

Brazilian presidential hopefuls debate

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BRASILIA, Brazil - President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who holds a commanding lead in the polls, was conspicuously absent from the first debate of presidential candidates ahead of Brazil's Oct. 1 elections.

As Monday's televised debate began, the camera focused on five candidates seated behind a large semicircular table and then came to a stop in front of the empty sixth seat that had been reserved for Silva. His opponents accused him of fleeing a challenge.

"I cannot accept his arrogance, nor the fact that he thinks he is better than the other candidates, which he is not," said Sen. Heloisa Helena, a candidate of the leftist Party of Socialism and Liberty. "He fled the debate. He was scared to debate."

Former Sao Paulo Gov. Geraldo Alckmin of the centrist Social Democracy Party, running a distant second in opinion polls, has accused Silva of "trying to escape" the debates.

Polls indicate Silva has an advantage of more than 20 percentage points over Alckmin, while Helena trails in third place.

Presidential spokesman Giancarlo Summa said Silva decided to sit out both scheduled pre-election debates to "preserve the institution of the president of the republic." He did not elaborate.

Silva's decision to skip the debates comes a week after he appeared nervous and made several errors during a prime-time television appearance, and amid speculation that his aides prefer not to expose him in a live setting.

In the interview, Silva said the only thing falling in Brazil were salaries, when he meant inflation. And he said his government was committed to fighting ethics, instead of corruption.

Silva's administration was rocked last year by a major corruption scandal that toppled a number of key aides and officials in his Workers' Party.

But the president was never linked to the charges and managed to ride out the political storm. In recent weeks his approval ratings have returned to pre-scandal levels, thanks in part to an improving economy.