

Published: 10.16.2005

Brazilians split ahead of vote on gun ban

By **Andrei Khalip**
REUTERS

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil - Dire campaign ads warning that Brazilians could be made defenseless against any Nazi-like tyranny have not budged Lourdes Lima from her plan to vote to ban gun sales in a national referendum.

"I'm sick and tired of guns; we see them or hear them every day. I made up my mind and will vote to ban them," the 54-year-old street sweeper said, crumpling a leaflet warning of the dangers of disarmament by showing Hitler giving a Nazi salute. "I don't know who's this guy anyway."

Brazil's Oct. 23 vote on whether to ban gun sales, which the government says is the world's first nationwide referendum on firearms, is being watched closely by gun makers and opponents across the globe as a referendum that could set a precedent for campaigns in other countries.

Brazil has the highest number of gun deaths in the world, with 36,091 people shot and killed last year, according to government figures.

More than 120 million people are expected to vote on the bill in Brazil, where voting is compulsory. Television and radio ads financed by groups on both sides of the debate have bombarded Brazilians.

"Those who want disarmament, raise your right hand," read the pro-gun leaflet, alluding to Nazi Germany's decision to ban guns for civilians in 1938.

Since the media blitz started several weeks ago, support for the ban has fallen and it now looks like voters are increasingly split on the issue.

Just two months ago, polls showed 80 percent would vote for the ban. A survey released Friday showed that number had plummeted to 45 percent.

Even the government is divided. President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva endorses the ban. But his vice president and defense minister, Jose Alencar, says the ban would encourage criminals.

Human-rights groups endorse the government-proposed ban, dismissing as absurd claims it would be a threat to democracy. But some groups acknowledge the prohibition of legal gun sales would not reduce the arsenals held by dreaded drug gangs and other criminals, as Lima hopes.

Almost 60 percent of an estimated 17 million guns in Brazil were obtained illegally, said human- and social-rights group Viva Rio.

Over the past year, violent shootouts between drug gangs with assault rifles have often shut the scenic ocean-side road connecting Rio's famous Leblon and Sao Conrado beaches.

Ballot details

- Brazil holds a national referendum on Oct. 23 on a government-proposed ban on the sale of firearms and ammunition to civilians. Some facts on the ballot:
- It is the first time a nation uses a referendum to decide whether to ban gun sales, according to Brazil's government.
- Existing gun-control laws require that citizens be at least 25 to buy a gun, have no criminal record, provide proof of employment and residence, in addition to passing psychological and gun-handling tests. Gun owners can buy no more than 50 cartridges a year.
- If the ban is approved, civilians will no longer be able to buy guns or ammunition, though those who already own registered firearms will be able to keep them at home. Police, firefighters, judges and the military will still be able to buy guns for their own private use. Private security firms will also be allowed to purchase firearms.

SOURCE: Reuters

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