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Chile: Gay-Marriage Debate Heats Up

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Argentina’s groundbreaking decision last month to legalize gay marriage had immediate reverberations across the Andes mountain range, in traditionally more conservative Chile, where the issue—already a subject of growing interest—has suddenly turned into a raging national debate with both political and religious overtones.

Chilean gay-rights advocates joined their counterparts the world over in celebrating Argentina’s historic move, which made it the first and only Latin America country to allow marriage between homosexuals.

In at least one high-profile instance, Chileans also took direct advantage of the law. Giorgio Nocentino and Jaime Zapata, legal residents in Argentina, were among the first gay couples to wed under the new rules, tying the knot July 31 in the western city of Mendoza.

Argentina’s Senate approved the gay marriage law, which also gives homosexuals adoption rights, July 15 by a tight 33-27 vote.

Chilean church leaders, in contrast, responded with outrage. On Aug. 1, one day after Nocentino and Zapata walked the proverbial aisle, Cardinal Francisco Javier Errazuriz, archbishop of Santiago, slammed the Argentine Senate decision as an "aberration." Chile would do well not to repeat the "mistake," he said, since gay marriage could cause a population decline.

"Maybe two people, two men or two women, want to live together and share their lives, but to call that ‘marriage’ is an aberration that some countries are falling into. It is sad Argentina has fallen into that," Errazuriz said following Sunday mass. "History is repeating itself. That is, something new comes along and becomes the fad that everyone applauds. After a while, after a few years, people see that it was a mistake."

Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez was even stronger in his criticisms, targeting not only gay marriage but homosexuality in general. The church, Medina explained in statements broadcast by Radio Bio Bio, distinguishes between homosexual "tendency" and "practice."

"If a person has a homosexual tendency, it is a defect, as if one lacked an eye, a hand, a foot," he said. Homosexual practice, the cardinal went on to say, is simply "immoral."

"As a priest, I have dealt with many people with this problem," Medina said. "I've known some who, like alcoholics, have corrected themselves through discipline, education, or re-education."

Statements of this kind are not uncommon in Chile, where traditional Catholic social mores are also echoed in politics, particularly through members of the conservative Alianza coalition, which ties together the center-right Renovación Nacional (RN) and hard-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI).

This past March, the Alianza assumed control of the government for the first time(NotiSur, March 26, 2010). The new president, former RN Sen. Sebastián Piñera, was preceded by four successive
leaders from the center-left Concertación coalition. He is Chile’s first conservative head of state since dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), who led a 17-year military regime.

While Piñera, a billionaire businessman, has made efforts to appeal to homosexuals by, for example, appearing with a gay couple in one of his campaign ads, his party's president Carlos Larraín has shown himself to be a downright homophobe. This past May, the RN leader caused a minor uproar when he asked reporters, "Why do we have to support the homosexual community? Next we’ll have to support groups that are for inappropriate sexual relations with children, or groups that are in favor of euthanasia. When it comes to sexual orientations, there’s real variety. I understand there are people who like to have sex with animals."

The times they are a changin’

Yet, in recent years, as Chile continues to connect more and more with the rest of the globalized western world, general attitudes toward homosexuality have begun to shift toward greater acceptance. The popular satirical weekly "The Clinic" lambasted Larraín for his comments, which were received critically even by the conservative mainstream press. The RN president later issued a mea culpa.

Other signs of the changing times are Chile’s popular nightly soaps, which occasionally feature gay characters, and Santiago’s openly gay Bellas Artes neighborhood, now one of the city’s most chic barrios.

Chilean political leaders are often slow to pick up on such general attitude changes. The Chilean government did not legalize divorce, for example, until just six years ago (see NotiSur, 2004-12-17). Even so, a growing number of politicians—including President Piñera—are finally, albeit to varying degrees, realizing it does make sense to support the country’s homosexuals.

A case in point is Sen. Fluvio Rossi, a 39-year-old senator who currently presides over the Partido Socialista (PS). Inspired by both the recent Argentine vote and the Chilean Catholic Church’s virulent reaction, Rossi decided three weeks ago to submit his own gay-marriage bill. The bill calls for changing Article 102 of the Código Civil, which currently defines marriage as between a man and woman. Rossi submitted the bill Aug. 3.

"It’s a question of rights and equality before the law," explained Rossi, who, like the party’s most popular figure, former President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), is a trained medical doctor. "If the state offers benefits to people who form a marriage contract, then it goes against our Constitution to exclude certain citizens....Sexual orientation cannot be a reason to deny benefits and rights that are established for all citizens."

A handful of fellow senators, including Guido Girardi of the Partido por la Democrácia (PPD), PS veteran Isabel Allende, daughter of deposed President Salvador Allende (1970-1973), and Ricardo Lagos Weber, the son of ex-President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), have already pledged support for the measure. In addition, Rossi’s ex-wife, former Bachelet minister and current PPD president Carolina Tohá, said her party as a whole is likely to back the initiative.

Civil unions, a likely compromise

Still, most analysts agree Rossi’s gay-marriage bill is unlikely to fly in Congress, and not just because of resistance by the RN and UDI parties. The Concertación appears divided on the issue. The center-
left coalition ties together the PS, PPD, Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC), and Partido Radical Social Demócrata (PRSD).

Concertación members who have raised objections to Rossi’s proposal argue that Chile "is not ready" for such a radical step, that the government should first pass legislation allowing for same-sex civil unions, a compromise position that falls short of defining marriage to include gays.

"First things first," said Senate president Jorge Pizarro of the DC. "We have de facto unions up and down this country that don’t have the necessary [legal] guarantees. Their rights aren’t recognized. Right there is the more important debate, which already includes very conflicting opinions."

Rossi admits the gay-marriage bill is a long shot, insisting his real goal in rushing the proposal was to fast-forward a pending national debate on the issue. In that regard he has been successful, although proposals for extending rights to same-sex couples have actually been kicking around in Chile for a while now.

Independent candidate Marco Enriquez-Ominami came out in favor of gay marriage during last year’s presidential campaign. Although the then deputy went on to finish third in the general election (see NotiSur, 2009-12-18), his better-than-expected run helped push the issue, at least briefly, to the forefront of the election contest. Piñera, the eventual winner, played to his conservative base by insisting marriage can only exist between a man and a woman. But, to the surprise of many, he did promise to support civil-union legislation that would benefit both heterosexual and homosexual couples.

President Piñera's support for such unions has pushed the idea into the mainstream in a way the political left never could. Inadvertently, Rossi’s recent maneuverings—from the other side of the political spectrum—could end up having the same effect, by making the once-radical notion look more and more like a safe middle-ground approach.

Rolando Jiménez, head of the gay rights advocacy group Movimiento de Integración y Liberación Homosexual (MOVILH), said conditions are finally right for Congress to pass such a bill. And while Chile is unlikely in the short term to follow Argentina’s lead and legalize gay marriage, such a law will pass "sooner or later," he said.

"We’ll keep pushing until we achieve full equality....That means marriage with the right to adopt children," said the MOVILH president. "We’re certain things will change as our representation in Congress improves."

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