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Brazil: Ban On Arms Sales Fails In Popular Ballot

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An Oct. 23 popular referendum in Brazil to ban the sales of guns and bullets to civilians overwhelmingly failed, contrary to early expectations that Brazilians would support the measure. There were differing interpretations of why the measure underwent such a radical shift in popularity, ranging from it being a rejection of corruption in the government of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to it being a success of marketing by the domestic and international pro-gun lobby. The government is still pointing to successes in its disarmament program started in 2003, which set up the October vote and has collected more than 400,000 firearms. "Nao" vote stages massive comeback Brazil suffers from the highest number of annual firearms deaths in the world, about 36,000 last year, according to its Health Ministry and the anti-violence advocacy group Viva Rio. By comparison, the US, with a population nearly 40% larger, had about 30,000 firearms deaths in 2002, according to the most recent government numbers. Calculated as a percentage of population, only Venezuela has proportionally more gun deaths. Estimates and surveys earlier this year foresaw as much as 70% to 80% of Brazilian voters backing a ban. But, in the end, Brazilian voters rejected the proposal by nearly 2 to 1. US groups fighting the gun issue closely watched the vote, saying a successful gun ban in this country of 186 million people could have influenced US arms policy. "It was the most sudden and drastic shift in public opinion I've ever seen," said Ricardo Guedes, director of the Sensus polling firm. The "Nao" vote took a 28-point lead with 64% of the vote, while "Sim" won 36%. President Lula endorsed the ban as did the national Catholic bishops conference Conferencia Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB) and a list of 65 top security professionals from the federal, military, and civil police. One analysis of the shift in public opinion said it resulted from three weeks of free radio and television advertising time allotted to the two congressional blocs representing the two sides in the debate: the Front for a Gun-Free Brazil, which supported the ban, and the Front for the Right to Legitimate Self-Defense, which opposed it. Those who supported the ban stressed that ending the legal sale of firearms and ammunition would help prevent gun-related deaths resulting from interpersonal disputes, accidents, and suicides, in addition to cutting off one of the sources of firearms for criminals. Opponents of the ban succeeded in winning over voters with arguments based on the government's inability to ensure public security and the subsequent need for people to have the right to defend themselves with firearms, concluded Guedes. A lack of confidence in the government's ability to protect the populace was notable. A report by the human rights group Amnesty International (AI) released in the last week of October said the use of death squads and torture are common practices among Brazilian police. Only 35% of Brazilians said they had confidence in their police in an August poll by the research firm IBOPE. Rural and remote areas like Amazonas state, where 2.8 million people live in a region nearly the size of Alaska, saw very high rates of voter rejection for the ban. Compared to the 64% of the entire country who voted no, rejection rates ran as high as 87% in rural states. Lawlessness, slavery, murders, and illegal land seizures contributed to the perception of the people of the rural regions, with little government presence to count on, that they needed to have firearms for self-defense. After months of corruption scandals surrounding Lula's governing party (see NotiSur, 2005-06-24, 2005-09-09), the president's connection to the yes vote may have proven to be a curse. His popularity numbers have declined sharply, and some voters may have seen the referendum as an opportunity to rebuke...
him. Government: disarmament effort has reduced gun deaths

