

Brazilian Christian groups oppose abortion penalty bill

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SÃO PAULO (RNS)—A bill aiming to punish abortion after 22 weeks at a similar penalty to homicide has spurred controversy in Brazil, with numerous constituencies demonstrating against it—including Christians.

Last week, two Christian groups released statements opposing the bill, echoing criticism voiced by progressives and feminists.

The bill was introduced by an Assembly of God theologian and far-right Congressman, Sóstenes Cavalcante, a strong ally of former President Jair Bolsonaro and a representative of the powerful Christian bloc in Congress, which has hundreds of members.

The proposal includes a penalty of up to 20 years in prison for women who undergo abortion after 22 weeks of pregnancy—a sentence comparable to the one applied in cases of homicide. And it would be applicable even in cases of rape, anencephaly defects and when the mother's life is at risk—conditions currently legal, with no time limit, in Brazil.

Currently, illegal abortion is punishable with prison sentences of up to three years for the mother, up to four years for the health care professional who performs the procedure and up to 10 years for a person who carries out an abortion without the mother's consent.

Cavalcante introduced his bill on the same day the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional a Federal Medical Council's recent resolution that prohibited doctors from inducing cardiac arrest on fetuses of more than 22 weeks. The congressman acknowledged his proposal was a reaction to the court's decision.

Opponents have been calling it the Rape Bill or the Child Pregnancy Bill—including the Women of Faith’s Front, a coalition of Christian women of various denominations, bishops, pastors, theologians, missionaries and community leaders.

In a [manifesto](#) against the bill initially signed by 155 women, they argued it’s unacceptable “that women are incarcerated for interrupting pregnancy.”

“We say no to the Rape and Rapist Bill because we have as a reference the gospel of freedom and justice for women and men, children, and the vulnerable in society,” the document said. “We will not remain under the yoke of slavery to a disastrous religious discourse.”

In 2022, almost [75,000 cases of rape were reported in Brazil](#), and 60 percent of the victims were girls under 13, with most cases happening at home.

Each year of the past decade, 20,000 Brazilian girls under 14 became mothers. The statement from the Women of Faith’s Front noted [252,786 girls were forced to give birth between 2010 and 2019](#). Among them, 179,679 were Black, and 8,099 were Indigenous.

Activists and experts say most raped girls only discover they’re pregnant after several weeks, due to the emotional trauma and shame involved. If Cavalcante’s proposal is approved, activists argue these girls would be the most impacted group.

The Women of Faith’s Front argued the bill is about hatred against women under the guise of protecting unborn children.

“We denounce the patriarchal alliances between religion and political parties that negotiate our rights in exchange for votes. We denounce priests, pastors and bishops who abuse girls, boys, and women on a daily

basis in churches and then coerce them into silence,” the document stated.

Lutheran Pastor Romi Bencke, one of the organizers of the Women of Faith’s Front, told Religion News Service the bill gave them the platform to speak up during a time when far-right evangelicals have been the dominant faith voice in the country.

Too far this time

“I think that the violence of rape impacts the population, and Sóstenes Cavalcante’s bill tried to downplay it. People just couldn’t accept it. They went too far this time,” she said.

Another group that expressed its opposition to the bill was the Priests of the Path, which includes 461 Roman Catholic bishops, priests and permanent deacons.

In a [declaration released](#) on June 19, the group said it’s not “in favor of abortion,” but is “against replacing public policies with punitive laws against victims of rape and abuse, accusing them of a crime followed by a sentence greater than that of rapists,” the document said.

Rape sentences are generally up to 10 years, with five additional years if the victim is under 18. Congressman Cavalcante was confronted by several critics about the fact his bill would penalize the victim of rape more than the rapist, leading him to promise to include in the bill a bigger sentence for rapists.

“Being against abortion, however, cannot be confused with the desire to see the woman who practices it behind bars. This ‘social revenge’ has the serious consequence of penalizing poor women who cannot even use the public health system,” according to the Priests of the Path’s statement.

