

Brazil limits gun ownership and restricts civilian access to arms and ammunition



Machine guns hang on the wall of a shooting club in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in October 2022 [File: Matias Delacroix/AP Photo]

Brasilia, July 23 (RHC)-- Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has moved to restrict access to firearms, seeking to reverse a trend of proliferating gun ownership under his predecessor Jair Bolsonaro.

Lula signed a decree on Friday tightening access to guns, cutting the number of firearms a civilian can own from four to two. The new regulations also require documentation affirming the necessity of holding the weapon and decrease the amount of ammunition a person can have per gun.

“It’s one thing for the regular citizen to have a gun at home for his protection, as a guarantee, because some people think this is safety. Let them have it. But we cannot allow gun arsenals to be in the people’s hands,” the president said during a signing ceremony.

Gun ownership skyrocketed in Brazil during Bolsonaro’s tenure, during which restrictions were loosened and the purchase of firearms encouraged. Gun manufacturers also saw their influence grow, especially within the conservative political sphere.

The new decree restricts the operation of shooting clubs. They will no longer be able to operate 24 hours a day; their maximum hours will be from six in the morning to ten at night, and they will have to be at least one kilometer away from educational centers. To get to the club, users will no longer be able to carry a loaded gun, and they will also have to inform the club in advance of the route they are going to take and the time they will be shooting.

Among other measures, the decree leaves in the hands of the Federal Police the competence to issue permits and control weapons, which until now was in the hands of the Army. Weapons such as 9 mm, .40 caliber pistols (the most purchased in Brazil in recent years), and .45ACP are again restricted and may only be in the hands of the security forces.

The common citizen who wants to buy a weapon for personal defense will only be able to buy two pistols and have 50 rounds of ammunition per year and will also have to demonstrate to the Federal Police the "effective need" to possess that weapon; until now, he could buy four pistols and have 200 rounds of ammunition.

While higher rates of firearm ownership are linked to increased gun violence, the increase in Brazil over the last several years has not resulted in an uptick in the country’s rate of violent crime. On Thursday, the Brazilian Forum on Public Safety, a crime-tracking organisation, released a report that found homicides had reached their lowest point in a decade.

The group found that 47,500 people were killed in violent crimes last year, the lowest rate since 2011 and down 2.4 percent from 2021. A number of factors can contribute to decreasing crime trends, and criminologists are doubtful that increased rates of gun ownership account for the country’s declining homicide rate.

In addition, the percentage of homicides committed with a firearm remains higher in Brazil than in other countries. Firearm injuries accounted for 77 percent of Brazil’s homicides in 2022, compared with the 44-percent average worldwide. Gun ownership in the country nearly tripled from 2018 to 2022.

“Although homicides have not increased, the percentage of deaths by firearms in Brazil is still very high,” Carolina Ricardo, director of the Instituto Sou da Paz, a nonprofit group that monitors public security, told the Associated Press.

She credits public security policies and social programmes that help keep children in school with helping to keep homicide rates low. Samira Bueno, who serves as executive director for the public safety forum, also pointed to a fragile truce among several of the country’s largest criminal gangs as a reason behind the homicide decline. Brazil’s ageing population could also be factored in, the experts explained.

The Igarape Institute, another public security research group, applauded the new rules President Lula instituted on Friday. It called the measures “another step to regain responsible parameters and legal security in controlling guns in Brazil”.

Under the new restrictions, a civilian gun permit in Brazil is valid for three to five years, as opposed to 10 years under Bolsonaro.

The objective is to reduce the amount of weapons and ammunition available to civilians, as well as limit the acquisition of weapons by hunters, shooters, and collectors. All this at a time when Brazil is facing an increase in attacks in the country's schools in recent years.

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