

Food insecurity haunts Brazil's election race

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The spectre of hunger hangs over Brazil's presidential race this year like few before it. Rampant inflation and fallout from the pandemic have pushed food insecurity here to levels nearly unrecognisable a decade ago. One in three Brazilians say they have struggled recently to feed their families. Trailing in the polls and eager to offer relief, President Jair Bolsonaro dribbled budget rules to boost Brazil's main welfare programme by 50 per cent through to the end of the year. But that has failed to move the needle so far. Opinion surveys show his support among the poorest Brazilians flat or flagging since the more generous payouts started. Welfare recipients interviewed by Reuters in a half dozen states were reluctant to give Bolsonaro credit for the expiring election-year benefits. Most said they are pulling for his left-wing rival, former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who slashed hunger and extreme poverty with the help of a commodity boom during his 2003-2010 presidency. In the slums of Brazilian cities, families are struggling to feed themselves as hunger rises in the powerhouse food exporter. "We're the forgotten ones. There is no lunch today," says Dona Monica in a "favela" called Arco Iris (Rainbow) on a river smelling of sewers and urine in the northeastern city of Recife where dengue is rife. In the centre of Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city, Carla Marquez lives in a room paid for by a church with her husband Carlos Henrique Mendes, 25, and their five-year-old daughter. "We haven't bought food in ages. Prices are absurdly high. I've nothing to give her," the 36-year old mother said in tears. UN HUNGER MAP Brazil's election looks to be yet another case of soaring global food inflation unsettling incumbents, but hunger has been mounting a comeback in Latin America's largest economy for the better part of a decade. Just eight years ago, Brazil hit its UN target for eliminating widespread malnourishment ahead of schedule. Since then, the share of Brazilians who say they cannot feed their families in the past 12 months has more than doubled to 36 per cent, according to the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV) think tank. The result is a consensus across Brazil's political establishment that the country needs a stronger social safety net. Almost every major party and candidate has backed "emergency" cash stipends to 20 million families, which benefit roughly one in four Brazilians – making it one of the world's most far-reaching welfare programmes. FGV's Marcelo Neri says he has never seen hunger so central to the electoral debate. "The whole political spectrum is talking about food insecurity, the emphasis is everywhere," he said. Bolsonaro and Lula both promise they will work to extend this year's more generous welfare programme or even expand it. Neither has explained how they would fund this – but analysts reckon it will mean the end of a constitutional spending limit that has defined fiscal policy for the past six years. LULA LEADING RACE Voter opinion polls showed that Bolsonaro did manage to narrow Lula's advantage earlier this year by increasing Auxilio Brasil and working to lower fuel costs, but Lula had begun to pull away again in the past two weeks. Lula received 48.4 per cent in last Sunday's first-round vote, with Bolsonaro on 43.2 per cent – meaning Lula fell short of outright victory. The outcome of the election will be decided in the second-round vote in three weeks. "The aid has not generated the effect the government had expected. The increase was seen by people as an electoral manoeuvre and they are rejecting the ploy," pollster Felipe Nunes, of Quaest Pesquisa e Consultoria, told Reuters. FGV economist Mr Neri agreed Lula's credibility is higher among Brazil's poor, because Bolsonaro's social welfare measures have been erratic. The government reduced and then suspended emergency aid after the Covid-19 pandemic, and when welfare was restored it was at a lower value, he said. Meanwhile, food prices have continued to go up, driven by fuel and transport costs, and have risen 9.83 per cent in the year. "People say Bolsonaro is helping. But he gives and then takes it away. It was much better with Lula," said Luciana Messias dos Santos, 29. In her wooden shack in Estrutural, Brasilia's largest favela, she had to adapt her stove to cook with wood as fuel because gas is too expensive. Bolsonaro has denied hunger has become critical in Brazil, irritated by the importance it has taken on in the election campaign. "Hunger in Brazil? It does not exist the way it is being reported," he said in August. Last week, his economy minister, Paulo Guedes, took on a survey by the Penssan Network that said 33 million people face starvation. "It's a lie. That is false. These are not the numbers," he said. In Rio de Janeiro, welfare recipient Carla Feliciano, 38, says she survives by picking fruit and vegetables from dumpsters outside the municipal market. She said life has become very difficult after the pandemic under the Bolsonaro government. "Welfare or no welfare makes no difference. I vote for Lula. I will die a Lula supporter," she said. WELFARE AS ELECTION PLOY Average income of poor Brazilians has fallen to levels of 10 years ago, widening the country's stark social inequality. Bolsonaro has focused on winning their votes which he needs to be re-elected – an uphill task running against Lula, whose conditional cash-transfer welfare programme called Bolsa Familia lifted millions from poverty when he was in office. Bolsonaro renamed the programme Auxilio Brasil to end the association of social welfare with Lula, but this has not brought the electoral dividends he had hoped for. "Bolsonaro has tried to play this card, but it won't help him," said Carla's husband Carlos, who scrapes by collecting scrap cardboard in the streets of Sao Paulo. He said he would vote for Lula and his Workers Party. His wife was not so sure. Living in a tent with her children and grandchildren just half a mile from the presidential place in Brasilia, Edilene Alves says she sees through Bolsonaro's ploy. The distrust of Bolsonaro's motives held by Carlos and Edilene was echoed by low-income Brazilians from Porto Alegre in the deep south to Salvador and Recife in the northeast. "They think we are dumb. Increasing welfare from 400 reais [£70] to 600 reais does not help when supermarket prices have risen so much," said the migrant from Brazil's poor northeast. "People are going to die of hunger." Denial of responsibility! 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