The statement went on to note “the criminalization of women does not

reduce the number of abortions. It just prevents them from being done safely.”

The Priests of the Path letter gained attention among Brazilian Catholics, especially after the presidency of the Bishops’ Conference released a statement in support of the bill.

Father Manoel Godoy, one of the members of the Priests of the Path, told RNS he thinks the Bishops’ Conference made a mistake in supporting the bill.

“That was a trap set up by the far-right, and the presidency of the Bishops’ Conference didn’t notice it,” he said.

Godoy alluded to a declaration given to the press by Sóstenes Cavalcante in which he said he was testing President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s commitment to evangelicals. Since the presidential campaign in 2022, Lula has declared on several occasions that he’s against abortion.

“Cavalcante wanted to politically harm Lula, leading him to veto it. But he was wrong about it. Lula will veto it with popular support,” Godoy affirmed.

A survey on the Chamber of Deputies’ website of more than 1 million voters shows 88 percent of them oppose the bill.

“A 12-year-old girl is not ready to be a mother. She can’t carry for nine months in her womb the memory of a rape. Nobody in their right mind can support such an idea,” Godoy said. “That is a kind of torture.”

Only in the past decade has abortion become a central element in Brazilian politics, with more evangelical leaders elected to office. According to research carried out in 2020 by Datafolha Institute, 31 percent of Brazilians are evangelical, and 50 percent are Catholic—representing a 50 percent growth of evangelicals in a decade. With that increasing social

strength, new ideas have gained importance.

“The moral agenda generates great engagement in society,” Baptist Pastor Ed René Kivitz told RNS.

Kivitz led a meeting between Christian leaders and the Human Rights Minister Silvio Almeida on June 21. The pastors who attended the meeting were critical of the bill and were supported by Almeida.

“It’s important that the Brazilian society understands that the evangelical church is not a monolithic bloc, but a plural and diverse sector,” Kivitz affirmed.

Bencke said the opposition to abortion has been a historically Catholic matter, and most Protestant churches had not been as concerned about it, she said, adding it’s a mostly ignored subject in the Bible.

“But [since] around 2010 there has been an influx of new topics in the evangelical agenda, many of them coming from churches and politicians from the United States,” she said.

Godoy said the opposition to abortion in the Brazilian Catholic Church also has been growing over the past decade thanks to the pro-life movement.

“It’s really a right-wing movement infiltrated among Catholics. They say a girl should carry a baby for nine months after being raped because they’re men. They don’t know how it would be painful,” he argued.

Godoy pointed out even St. Thomas Aquinas didn’t believe “life begins with conception.”

“He thought that a soul was only infused in the fetus after a few weeks. That demonstrates that the current ideas concerning abortion have not been eternal in the church,” Godoy reasoned.

Political motives

According to lawyer Naiana Zaiden, a professor at the Goiás Federal Institute who has researched the bills introduced by evangelical congressmen over the years, proposals like these are conceived to increase their creators' visibility.

"We'll have elections this year. Many people who didn't know Sóstenes Cavalcante have now heard of him for the first time. He'll certainly give support to a group of candidates, and it's part of the construction of his political career," she told RNS.

Zaiden doesn't think the bill will pass, but she fears it may be used by evangelical congressmen to bargain for the approval of other bills or for other political targets.

"I've seen numerous proposals that were surprising. I thought: 'How can someone introduce a bill like that in Congress?' But then I'd discover they were used by evangelicals as a form of putting political pressure on somebody and gaining positions or power," she concluded.

The bill was approved to be analyzed in the so-called urgency regime, when it's moved directly to be voted on by the assembly and doesn't need to be approved by distinct Chamber of Deputies' commissions.

With all the public rejection it has suffered, however, the president of the chamber, Congressman Arthur Lira, announced it only will be discussed in August.