

Argentina senate rejects bill to legalise abortion

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Lawmakers vote against allowing elective abortion in first 14 weeks of pregnancy

Argentina's senate has rejected a bill to legalise abortion in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy.

Lawmakers debated for more than 15 hours and voted 38 against to 31 in favour, despite the fact opinion polls showed the bill had strong public support.

Pressure from the Catholic church prevented its approval, according to female activists who supported the bill. [Argentina](#) is the homeland of Pope Francis.

"The church put pressure on senators to vote against the bill," said Ana Correa, an original member of the #NiUnaMenos ("Not one woman less") feminist movement that supported the bill.

The lower house had already passed the measure and President Mauricio Macri had said he would sign it.

Rejection of the bill means that abortion remains legal only in the case of rape and danger to the life of the woman.

Mariela Belski, Argentina's Amnesty International director, said a survey had shown 60% support for the bill, and described its failure as "an unforgivable step backwards".

"Lawmakers chose today to turn their backs on hundreds of thousands of women and girls who have been fighting for their sexual and reproductive rights," Belski said. "All that this decision does is perpetuate the circle of violence which women, girls and others who can become pregnant are forced into."

Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly women, braved a cold and rainy night to stand vigil outside the congress building on Wednesday while the votes were counted inside. Despite the final result of the vote, many women said they believed Argentina would have legal abortion eventually.

"I'm still optimistic. It didn't pass today, but it will pass tomorrow, it will pass the next day," said Natalia Carol, a 23-year-old abortion rights supporter. "This is not over."

The journalist Silvina Márquez, who joined the crowd outside the congress building early in the afternoon, said: "We might not have a law today, but it is going to happen. Argentina is not going back to this, it is important for the women, especially for the young women. So sooner or later we'll have an abortion law."

"What this vote showed is that Argentina is still a country that represents family values," the anti-abortion activist Victoria Osuna, 32, told Reuters.

A nearby group of secondary school students, megaphone in hand, chanted: “Beware, beware, *machistas* [chauvinists] beware, all Latin America will be feminist.”

The pope, who remains deeply involved in the politics of his home country, has made no secret of his opposition to the bill. On Monday, the Clarín daily newspaper reported that Francis had asked anti-abortion legislators to pressure fellow lawmakers to reject the bill.

Despite a recent survey that showed 71% of Argentinians opposed political interference by the church, leading Catholic authorities have spoken out recently against the bill. “This would be the first time a law is passed in democratic Argentina permitting the elimination of a human being by another human,” Monsignor Óscar Ojea, president of Argentina’s synod of bishops, said in a homily at the Basilica of Our Lady of Luján, one of Argentina’s leading pilgrimage sites, last month.

In a pointed signal, Bishop Ojea and Cardinal Mario Poli – who succeeded Jorge Bergoglio as archbishop of Buenos Aires after Bergoglio became pope – held a mass on Wednesday at 8pm at Buenos Aires Cathedral while the senators debated the bill.

Although the law as it stands also permits abortion when there is risk to the woman’s health, few of Argentina’s 23 provinces have implemented this third instance.

In the city of Rosario, in the province of Santa Fe, where this option has been available since 2012, deaths as a result of complications from clandestine abortions have fallen to zero. Complications related to clandestine abortions are the main cause of death among pregnant women in Argentina.

“Senators and anti-rights can go to sleep pleased that they saved the lives of people who literally speaking do not exist and pleased that they fought for women to keep dying,” tweeted Malena Pichot, a well-known comedian and legal abortion activist.

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