

Philippines OKs divisive contraceptives bill

December 17 2012, by Hrvoje Hranjski



Filipino women and supporters wave at a convoy of a congressman as they celebrate after hearing news that Philippine legislators passed a landmark law that would provide government funding for contraceptives and sexuality classes during a demonstration outside the Philippine Congress in suburban Quezon City, north of Manila, Philippines on Monday, Dec. 17, 2012. Philippine legislators passed the law despite strong opposition by the dominant Roman Catholic Church and its followers, some of whom threatened to ask the Supreme Court to thrash the legislation. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)

Philippine legislators passed a landmark bill Monday that would provide government funding for contraceptives and sexuality classes in schools

despite strong opposition by the dominant Roman Catholic Church and its followers, some of whom threatened to ask the Supreme Court to block the legislation.

The Senate and the House of Representatives passed different versions of the bill, which languished in Congress for more than a decade as legislators avoided colliding with the influential church. The two versions will have to be reconciled before President Benigno Aquino III has an opportunity to sign the legislation.

In a scene considered unusual just a few years ago, lawmakers openly defied the church's stand during the plenary voting, which was shown live on nationwide TV.

"The Catholic church has steadfastly opposed the (reproductive health) bill for 13 years," said Sen. Miriam Defensor-Santiago, a key proponent. "But I humbly submit this afternoon that there is no force more powerful than an idea whose time has come."

Aquino, who certified the bill as urgent, considers it a major step toward reducing maternal deaths and promoting family planning in the impoverished country, which has one of Asia's fastest-growing populations. Church leaders said in a pastoral letter Sunday that if passed, the bill would put the moral fiber of the nation at risk.

Archbishop Socrates Villegas, vice president of the Philippines' Bishops Conference, said that "the wide and free accessibility of contraceptives will result in the destruction of family life."

"Money for contraceptives can be better used for education and authentic health care," he said, adding that "those who corrupt the minds of children will invoke divine wrath on themselves."

The long delay in the bill's passage has been attributed to politicians' fear of upsetting conservative Catholic bishops, who helped mobilize popular support for the 1986 "people power" revolt that toppled dictator Ferdinand Marcos and the 2001 overthrow of another president, Joseph Estrada.

But in a sign of changing times and attitudes, particularly across generations, reformist civil society groups and Aquino threw their weight behind the bill despite the threat of a backlash.

An independent survey in June last year found that 68 percent of respondents agreed that the government should fund all means of family planning. An October survey of 600 teenagers in Manila, the capital, also carried out by the Social Weather Stations institute, found that 87 percent believed the government should provide reproductive health services to the poor.

The United Nations said early this year that the bill would help reduce an alarming number of pregnancy-related deaths, prevent life-threatening abortions and slow the spread of AIDS.

The U.N. Population Fund says 3.4 million pregnancies occur in the Philippines every year. Half are unintended and a third are aborted, often in clandestine, unsafe and unsanitary procedures. The fund says 11 women in the country die of pregnancy-related causes every day. Nearly 70 percent of women use no contraception at all.

Reproductive health programs are patchy and often unavailable to the poor. Some local governments have passed ordinances banning the sale of condoms and their distribution in health clinics.

"Many Filipino women have faced difficulties and sometimes death because of the absence of a comprehensive and consistent reproductive

health policy. This law can change that," said Carlos Conde, Asia researcher at New York-based Human Rights Watch.

Former Manila Mayor Lito Atienza, who opposes the bill, said pro-church groups were considering asking the Supreme Court to declare the bill unconstitutional. "You cannot legislate anything that is contrary to one's faith," he told reporters.

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