

Philippine court rules family planning law legal

April 8 2014

The Philippine Supreme Court ruled Tuesday that a family planning law is constitutional, allowing the government to provide reproductive health care services primarily to the country's poor despite strong opposition to the law from the Roman Catholic Church.

Supporters of the law cheered as court spokesman Theodore Te announced the ruling in northern Baguio city, where it was issued.

President Benigno Aquino III signed the law in December 2012 but the court imposed a temporary restraining order while it studied petitions questioning its constitutionality.

Te said the court did consider some details within the law to be unconstitutional: One provision would have punished [health workers](#) who failed or refused to support reproductive health programs, and a rule governing how the law is implemented would have defined abortifacients—drugs or devices—as only those that "primarily" induce abortion.

Opponents have 15 days to ask the court to reconsider its ruling, Te said.

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.

Aquino had certified the legislation as urgent, aiming to reduce maternal deaths and promote family planning in the impoverished country that has one of Asia's fastest-growing populations.

The U.N. Population Fund counts 3.4 million pregnancies in the Philippines annually; half are unintended and a third are aborted, often in clandestine and unsafe procedures. The fund says 11 women in the country die of pregnancy-related causes every day.

The law directs government health centers to provide universal and free access to nearly all contraceptives to everyone, particularly the country's poorest, which account for about a third of the country's 96 million population. Some local officials who support the church have banned free distribution of condoms and other contraceptives in their areas.

Another key feature of the law makes sexual education compulsory in public schools.

The law specifically bans abortion drugs, but it requires health workers to provide care for those who have complications from illegal abortions.

Under the law, the government will hire more village health workers who will distribute contraceptives, especially to the poor, and provide instructions on natural [family planning](#) methods approved by the church.

The government will train teachers who will provide age- and development-appropriate reproductive health education to 10- to 19-year-old youths. This will include information on protection against discrimination and sexual abuse, teen pregnancy, and women's and children's rights.

Retired Archbishop Oscar Cruz, one of the sharpest critics of the law, told ABS-CBN television that the law will promote abortion.

"Reproductive health is a misnomer because it is against reproduction," he said.

Nancy Northup, president of the Center for Reproductive Rights, hailed the Supreme Court decision because "millions of Filipino women will finally be able to regain control of their fertility, health, and lives" with universal and free access to modern contraceptives.

"The Reproductive Health Law is a historic step forward for all women in the Philippines, empowering them to make their own decisions about their health and families and participate more fully and equally in their society," she said.

The U.N. Population Fund welcomed the court's decision, saying it "recognizes the basic human right of Filipinos to reproductive [health](#)."

"The full and speedy implementation of the law will be critically important in reducing maternal mortality and ensuring universal access to [reproductive health](#) care," it said, citing the "consistently high" maternal mortality ratio of 52 deaths per 100,000 live births in the country.

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