

Philippine top court halts contraceptives law (Update)

March 19 2013

(AP)—The Philippine Supreme Court temporarily halted the implementation of a law that provides state funding for contraceptives, legislation opposed by the dominant Roman Catholic Church but supported by reproductive health activists.

The Responsible Parenthood Law was passed by lawmakers late last year despite the church's opposition but petitioners questioned its legality on several grounds, saying it offends religious beliefs and fosters abortion, which remains illegal in the country.

Voting 15-5 in favor of 10 separate petitions Tuesday, the justices stopped the implementation of the law until June 18, when both sides will argue their cases before the court, said Theodore Te, spokesman for the Supreme Court.

Catholic leaders consider the law an attack on the church's core values and say it promotes promiscuity and destroys life. The government says it helps the poor manage the number of children they have and provides for maternal health care.

Nearly half of all pregnancies in the Philippines are unwanted, according to the U.N. Population Fund, and a third of those end up aborted in back-alley clinics.

The Philippines has a population of 94 million and one of Asia's highest birth rates.

Edwin Lacierda, spokesman for President Benigno Aquino III, said that the government was confident it will be able to defend the merits of the law.

Aquino risked the clash with the church and church-backed politicians to sponsor the law and lobby for its passage. Aquino signed the law in December, and the Department of Health last week drafted and approved its implementing rules, setting it into motion.

The law mandates government health centers to provide universal and free access to nearly all contraceptives to everyone, particularly the country's poorest, who make up a third of the population. So far, such access has been patchy, expensive, and hinged on the political will of local governments. In the past, for instance, some mayors banned free distribution of condoms in their areas.

The law also makes sexual education compulsory in public schools.

The government made some concessions in deference to the church, according to Mellisa Upreti, regional director for Asia at the U.S.-based Center for Reproductive Rights.

It failed to legalize all contraceptives, including emergency contraception, and the law contains a measure that allows private and religious-affiliated hospitals to deny reproductive health services based on their moral and theological objections, Upreti wrote in Tuesday's Guardian newspaper.

Private-run Catholic hospitals are among the leading providers of health care in the Philippines.

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