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Colombia came close to becoming the first Latin American nation to give established gay couples full rights to health insurance, inheritance, and social security under a bill passed by its Congress in June with the backing of President Alvaro Uribe. Legislators approved the plan on June 14, but conservative lawmakers used "unprecedented" legal maneuvering to derail the measure on June 19. Supporters of the measure have vowed to continue to push for basic economic rights for gay couples.

President Uribe had backed benefits-equality bill

The measure would have allowed gay couples in long-term relationships to have the same health-insurance and social-security benefits as heterosexual couples. It also guaranteed that assets accumulated during the relationship would be divided between the two and, in the case of death, inherited by the survivor. Previously, possessions were passed on to blood relatives.

Some states and cities in Latin America have passed similar laws, but no other country in the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic region has done so at a national level, said Marcela Sanchez, director of the gay rights group Colombia Diversa. She said as many as 300,000 gay couples in Colombia stand to benefit. "I'm elated," said Catalina Gomez, an English teacher, who said she planned to use the new legal status to take out health insurance for her partner, who works as a self-employed designer and disc jockey. "It validates our union before the law so we no longer have to going around lying about our relationship."

The lower house in Congress passed the bill 62-43 following a heated debate in which Alfredo Cuello Baute, the president of the chamber, accused gay lawmakers of a conflict of interest. "I hope photos don't turn up showing some of our colleagues dressed as drag queens on Caracas Avenue," said Baute, referring to a nighttime cruising spot for transvestites and male prostitutes in Bogota. Colombia's Senate passed a similar version in April. The two chambers had to agree on a unified text before sending it for Uribe's signature.

"This is a victory that only a few months ago seemed unthinkable in this country," said pro-government Sen. Armando Benedetti, one of the bill's sponsors. "To my surprise, the Congress has shown itself to be a modern, responsible and liberal institution."

While open homosexuality is still taboo in much of Latin America, there has been increasing acceptance in many areas. Mexico City and the state of Coahuila (see SourceMex, 2007-04-11) recently joined the Argentine capital of Buenos Aires and the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul in legalizing same-sex civil unions.

Opponents of the measure and representatives of the Roman Catholic Church said they feared the Colombian law could open the way to gay marriage and gay adoption. But activists say their
campaign is focused for now on obtaining practical benefits. "Now people will have no choice but to accept that we exist and have the same rights as straight couples," said Jose Luis Bautista, 36, who has been living with his partner for 15 years.

**Reconciled version of bill derailed**

Despite congressional approval, a bloc of conservative senators opposed to the measure derailed the landmark bill at the last minute. A June 19 vote on the final, reconciled version was expected to be routine, but Sen. Manuel Virguez Piraquive, from the small party Movimiento MIRA, which is closely linked to an evangelical Colombian church, called for an unusual floor vote on the bill.

Other conservative lawmakers then broke ranks with the pro-Uribe faction backing the bill, and it was defeated, 34-29, in the 102-member Senate. Many of the bill's supporters were absent. The call for an individual vote was unusual, and some said unprecedented. Parties usually vote as blocs on the final, reconciled versions of bills in Colombia's legislature.

Sen. Benedetti vowed to restart the legislative process when Congress reconvened on July 20, and he criticized Uribe for not defending the initiative more forcefully. "He said he supported the bill during his presidential campaign, but since then he's been silent," Benedetti said.

About 80 gay-rights advocates protested outside Congress on June 20 with banners reading "A hoax democracy" and "Without sexual freedom there can be no political freedom."

**Constitutional court rules gay couples may share assets**

Earlier, in February 2007, Colombia's Corte Constitucional (CC) recognized similar rights to shared property and inheritance, but the decision did not mention health insurance or social security. The court ruled that gay couples in long-term relationships should have the same rights to shared assets as heterosexual couples. The decision marked the first official recognition of gay couples' rights in Colombia.

The court ruled that if a gay couple who had been together for two years separated, the assets accumulated during the relationship would be divided between the two, and, in the case of death, the survivor would receive all the assets. Previously if one died, his or her possessions passed on to the surviving family.

Representatives of the Roman Catholic Church said they supported the law but reiterated their fear that it could open the way to gay marriage and gay adoption. While homosexuals celebrated the ruling, activists said they would continue fighting for parity with heterosexual couples. At the national level, lawmakers in Colombia and Costa Rica have debated, but not successfully passed, measures to recognize gay unions.

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