The number of gun-related deaths led the Brazilian Congress to pass a new law on disarmament in December 2003. The law prohibits civilians from carrying firearms in public, limiting that right to the armed forces, police, and security guards. It also puts tight restrictions on gun ownership and requires all firearms and ammunition manufactured in Brazil to be marked for identification. An October Ministry of Health report said the number of gun-related deaths in Brazil dropped for the first time in 12 years in 2004, when 36,091 people were killed by firearms, 3,234 fewer than in 2003. The Brazilian authorities say the 8.2% reduction was largely the result of the disarmament program that began to be implemented in July of last year, through which firearms were purchased from the public in order to be destroyed. More than 450,000 guns were turned in a week before the vote, and it was hoped that the total number collected would reach half a million by the deadline set for the program, Oct. 23, the same day as the referendum. Those who gave their arms to federal police received between 100 reais and 300 reais (between US$45 and US$130). While it became illegal to own unregistered arms, there was an amnesty allowed to register weapons that ended the day of the referendum. The legal firearms trade has already experienced a sharp decline, as the number of shops selling guns and ammunition has fallen from 1,200 in 1997 to only 300 currently. Rio de Janeiro newspaper O Globo reported that the lead-up to the vote helped reverse arms dealers' declining fortunes, however, with arms sales in the past 10 months increasing 27.8% relative to 2004. This year, 68,800 weapons have been sold compared with 53,811 in 2004. Despite last year's decline, the annual number of gun-related deaths has more than doubled since 1992, when 16,729 cases were recorded. This astronomical rise has led many to refer to the problem as an epidemic. Most of the victims are between the ages of 15 and 24, making gun deaths the leading cause of death for members of that age group in Brazil. NRA helps "No" drive Brazil's gun lobby, which boasts two of the world's largest weapons suppliers with Taurus and ammunition maker CBC, fought the measure heartily. Thanks to an aggressive, savvy media campaign with catchy Internet and television ads, their arguments spread in the weeks prior to the vote. In one TV spot, a camera panned to a man standing behind the barred door of his house while a voiceover said that decent citizens are forced to take refuge in their own homes because the criminals have the guns. Another tactic that got people's attention was a fake story circulated on the Internet saying that a drug gang in Rio de Janeiro was giving money to the Yes campaign implying that the criminals people disarmed. The No campaign received help from the US National Rifle Association (NRA), the premier anti-gun-control group in the US. Andrew Arulanandam, director of public affairs for the NRA, said his group had not given money to the Brazilian No campaign but that "some counsel had been given." "Because of our charter we are involved in issues that happen only on the domestic front," Arulanandam said. "We are concerned about what is happening down in Brazil because we believe and the gun-control movement admits this that they are using that country as a beachhead in trying to enact worldwide gun control and the ultimate target is the USA." Josephine Bourgois, a researcher for Viva Rio, decries the quality of the debate. "The battle is not being won by scientific data or common sense but by money. This is a marketing campaign." In Australia, where the right to bear guns became a "privilege" a decade ago, the number of deaths from firearms was cut in half in five years, say gun-control advocates. Japan, which has a similar law, registers only about 30 gun-related killings a year fewer than an average weekend in Sao Paulo, Brazil's biggest city. During the past two months, gun fights between favela gangs and Rio de Janeiro police have closed major highways and tunnels repeatedly and sparked panic among residents. The possibility that a major nation like Brazil would pass an arms ban accelerated what critics called the "globalization" of the gun-manufacturers' and users' lobby. Brazil's gun lobby reportedly sought help from its northern counterpart, the NRA, as disarmament
became government policy. In 2003, as the disarmament law neared a vote, Charles Cunningham, an NRA lobbyist in Washington, traveled to Sao Paulo on invitation from the Brazilian Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property, a pro-gun group. He spoke publicly and met privately with gun supporters to discuss strategies, though an NRA spokesman said the association does not discuss the contents of its meetings. While the NRA denied any direct funding of Brazilian groups, activists say Brazilian gun-control foes have directly translated NRA materials and used statistics and rhetoric that bear a striking resemblance to NRA television infomercials aired in the US. In some cases, the translations were culturally clumsy. One TV spot referred to the "right" to own a gun (Brazilians have no such right) while another argued for gun ownership because "it can take up to seven minutes for police to respond to your call." Jessica Galeria, a former Fulbright scholar who coordinates research on women and armed violence for Viva Rio, observed that the "seven minutes" reference was taken from US NRA materials. In Brazil, she said, "it would likely take much longer." [Sources: El Mercurio (Chile), 10/05/05, 10/18/05; The Christian Science Monitor, The Nation, 10/21/05; Associated Press, 10/20/05, 10/23/05; Inter Press Service, 09/20/05, 10/21/05, 10/24/05; O Globo (Brazil), 09/26/05, 10/03-05/05, 10/18/05, 10/20-24/05; Bloomberg, 10/24/05; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 10/10/05, 10/18/05, 10/21/05, 10/24/05; Folha de Sao Paulo (Brazil), 10/21/05, 10/23-25/05; The Miami Herald, 10/20/05, 10/21/05, 10/24/05, 10/31/05]

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