ambassadors to a meeting in Brasília and made a presentation questioning the reliability of Brazil's electronic voting system. The country helped pioneer electronic voting in 1996 and is the only nation in the world to collect and count votes entirely digitally.

Now, Bolsonaro was suggesting the machines were prone to fraud. Alarmed US officials decided they needed to step up their messaging campaign. Bolsonaro, they reasoned, had drawn the international community into the voting machine controversy by calling the meeting and Washington now needed to make its views even clearer.



© Andressa Anholete/Getty

July 2022 As Bolsonaro launches his election bid a US official reports that the vice-president, Hamilton Mourão, said he agreed with US worries about the possibility of a coup

The next day, the state department issued an unusual endorsement of the voting system, saying that “Brazil’s capable and time-tested electoral system and democratic institutions serve as a model for nations in the hemisphere and the world.”

“The statement by the US was very important, especially for the military,” one top Brazilian official says. “They get equipment from the US and do training there, so having good relations with the US is very important for the Brazilian military . . . The statement was an antidote against military intervention.”

A week later, secretary of defence Lloyd Austin used a visit to a regional defence ministers’ meeting in Brasília to send a clear message. Military and security forces needed to be under “strong civilian control”, he said in a speech.

In private, Austin and other officials spelt out to Brazil’s military the consequences of supporting any unconstitutional action, such as a coup. “There would be significant negative ramifications for the bilateral military-to-military relationship if they were to do something and they needed to respect the outcome of the election”, a senior administration official says.



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Summer 2022 Bolsonaro criticises the reliability of Brazil’s electronic voting system during his campaign

Further reinforcement of the message to Brazil's top brass came from General Laura Richardson, head of US Southern Command which covers Latin America, during visits last September and in November 2021, officials said. CIA chief William Burns also came and told the Bolsonaro administration [not to mess with the elections](#).

“The secretary of defence, the head of the CIA, the national security adviser all visited in an election year,” says McKinley. “Is this usual? No, it's not.”

The US also provided some practical help to the election process, helping to overcome supply chain difficulties to obtain components, especially semiconductors, needed to manufacture new machines. The former US ambassador to Brazil, Anthony Harrington, was able to leverage connections inside chipmaker Texas Instruments to, he says, “distinguish semiconductor needs and give priority to the impact on democratic elections”.

The US state department and some senior Brazilian officials also asked Taiwanese authorities to give priority to Brazil's [need for semiconductors](#) made by Nuvoton, a Taiwanese company, which are used in the voting machines, according to two sources.

At the same time as the US was conducting its own messaging campaign, key figures in Brazil's institutions were holding their own private meetings with military chiefs to try to persuade them to stay within the bounds of the constitution and raising the alarm abroad about the risks of a coup. Some of those involved have spoken to the Financial Times, requesting anonymity because of the sensitivity of the discussions. Many still prefer to avoid any mention of their roles.

A senior Brazilian official who was closely involved recalls that Bolsonaro's navy minister, Admiral Almir Garnier Santos, was the most “difficult” of the military chiefs. “He was really tempted by more radical action,” says the official. “So we had to do a whole lot of dissuasion work, the state department and the US military command said they would tear up the [military] agreements with Brazil, from training to other types of joint operations.”

At a tense dinner in late August with military chiefs lasting until two in the morning, key civilian figures attempted to persuade them that the voting machines were not rigged against Bolsonaro and that they should respect the election.

The timing was crucial: Bolsonaro was calling for mass demonstrations in his support on Brazil's independence day, September 7. Garnier did not respond to requests for

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© Victor R Caivano/AP

October 30 Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva wins the run-off election by a narrow margin, having also won the first round. He is inaugurated on January 1 2023

Luís Roberto Barroso, a supreme court judge who at the time headed Brazil's electoral court, says he also played a part in soliciting the statement from the US state department.

“I asked [Douglas Koneff, then acting US ambassador to Brazil] a couple times . . . for declarations about the integrity and credibility of our voting system and the importance of our democracy,” Barroso recalls. “He did make a statement, and more than that he got the state department to make a statement supporting democracy in Brazil and the integrity of the system.”

