

# Despite Catholic opposition, Mexico City passes abortion bill

MEXICO CITY - Despite an intense opposition campaign by the Catholic Church, the Mexico City Assembly has approved an initiative legalizing abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Following a heated session April 24, the legislature voted in favor of the new law, which will allow hospitals run by the city government to provide abortions.

The bill, passed 46-19 with one abstention, will become law when it is signed by the mayor.

Outside the Assembly, on the streets of Mexico City's colonial center, supporters and opponents of the measure faced off, separated only by a thin row of riot police.

Waving banners and chanting over the sound of booming drums, opponents of abortion vowed to find new ways to defeat the bill, which has put Mexico City, the nation's capital, on the short list of places in Latin America where abortions are allowed - along with Cuba, Puerto Rico and Guyana.

"We will continue fighting to prevent this," said Ivan Manjarez, a former Mexico City legislator with the conservative National Action Party, or PAN, which opposes abortion. "You cannot take away the rights of those who are weakest."

Currently, abortions are only allowed in cases of rape or serious birth defects or when the pregnancy endangers the mother's life. Doctors who perform unauthorized abortions as well as the mothers who hire them can be jailed for up to 5 years.

Supporters of the bill say the prohibition has resulted in hundreds of thousands of clandestine abortions across the country, often carried out in unsafe conditions. Federal health officials recorded 88 deaths in 2006 due to botched abortions; some organizations claim this figure is much higher.

The National Action Party, which historically has strong ties to the Catholic Church,

says it plans to challenge the measure before the Supreme Court, arguing the law violates Mexico's Constitution. However, the party's minority status in the Mexico City Assembly may hinder this effort: It controls 17 of the chamber's 66 seats.

A constitutional challenge requires at least one-third of the chamber's support - 22 signatures - and the National Action Party has been hard-pressed to find help from rival parties on the issue.

Members of the party say that if the constitutional challenge fails they will file a complaint with the federal attorney general's office and seek other legal avenues to derail the measure.

Civic groups are also attempting to force a citywide referendum on the issue.

On April 23, the Mexican College of Catholic Lawyers presented a petition, signed by 36,000 capital residents, demanding a special vote on the law.

But local lawmakers from the left-leaning Democratic Revolution Party, which controls the city government and supports the abortion bill, have argued that the referendum petition was turned in too late.

The Democratic Revolution Party's support for the bill has put abortion in the national spotlight and spurred a monthslong campaign by the Catholic Church. The weeks leading up to the vote were marked by steadily harsher words from both sides.

The head of the Democratic Revolution Party in the city Assembly has blamed Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico City for death threats he allegedly received, while bishops have threatened to excommunicate the legislators who voted in favor of the measure.

Pope Benedict XVI recently entered the fray, condemning the measure in a statement released by the Mexican bishops' conference April 20.

"The pope unites with the church of Mexico and countless others of good will who are worried by the Mexico City law that threatens the lives of unborn children," the statement read.

Some observers said the intense, but ultimately fruitless, efforts to derail the initiative showed a loss of the church's influence in Mexico.

In an interview with Catholic News Service, Roberto Blancarte, a sociologist specializing in religious issues at the Colegio de Mexico research center, said the Catholic hierarchy has distanced itself from followers, and scandals involving abusive priests have hurt the church's image.

"This is a question of moral authority," he said. "This moral authority is very diminished so (the church) is going to have to completely change the way it perceives itself and its own power."

Meanwhile, public opinion polls on abortion reveal sharp divisions among Mexicans. A survey conducted April 21 by the Mexico City daily Reforma shows that a slim majority of city residents - 53 percent - approve the decriminalization of abortion. But this support has waned from March, when 59 percent approved. Outside Mexico City, 59 percent of those polled disapproved of the initiative.

Regarding the church's efforts to defeat the bill, 70 percent of capital residents polled and 54 percent of those outside the capital said the campaign was "bad."