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Latin America

“The patriarchal system weighs on the political structures”

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Although Argentina is currently debating abortion, the subject remains one of the great taboos of the South American continent. Charles Delouche spoke to lecturer in Latin American Studies at the University of Grenoble and “International Viewpoint” collaborator Franck Gaudichaud about the situation for the French daily newspaper *Libération* on August 7, 2018 (before the Argentine Senate voted to reject abortion legalisation).

Why does the right to abortion remain in a marginal position in South America?

It is one of the most restrictive regions in the world in terms of the right to abortion: 90% of South American women live in a restrictive context of the right to self-determination of the body. The patriarchal system is very important, and it weighs on the political structures. Overall, the situation is repressive, with extreme cases such as in El Salvador or Nicaragua, the most radical regarding the criminalization of abortion. Conversely, Cuba decriminalized abortion as early as 1965 and Uruguay legalised it in 2012. Even in the most advanced countries on the issue, there are problems of law enforcement and doctors refuse to practice abortion. It is a continent of inequalities of gender, race and class. In Chile, girls in good families practice abortion quite easily: they are hospitalized for “appendicitis” ... girls from the lower classes do not have access to these very expensive and illegal operations.

Is the current political situation favourable to an evolution of women's rights?

In Brazil and in several countries, there is a tendency to the return of right wing parties. Since the institutional coup against Dilma Rousseff, the right has made agreements with the evangelical church. There is clearly a threat to the right to abortion, which is already very limited: abortion is legal only in cases of rape, danger of death for the mother or anencephaly of the foetus. It is on the moral and ethical plane that the South American political and religious conservatives advance their pawns. Since 2017, under the leadership of former President Michelle Bachelet, Chile has finally passed a law that allows conditional abortion (danger for pregnant women, unsustainable foetuses or the result of rape). This was done at the price of Homeric battles in Parliament, despite the interventions of the Church.

What role does the Catholic Church play in the abortion debate?

There are big differences between countries, but the weight of religion is growing stronger. In Chile, the law is there but the Church has obtained a right of conscience for Catholic doctors who can refuse to practice abortion. There is even a right of institutional conscience: Catholic hospitals or university centres may refuse to apply the law as institutions. In Brazil, for example, you cannot be president if you do not get along with the evangelists. They are an indispensable reservoir of votes and, with their television channels, they represent a media strength of tens of millions of viewers, which has direct effects on debates around abortion.

What is the position of Pope Francis on the bill in Argentina?

The Pope has always said that he wanted to avoid commenting on the political debates in his country. Even though he has spoken repeatedly against equal marriage or against the right to abortion. It is an indirect way to support the Argentine Church in this fight. In this sense, he is in line with the Popes and the doctrine of the Catholic Church. But he did not speak specifically about the Argentine case.

If the law is validated by the Senate, can we expect a social and feminist wave on the continent?

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We are witnessing an evolution, there will be no turning back. With what is happening right now in Argentina, in Chile with the feminist demands or in Mexico with the group of activists against femicide, we are facing a phenomenon that traverses the whole of Latin America. From the Argentine movement “Ni una menos” (“Not One Less”) born from the assassination of a young woman in 2015 to the green scarves of the pro-legalization of abortion movement, the new generation activist emerges and are located in a much broader societal movement. We see grandmothers supporting their granddaughters who are demonstrating. If the Senate votes for the law, it will be a conquest of the feminist movement and the victory of a project that was carried out under the pressure of the street. This advance will have an impact on the whole region because the political influence of Argentina is significant.

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