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Bill to Legalize Abortion Set to Pass in Mexico City



Eduardo Verdugo/Associated Press

A bill that would give women in Mexico City the right to an abortion for any reason during the first three months of pregnancy has filled city streets with protesters against the measure.

By JAMES C. MCKINLEY Jr. Published: March 31, 2007

MEXICO CITY, March 30 — Dominated by liberals, Mexico City's legislature is expected to legalize abortion in a few weeks. The bill would make this city one of the largest entities in Latin America to break with a long tradition of women resorting to illegal clinics and midwives to end unwanted pregnancies.

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Dario Lopez-Mills/Associated Press Others support the measure. A pro-choice supporter stands in front of riot police in Mexico City.

But the measure has stirred a vicious debate and shaken this heavily Roman Catholic country to its roots. In recent days, the bill has dominated conversations from family dinner tables to the president's office. Celebrities and politicians of all stripes have lined up on both sides, throwing verbal darts at one another. Catholic and feminist groups have staged dueling protests and marches.

The contours of the debate are familiar to veterans of similar battles in the United States. But Mexico City's law would be groundbreaking in Latin America, where most countries allow abortion only under strict conditions, like when the life of the mother is in danger or when she is a victim of rape or incest. Only in Cuba, Puerto Rico and Guyana can women have abortions for any

reason during the first trimester. Three countries — Chile, Nicaragua and El Salvador — ban it without exception.

The Mexico City bill would make it legal to have an abortion during the first trimester for any reason. The procedure would be free at city health facilities. Private hospitals would be required to provide an abortion to any woman who asks for one, though doctors with religious or ethical objections would not be required to perform abortions.

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Catholic leaders and church officials have denounced the proponents as “baby killers” and have warned that the law could provoke violence against doctors who agree to provide the service. A group of Catholic lawyers are pushing for a citywide referendum on the issue, hoping to avert the vote in the city Legislative Assembly.

The debate in [Mexico](#) threatens to revive tensions between President [Felipe Calderón](#), a conservative who opposes abortion, and the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution, whose candidate narrowly lost the election last year and still refuses to concede.

Mr. Calderón has tried to stay above the fray, but he said last week, “I am in defense of life.” His health minister and other surrogates in the conservative National Action Party, however, are in the thick of it. They have proposed streamlining adoption laws, improving sex education and providing subsidies to unwed mothers as alternatives.

Leftists and feminists, meanwhile, have accused opponents of turning a blind eye to reality. They say millions of women here, and indeed throughout much of Latin America, already ignore the law and choose to abort fetuses, often in dingy underground clinics or the private homes of midwives. They risk infection, sterility and sometimes death.

“Women are dying, above all poor women, because of unsafe abortions,” said María Consuelo Mejía, the director of Catholics for the Right to Decide. “What we would like is that these women never have to confront the necessity of an abortion, but in this society it’s impossible right now. There is no access to information, to contraceptives. Nor do most women have the power to negotiate the use of contraceptives with their partners.”

Conservatives respond that abortion is tantamount to murder. “This law is a law that will cost many lives,” said Jorge Serrano Limón, the head of Provida, an anti-abortion group. “If it is signed, it will spill a lot of blood, the blood of babies just conceived in the maternal womb.”

Mr. Serrano Limón and other opponents also dispute that the law will end illegal abortions. The procedure carries such a stigma here, they say, that whether legal or not, many women will seek out underground clinics to keep their condition secret from their friends and families anyway.

The bill, tentatively scheduled for a vote on April 19, is likely to pass the 66-member city Legislative Assembly with a solid majority, and the mayor, Marcelo Ebrard, has said he will sign it, the sponsors say. It would legalize abortion in the capital, which has eight million residents, and could make Mexico City a magnet for women seeking abortions across the country.

The debate now roiling Mexico would have been nearly unthinkable a decade ago, proponents of the law say. The topic was so taboo that the church once excommunicated actresses and television producers for bringing it up in a soap opera.

“People are talking about abortion openly for the first time in Mexico,” said Lilian Sepúlveda, a lawyer with the New York-based Center for Reproductive Rights who tracks the issue in Latin America. “It is historic.”

Still, lawmakers in the Assembly are bracing for an ugly fight, and each side has held competing rallies.

Several hundred people in favor of the law marched Thursday afternoon through the narrow streets of the historic downtown. The crowd was made up mostly of women, largely from women’s rights groups and political parties that support legalizing abortion.

Last Sunday, Cardinal Norberto Rivera was among the church leaders who joined a protest march down the boulevard to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Despite a ban on the clergy taking part in politics, the cardinal told the crowd of several thousand, “We are united here so that they hear our voice, the voice of life.”

“They say that it’s a problem of a woman’s rights over her body, but they ignore the right over their bodies that all the aborted girls and boys have,” he said later in his homily. “They deny them the fundamental right, which is the right to life.”

Víctor Hugo Círigo Vásquez, the majority leader of the Assembly, said many of the 34 legislators from his Party of the Democratic Revolution who support the measure had received threatening calls and messages on their cellphones, as well as nasty e-mail. They were told they would be excommunicated or go to hell if they approved the law.

“There is a media lynching campaign that has been orchestrated by clerical groups from the very, very far right,” he said. He added, “It’s a black campaign that’s coming hard.”

The bill’s prime sponsor, Jorge Díaz Cuervo of the Alternative Party, said church leaders had broken Mexican law by meddling in the legislative process. “This is a layman’s state,” he said. “There is no reason to impose the beliefs of one church on 100 percent of the people.”

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Many women here are watching the political battle with a mix of trepidation and hope. Like many laws in Mexico, the abortion law is honored as much in its breach as its observance.

Government officials estimate at least 110,000 women a year seek illegal abortions in Mexico, and many abortion rights groups say the number is much higher. At least 88 women died in 2006 from botched abortions, the Health Ministry says, though it is far from clear that all cases were reported.

For the well off, it is common knowledge that certain gynecologists perform illegal abortions in private hospitals, disguising the procedure as something else on documents.

For the poor, unwanted pregnancies often mean finding a midwife or an underground clinic, abortion rights advocates say. Some young women also resort to huge doses of drugs for arthritis and gastritis, available over the counter, that can cause miscarriages. Others use teas made from traditional herbs to cause miscarriages. All of these methods carry dangers.

The story of one woman, Dolores, who did not want her full name used, is typical. When she was 18, she became pregnant after her first sexual encounter with a boyfriend she barely knew, mostly because she knew nothing about contraception or even the basics of sexuality.

“I was alone and had no help,” she said in an interview. “In fact, I thought about it a lot before I made the decision, but in the end there was no other way. I wasn’t in the economic position to face the situation.”

Panicked, she visited a midwife, who inserted a flexible tube into the womb to let air in and provoke a miscarriage. Dolores was told to wait three days before removing the tube.

She started bleeding within 15 minutes of leaving the midwife’s house. The bleeding continued unabated for a month. At last, she fainted in front of her parents from a loss of blood and they took her to a hospital, where she recovered slowly after a week of treatment. “I almost died,” she said.

Now 41, she has never carried a baby to term. Two of her pregnancies ended in premature births, and both infants died.

Yazmín Quiroz, Elisabeth Malkin and Antonio Betancourt contributed reporting.

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