

Church and State in Manila

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HONG KONG — In principle the mostly Christian Philippines is a secular republic like its mostly Muslim and similarly Malay neighbor, Indonesia. In practice however the Roman Catholic Church holds more sway over Manila lawmaking than any Muslim organization in Jakarta.

Divorce does not exist in the Philippines — other than for those married according to Islamic rites. State support for family planning is minimal, which at least partly accounts for the fact that the Philippines has the highest fertility in Asia east of Pakistan. The current rate of 2.8 children per woman compares with, for example, 2.5 in India, 2.3 in Bangladesh and 2.1 in Indonesia.

So a battle in Manila over a reproductive health bill may produce not just a push for more easily available contraception — which would reduce poverty and often-fatal illegal abortions — but a clash between local bishops and an increasingly secular society.

President Benigno Aquino has fallen afoul of the church for supporting a bill in principle and contraception in general. It is uncertain whether the bill, which covers a wide range of state responsibilities for assisting family planning and other maternal and child health issues, will be passed, given the unwillingness of many lawmakers to oppose the church even if they know most of their constituents favor easier access to contraception. Previous efforts to pass such legislation have failed and health ministers who have tried to promote birth control have been pushed out.

Opponents of the bill assert that it will pave the way to legalized abortion wedge by promoting “morning after” pills. They also argue that the bill’s recommendation of the ideal of two children per family is not only an infringement on family rights but will ultimately lead to the sort of aging crisis now faced by Japan and much of Europe, and will hit other countries in East Asia within 20 years.

The two-child goal is aimed at improving economic conditions and eventually stabilizing the population, now 93 million and expected to reach 126 million by 2050, even if fertility falls to the 2.1 replacement level within 20 years, the lowest projection in the latest U.N. population report.

Opponents of the bill have also argued that claims of runaway population growth in the Philippines have been greatly exaggerated. They have a point — one that indicates the extent to which people are already ignoring the church. The Philippines' fertility decline started late by Asian standards, but the birthrate has halved since 1980. Some of this is due to the huge numbers of women who have gone to work overseas. But it is quite likely that rapid decline will continue regardless of legislation or the church. As countries as varied as Bangladesh, Vietnam and Indonesia have shown, it does not take much to change habits if contraception is easily and cheaply available.

Some argue that it may not matter much whether this bill passes or not because the broader influence of the church hierarchy is fading under the impact of urbanization, migrant workers and a popular culture very open about sex. There is also the example of an elite that often does not practice what it preaches in Congress.

The Philippines is a very religious country but also one where tolerance of priests having relations with women appears high and where marriage breakups and de facto unions are a common and accepted substitute for divorce. Despite five centuries of Catholicism, indigenous practices in which divorce was common and could be initiated by either women or men lurk not far beneath the surface.

Mainstream Catholic influence is also being eroded by the enduring presence of two nationalist Christian denominations, the Iglesia ni Cristo, and the Aglipayans, by the growth of Protestant sects and by the impact of high-profile evangelical and charismatic preachers reaching mass audiences through radio and television.

In short, the Catholic Church may win this round in its battle against contraceptives. But it has probably already lost the war.

Ref.:

1. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/22/opinion/22iht-edbowring.html?_r=2
2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00_tQx8Zu20