

## Food insecurity haunts Brazilian election race

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The specter of hunger hangs like few this year over Brazil's presidential race. The rampant inflation and the effects of the pandemic have brought food insecurity here to levels almost unrecognizable a decade ago. One in three Brazilians say they have struggled to feed their families lately. Trailing in the polls and eager to lend aid, President Jair Bolsonaro dribbled fiscal rules to boost Brazil's key welfare program by 50 percent through the end of the year. See also Pasadena firefighters rescue blind dog that fell into hole at construction site But that hasn't been able to move the needle so far. Opinion polls show that his support among the poorest Brazilians is flat or weakening since the more generous payouts started. Luciana Messias dos Santos, 29, poses for a photo in front of her empty fridge in her home in Brasília's Estrutural favela (Reuters) Thawanny eats a lunch of rice, beans and eggs at her family's home, in the favela Arco Iris (Reuters) Welfare recipients interviewed by Reuters in half a dozen states were reluctant to give Bolsonaro credit for the expired election year benefits. Most said they advocate for his left-wing rival, former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who reduced hunger and extreme poverty through a commodity boom during his 2003-2010 presidency. In the slums of Brazilian cities, families struggle to feed themselves as hunger mounts at the food exporter's powerhouse. 'We are the forgotten. There's no lunch today,' said Dona Monica at a "favela" called Arco Iris (Rainbow) on a sewer and urine-smelling river in the northeastern city of Recife, where dengue fever is rife. Carla Marquez, 36, who is six months pregnant, cries as she talks about gas and food prices in the room where she and her family live in Sao Paulo (Reuters) Luciana stands with her son while she cooks with firewood outside her house (Reuters) In the center of Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city, Carla Marquez lives with her husband Carlos Henrique Mendes (25) and their five-year-old daughter in a room paid for by a church. 'We haven't bought food in ages. The prices are absurdly high. I have nothing to give her,' said the 36-year-old mother in tears. UN HUNGER CARD Brazil's elections appear to be yet another instance of rising global food inflation alarming incumbents, but hunger has been making a comeback in Latin America's largest economy for nearly a decade. Just eight years ago, Brazil reached its UN goal of eliminating widespread malnutrition ahead of schedule. Since then, the proportion of Brazilians who say they cannot feed their families has more than doubled in the past 12 months to 36 percent, according to the think tank Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV). The result is a consensus in Brazil's political establishment that the country needs a stronger social safety net. Nearly every major party and candidate has supported 20 million families in "emergency" cash, benefiting about one in four Brazilians – making it one of the world's most far-reaching welfare programs. Elvira de Fatima Saraiva, 57, prepares dinner, the only meal of the day for the family, in Porto Alegre (Reuters) A view of the Brasília Teimosa favela is seen among the residential buildings of the Boa Viagem neighborhood of Recife (Reuters) Marcelo Neri of FGV says he has never seen hunger so central to the election debate. "The whole political spectrum is talking about food insecurity, the focus is everywhere," he said. Bolsonaro and Lula both pledge they will work to expand or even expand this year's more generous wellness program. Neither has explained how they would fund this, but analysts believe it will mark the end of a constitutional spending cap that has defined fiscal policy for the past six years. LULA LEADING RACE Voter polls showed Bolsonaro managed to narrow Lula's advantage by increasing Auxilio Brasil and cutting fuel costs earlier this year, but Lula has started to back off in the past two weeks. Lula got 48.4 percent in last Sunday's first ballot, with Bolsonaro at 43.2 percent – meaning Lula didn't take the outright win. The results of the elections will be determined in the second round of voting in three weeks. Maria Jose holds her lunch, a bowl of rice, in front of her house in the Arco Iris favela (Reuters) Luciana feeds her 10-month-old baby while sitting on her husband Felipe dos Santos, 26, lap at their home (Reuters) "The aid has not had the effect that the government expected. The raise was seen by people as an electoral maneuver and they reject the trick," pollster Felipe Nunes, from Quaest Pesquisa e Consultoria, told Reuters. FGV economist Neri agreed that 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 prosperity was restored it was at a lower value, he said. Meanwhile, food prices have continued to rise, driven by fuel and transportation costs, and are up 9.83 percent in the year. "People say that Bolsonaro helps. But he gives and then takes it away. It was much better with Lula," said 29-year-old Luciana Messias dos Santos. Carla dos Santos Feliciano, 38, pushes a buggy with fruits and vegetables donated by merchants at the CEASA supply center in Rio de Janeiro (Reuters) Carla sorts discarded food to find edibles to cook with, at CEASA Supply Center (Reuters) In her wooden hut in Estrutural, Brasília's largest favela, she had to adapt her stove to cook with wood as fuel because gas is too expensive. Bolsonaro has denied that hunger in Brazil has become critical, annoyed by the importance it has been given in the election campaign. "Hungry in Brazil? It doesn't exist as reported," he said in August. Last week, his Commerce Secretary, Paulo Guedes, captured a Penssan Network survey that found 33 million people are starving. "It's a lie. That's 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 Bolsonaro's government. "Welcome or no assistance does not matter. I vote for Lula. I will die as a Lula supporter," she said. WELL-BEING AS AN ELECTION PLOY The average income of poor Brazilians has fallen to the level of ten years ago, increasing the high social inequality in the country. Bolsonaro has focused on winning their votes he needs to be re-elected – an uphill task for Lula, whose conditional money transfer program called Bolsa Familia lifted millions out of poverty while in office. Carla sorts food that has been thrown away to find edibles to cook (Reuters) Izabela, 2, eats a meal made from food provided by her mother Carla. Was found in a garbage can (Reuters) Bolsonaro renamed the program Auxilio Brasil to end Social Security's association with Lula, but it hasn't delivered the electoral dividends he'd hoped for. "Bolsonaro has tried to play this card, but it won't help him," said Carla's husband Carlos, who is scraping by collecting old cardboard on the streets of Sao Paulo. He said he would vote for Lula and his Workers' Party. His wife wasn't so sure. Edilene Alves, who lives with her children and grandchildren in a tent just 800 meters from the presidential site in Brasília, says she sees Bolsonaro's trick. The distrust of Bolsonaro's motives 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 stupid. Increasing prosperity from 400 reais [£70] to 600 reais doesn't help when supermarket prices have risen so sharply," said the migrant from Brazil's poor northeast. "People are dying of hunger."



