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Chile to Vote to Modify Draconian Abortion Laws

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The congress of Chile, one of only six countries in the world where abortion is entirely prohibited, will vote Tuesday to legalize terminations in certain extreme circumstances.

As the law stands, mothers are unable to terminate pregnancies, even if their lives are in danger, and face a five-year prison sentence.

The parliament will debate to permit abortion when the pregnancy resulted from a rape, when the life of the mother is at risk, and when the fetus has serious defects.

An estimated 120,000 women have illegal abortions in Chile each year, facing punishment and medical complications in underground clinics.

“There are 17 rapes a day in Chile, and in many cases it is by family members,” said Maria Ines Salamanca, Program Director of the United Nations Women office in Chile. “Many of these victims are underage ... This is a debate that Chile needs to have.”

President Michelle Bachelet has advocated reproductive rights and abortion reform since her election to her second term in 2013.

However, her attempt to modify the outright ban on abortion is being undermined as the most conservative factions of the governmental coalition threaten not to support the text.

Leaders of the Christian Democrat party, the coalition's senior partner, told the press agency that fewer than a third

of its 21 lawmakers in the House of Representative fully support the reform of the abortion ban. Bachelet's socialist lawmakers would therefore be short of the votes required to pass the reform.

Another destabilizing factor for Bachelet's administration has been the Communist Party, who have threatened to leave the government coalition if planned reforms are continually "destroyed."

The bill has also faced fierce opposition from the Catholic church, who have launched an anti-abortion media campaign, including a full-page advertisement in rightwing newspaper El Mercurio.

"It will be our obligation as pastors to warn our faithful... (of) the moral prohibition to vote in favor of a candidate who has supported the abortion project," the message read.

Claudia Pascual, Chile's minister of women's affairs, hit back at the interference of the religious leaders, accusing them of "impeding the ability to have a space to debate."

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