The US embassy declined to comment on details of confidential meetings held during the election period.

Inner circle

As the election neared, senior US officials believed that Bolsonaro also needed to hear from more voices within his own circle.

FROM MORE VOICES WITHIN HIS OWN CIRCLE.

They identified key lieutenants and political allies, not all of whom were happy about the president's attempts to stay in power whatever happened, to urge him to respect the results of the election.

Arthur Lira, head of the lower house of congress, vice-president Mourão, Tarcísio Gomes de Freitas, Bolsonaro's infrastructure minister, and Admiral Flávio Rocha, the secretary of strategic affairs in the presidency, were all conduits for US messages about the need to protect the integrity of the elections, according to those involved.

US officials stayed in regular communication with them and other key figures in the Bolsonaro government. "We got the sense that the people around Bolsonaro were urging him to do the right thing," a senior administration official says.

In the October 2 vote no candidate won an overall majority. But after the run-off vote later that month, it became clear that Lula had scored a narrow yet unarguable victory.

Several key Bolsonaro allies including de Freitas and Lira, quickly recognised the leftist's win. "Within 24 hours they accepted the results of the second round," McKinley says. "What a blow to anyone who was thinking there was room to challenge the results."

Shocked by the result, Bolsonaro disappeared from public view and did not concede, but reluctantly ordered officials to co-operate with a transfer of power.

As Lula's January 1 inauguration approached, tensions continued. On December 12, pro-Bolsonaro rioters attacked police and set fire to vehicles in Brasília. A week later, the former army captain attended a dinner with some more moderate members of his inner circle, one of those present says.





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January 8 2023 Bolsonaro supporters storm the federal government buildings in Brasília a week after the inauguration of Lula. Many of the participants state their goal is to disrupt the transfer of power

With doubts over his willingness to hand the presidential sash over to Lula at the inauguration, some of Bolsonaro's allies sought to persuade him to bring forward his plans to travel abroad and to skip the inauguration, the person present says.

When Bolsonaro left Brazil for Florida two days before Lula was sworn in, the Americans, along with many Brazilians, breathed a sigh of relief. But the danger had not passed.

On January 8, thousands of Bolsonaro supporters staged an insurrection in Brasília, storming congress, the supreme court and the presidential palace demanding military intervention. Brazil's military did intervene within hours — but to quash the protests. More than 1,000 demonstrators were arrested.

Police investigators would later find draft documents in the possession of Bolsonaro's justice minister, Anderson Torres, and one of his closest aides, army Lieutenant-Colonel Mauro Cid, which outlined steps to overturn the results of the election and maintain power.

Torres, who spent five months in jail this year as he awaits trial, says the document found in his home was “leaked out of context” and “without legal validity”. Cid could not be reached for comment.

The US decided to make one last push in favour of respecting the election. Biden was in Mexico at the time of the insurrection for a North American leaders' summit, and saw what was happening on the news. “He asked right then to speak with Lula,” says a senior administration official. “After the call, he proposed to Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau and to Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador that we issue a trilateral joint statement supporting Lula and Brazil. It was a first of its kind for North America.”

With the rioters arrested, the military under control and Lula in power, Brazil's democracy appears to have survived the potential threat.

For the Biden administration, relations with Brazil have improved but there has still been friction with the new government. Lula showed little public recognition of the US campaign to protect the election. His first official visit to Washington in February was a low-key affair lasting a day.

In April he took a big delegation to China for a three-day, two-city tour. On that trip, Lula rejected US sanctions on Huawei, the Chinese tech company, lashed out at the west's military support for Ukraine and endorsed Beijing's drive for alternatives to the US dollar.

A spokesperson for Lula insists that he talked in Washington about "defending democracy and threats from the extreme right" and that a longer trip to the US is being considered.

"People here understand that there are going to be political differences," says Shannon. "But there's a tone of anger and resentment underlying all of this which really caught people by surprise . . . It's as if he doesn't know or doesn't want to acknowledge what we did."

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