City Council's vote legalizing abortion rocks Mexico City

by S. Lynne Walker

MEXICO CITY - In an emotional day marked by tears, prayers and angry proclamations, Mexico City's city council legalized first trimester abortions Tuesday in a landmark vote that sets a precedent for expanding women's rights across the nation.

The council passed the law 46-19, with one abstention, after seven hours of tense debate over the question of who has more rights - a woman or a fetus.

MEXABORTION - Cesar Ramirez, 28, carried a tiny coffin during a protest in downtown Mexico City streets against the legalization of first trimester abortions. Nearby, at Mexico City's city hall, council members debated issue before casting their votes on the groundbreaking law. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXABORTION - Police lined downtown Mexico City streets to separate raucous crowds of opponents and supporters of abortion. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXABORTION - Dressed as skeletons, abortion opponents stared at replicas of 12-week-old fetuses during a protest in downtown Mexico City streets. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXABORTION - Police lined downtown Mexico City streets to separate raucous crowds of opponents and supporters of abortion. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXABORTION - Estela Lira, 43, held up a photo of a newborn baby during a protest in downtown Mexico City streets against the legalization of first trimester abortions. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

MEXABORTION - Abortion opponents protested in downtown Mexico City streets against the legalization of first trimester abortions. CNS photo by Luis J. Jimenez

"Decriminalizing abortion is a historic triumph, a triumph of the left," said Jorge Diaz, a leftist social democrat. "Today, there is a new atmosphere in this city. It is the atmosphere of freedom."

Council members stood one by one to voice their vote, some cheering and other wiping away tears.

"Not one more death because of a clandestine abortion," shouted one. "For all women," said another, "and for my mother, who is here."

When the votes were tallied, a chant rocked the ornate council chamber. "Yes, it could be done," lawmakers yelled.

As the leftist-dominated council celebrated the victory, opponents vowed to rescind a law they described as a death penalty for unborn children.

"The fight is not lost," said Celina Saavedra, a councilwoman from the conservative National Action Party, or PAN. "You can be sure that it won't be long before things change - in the courts and at the ballot boxes."

The PAN and the Catholic Church are already preparing a Supreme Court challenge of the law, which grants women in the nation's capital the right to an abortion in the first 12 weeks of their pregnancy.

With gubernatorial elections scheduled in several PAN-controlled states this year, including Yucatan and Baja California, PAN lawmakers predicted the abortion law will have political repercussions for the two parties that backed the measure - the leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party, or PRD, and the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.

The Vatican issued its own warnings to supporters of the law. Faced with the with possibility of legalized abortion in one of the most influential cities in Latin America, the church threatened to excommunicate lawmakers who support abortions, doctors who perform them and women who have them.

Mexico's leading anti-abortion activist vowed to lead an attack on hospitals and clinics that practice legal abortions.

"We are going to block abortionists as they go into the clinics and we are going to disconnect the equipment, the suction machines, that do have any other purpose than to kill a person," Jorge Serrano Limon, president of Provida, told reporters. "We know that will violate the law, because abortion will be legal. But we are saying our conscience supersedes the law, that life supersedes the law, that our obligation as Mexicans supersedes the law. We are definitely going to disobey a law that is criminal."

Serrano Limon's words signaled a new phase in his 29-year fight. But he insisted his movement will not target those who perform abortions.

"This civil resistance will be peaceful," he said. "Even though abortion is the most violent act against a person, against a pregnant woman, we are not going to respond with violence."

As he emerged from a prayer vigil Tuesday morning in Mexico City's cathedral, Serrano Limon pronounced the law "a victory of death over life."

"Our country is in mourning," he said, his voice rising over the sound of bells pealing from the cathedral's towers. "They are going to instruct hospitals to perform abortions. That is truly sad."

Serrano Limon and PAN legislators accused leftist council members of passing a law that did not have public support. However, a poll published in the Mexico City daily El Universal on Monday showed that a majority of people between the ages of 18 and 39 supported the law, while those over 40 tended to oppose it.

Throngs of people - both opponents and supporters of abortion - choked downtown streets in the hours leading up to the vote.

As rows of riot police separated the raucous crowds, anti-abortion protesters shouted insults, carried tiny coffins and broadcast the wails of a crying baby over loudspeakers pointed in the direction of the City Council chamber.

"There is not a single reason to abort a child," said Maria Crespo, 47, the mother of five children. "How is it possible that we could take the life of a human being who cannot defend himself? If we do this, then what will we do next?"

Crespo became pregnant with her fifth child, a daughter who is now 8 years old, after having a tubal ligation. But Crespo said she never considered abortion, even though she did not want more children.

"She was a gift from God," Crespo said. "She is the one who hugs me all the time, the one who takes care of me. She is very special."

On the other side of the wall of police, supporters of the law mocked the Catholic Church by laughing and raising their fists as they shouted, "Excommunication."

Rebeca Beja, a 52-year-old consultant, held up a sign, saying: "My body is not the property of the church or of the PAN. I decide what to do with my body."

"We want justice in this country, above all for poor women who most often die from clandestine abortions," said Beja.

Although there are no firm statistics, supporters and critics of abortion generally agree that between 500,000 and 1.5 million abortions are performed in Mexico every year.

"The only difference is that women who have money get abortions in other countries or in private clinics while poor women die on clandestine operating tables," said PRD Councilwoman Leticia Quezada.

"Wake up to reality, to the real city, where thousands of women face inequality and marginalization. Understand that women die in Mexico City and they die because of badly performed abortions because they don't have access to quality medical services."

Most Mexican women who seek abortions are married, already have children and are at least 20 years old, studies show. The majority say they have abortions because they cannot afford more children.

"The only message that we are going to send society is that we legislate because we do not want more children sleeping on street grates," said Tonatiuh Gonzalez, the PRI councilman who proposed the legislation. "We do not want more children brought in to the world because of obligation and not because of love."

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