

Rattled by gun violence, Swedish voters embrace nationalist party



Support for the nationalist Sweden Democrats party led by Jimmie Akesson is at 21 per cent. PHOTO: REUTERS

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STOCKHOLM - A five-year-old boy struck by a ricocheting bullet, a mother hit in the playground as she tried to protect her daughter, and another woman caught in the crossfire of a gangland killing in a mall - for Swedes, last month's attacks have become depressingly familiar in the European capital of gun crime and will be key a factor in Sunday's election.

The Nordic region's largest economy heads into a tight vote that stands to make the nationalist Sweden Democrats the second-largest political force.

Support for the party led by Jimmie Akesson is at 21 per cent, putting them only behind the Social Democrats under Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson, who commands a 29 per cent lead.

As support for the Sweden Democrats has surged, their loose coalition of opposition parties on the right look set to poll practically level with Andersson's alliance.

As most of Europe grapples with the cost-of-living crisis and surging energy prices, gun violence has become a central theme in the election campaign Sweden.

In the first eight months of this year, 47 people were killed by gunfire in the country of 10 million.

That's more than in the entire last year, propelling a call for law and order to the top of the political agenda in a country known more for its cradle-to-grave welfare system.

"The situation when it comes to gun violence is very serious, very dark," said Ardavan Khoshnood, a criminologist and physician at the Skane University Hospital. "When it comes to shootings we are far above the European average."

Failure to properly integrate immigrants over the years has coincided with insufficient attention from the justice system, allowing criminal gangs to flourish relatively undisturbed, Khoshnood said.

"As they have been given space to grow, conflicts have escalated, contributing to the emergence of a huge market for firearms," he said.

As gang violence has spread from Sweden's largest cities to places like Eskilstuna, where the mother and the young boy were caught in the crossfire last month, political parties across the spectrum are rushing to formulate proposals that seek to convince voters they are tackling the issue.

Prime Minister Andersson, who has been in office for less than a year, has promised to "turn every stone" in the battle against violent crime, and her government has tightened laws on a number of offences, including gun possession, witness intimidation and rape.

In Sweden, anyone above the age of 18 without a criminal record can legally own a gun, though obtaining a license requires a certificate from a shooting club, and buyers of hunting weapons need to pass a special exam.

Almost 600,000 Swedes are registered gun owners, though most of weapons for criminal purposes are smuggled into the country.

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For the right-wing opposition bloc that has coalesced around the Moderate Party candidate Ulf Kristersson, those measures don't go far enough.

Kristersson's proposals include giving the police authority to tap phones without concrete suspicion of criminal activity, and double sentencing for gang-related crimes.

The nationalist Sweden Democrats were long shunned because of their roots in the neo-Nazi movement, but have managed to break into the mainstream after expelling members with racist views and abandoning a long-held demand for Sweden to leave the European Union.

Kristersson and Akesson held their first face-to-face talks in 2019, and the parties have since formed a loose alliance that includes two smaller parties.

Whoever ends up ahead in Sunday's election is unlikely to make any major difference for Sweden's prospects of winning the battle against rising gun violence, according to Khoshnood, the criminologist.

"Almost all political parties have a tough-on-crime agenda," he said. "What we also need is more police, more investigators, more efficient intelligence work, and a cultural change, for example with schools doing more on crime prevention. On that front, none of the parties have a credible plan, unfortunately."

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