

Population bill tests Philippine Catholic Church's clout

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(ENInews)--A bill intended to help manage the Philippines' growing population moved forward in the legislature, challenging the clout of the Roman Catholic Church, which has been opposing it for more than ten years.

In a surprise move, 188 of the 231 Lower House representatives present in its August 6 session voted to end debate on the bill instead of waiting for a previously-scheduled August 7 vote. The population of the Philippines, now at 94 million, is growing at two percent per year, one of the highest rates in Asia.

This means the bill, which would provide universal access to birth control, would now advance to the next step -- a period of amendments before it is put to a vote on second reading. This dismayed Catholic leaders, who were expecting to participate in the congressional debates.

However, they said they remain opposed. "We will remain vigilant," Bishop Carlito Cenzon of the Baguio diocese told ENInews August 7. "Although the process of amendments is tricky and tiring, we will scrutinize every amendment introduced."

Amidst monsoon rains on 4 August, Cenzon led over 1,000 people in a prayer rally, which other Catholic leaders and members also held in various cities nationwide. Over 10,000 joined the rally in Manila alone.

"Our problem is not over-population, but individualism. Many of us belong to what is called the 'me' generation," Cenzon said in a homily on August 4.

Instead of population control, "we need to develop the mentality of sharing and solidarity with neighbors as Jesus taught us," Cenzon told ENInews. "This will increase our will to expand the common good."

But evangelical and Protestant groups favor "responsible parenthood," which includes managing and planning family size.

"The reproductive health of mothers does not rest on the bishops or the clergy," Bishop Rodrigo Tano of the Christian Alliance Church told national television on August 6. Tano is also a leader of the Interfaith Partnership for the Promotion of Responsible Parenthood, whose members include Christians, Muslims and other faiths.

The interfaith group favors the reproductive health bill because it noted that the proposed law mandates government to make available free health and medical services to mothers even in rural villages. The services are aimed to help prevent maternal deaths due to pregnancy complications.

"We studied the bill and no provisions allow abortion as opponents are claiming," Rev. Simplicio Dang-awan Jr. of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines told ENInews.

Also part of the interfaith group, Dang-awan cited the importance of planning pregnancies as part of responsible parenthood.

Half of all pregnancies in the country, or about 1.9 million, are unplanned, according to a August 7 joint statement of the interfaith group and a federation of government leaders and civil society organizations favoring the bill, citing government studies.