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Philippines church welcomes court delay on reproductive health law

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A controversial new reproductive health law in the Philippines has been put on hold and opponents, backed by the Catholic church, say they are glad for the temporary reprieve.

On March 19, the Supreme Court ordered a "status quo ante" on the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012. The order effectively puts off implementation of the law for 120 days, while the court looks over about 10 petitions filed against the act.

Some petitions challenge the constitutionality of the new law, which provides for government-funded contraception for the poor and sex education for middle- through high-school students and mandates medical care for women who have had abortions, among other provisions.

Abortion is illegal in the Philippines, and the new law remains contentious in this predominantly Catholic country.

The new law was supposed to take effect March 31.

Bishop Gabriel Reyes of Antipolo, head of the Philippine bishops' Commission on Family and Life, said the bishops' conference is throwing its support behind the lay groups that filed the challenges.

Reyes told Catholic News Service his office was happy with the Supreme Court's decision, and he is praying the law will be abolished in the end.

He said the constitution "should protect and should strengthen marriage and the family."

"The fact that [the law] is spreading free contraceptives among our people ? around 80 percent are Catholic, [it] will be endangering and undermining marriage and the family."

The bishop said the bishops' conference takes the position that in countries where contraceptives are widely distributed, their use encourages premarital sex, extramarital relations and other such occurrences that "undermine the good of the family." Furthermore, the conference takes exception with the provision that obliges conscience-driven doctors who choose not to prescribe contraceptives to refer patients to someone who will.

The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear oral arguments on the petitions June 18, and Anthony Perez, president of Filipinos for Life, was surprised by the decision to put the law on hold for four months. His group filed a challenge in the court.

"We are thrilled of course," he said in a phone interview. "But we have been telling people that the four-month suspension doesn't mean anything if we don't win the oral arguments afterward. So we'd better get prepared."

Perez's group argues that by its name alone, the law is unconstitutional, because it addresses two separate issues: parenthood and reproductive health.

Congressman Edcel Lagman, a main sponsor of the reproductive health legislation -- commonly called "RH" -- said the decision is a "very temporary delay."

Lagman told CNS, "The RH advocates have waited 13 years for the enactment of this law. Four months' delay is not too long for us to wait ... for the full implementation of the law."

Lagman said he was "very confident" that the Supreme Court would find the law is "strictly and absolutely" constitutional. He said he has a petition pending to argue in favor of the law.

President Benigno Aquino's spokesman said his office is confident the government will "successfully defend" the law.

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