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Philippine bishops consider Supreme Court appeal for reproductive law

by Simone Orendain by Catholic News Service

Manila, Philippines — Philippine Catholic leaders said they would appeal to the Supreme Court if the Reproductive Health Bill -- versions of which have passed the House and Senate -- gets signed into law.

During a news conference Tuesday, Msgr. Joselito Asis, secretary-general of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, said if President Benigno Aquino signs the legislation into law, the bishops would support an appeal by Catholic lawyers who claim it is unconstitutional.

"The RH bill is against the goodness of family, the stability of marriage," Asis said. He explained that in other countries the ready availability of contraceptives had resulted in "promiscuity, premarital sex and extramarital affairs."

In the Philippines, contraceptives are widely available, but they are not supplied by the government.

The Senate and House have come together on bills that call for a number of provisions, including government-sanctioned family planning education for adults as well as middle and high school-age youth, and contraception for the poor to be fully covered by government health insurance. While abortion is illegal in the Philippines, the bills mandate that hospitals and clinics give medical care to women who have had abortions.

Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan, vice president of the bishops' conference, said in a statement that "conscience was stifled" during the final votes.

"If the president will sign this into law, he will give us a moral time bomb wrapped as a gift to celebrate Christmas," he said. "This law will open more doors to abortion and more crimes against women."

The proposals had gone through multiple versions as lawmakers spent more than 14 years trying to pass such legislation. Some versions got past earlier readings only to fail at voting time. Others never made it out of committee. Throughout the debates, the prominent voice of the Catholic Church opposed any form of it.

Church leaders' meetings with lawmakers had proved fruitful, but in early December, Aquino met with a number of Congressional allies. In mid-December, Aquino, a Catholic who said last year he was willing to be excommunicated for pushing passage of the bills, certified them "urgent," effectively forcing a vote before the Congressional holiday recess.

Some lawmakers who opposed the bills said they are veiled attempts at population control.

Young opponents of the bills also questioned the argument that overpopulation and the perpetuation of poverty was caused by ignorance of family planning.

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Kiboy Tabada, 21, is a founder of "UP for Life," a group based at the University of the Philippines. His group gave lawmakers counterproposals.

"In the city, Manila, for example ... the people who usually live in the slums, the poorest people living in the cities usually come from the provinces," said the engineering major.

"From this data we can see that the real cause of overpopulation and over-concentration in the cities would be the lack of opportunity in the provinces. And we consistently lobbied (them) to look at this cause more closely," he said.

Proponents are elated with the results of the voting, which had significant margins. Benjamin De Leon, president of the Forum for Family Planning and Development, called it a "landmark victory for the Philippines," particularly for women.

"This is a long-term solution to the population problem that we have, in terms of women who already would like to practice family planning after bearing two, three or four children," he said.

De Leon said parents need to have a choice on how to plan their families and space out their children's births so that they can adequately provide for them.

Tabada said UP for Life plans to remain vocal in its opposition.

"We will still stand," he said. "This battle is not over. It will never be over."

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