Philippine divorce activists vow to fight on

AFP- In her bid to convince lawmakers to legalise divorce, Filipina fruit vendor Avelina Anuran has publicly testified about the abuse she said she regularly endured at the hands of her husband.

She also keeps a copy of the medical certificate from the bloody injuries she says he inflicted, hoping it might one day serve as evidence in court.

But the mother of two-turned-activist has gotten no closer to ending her marriage.

The Philippines is one of just two countries — along with Vatican City — where divorce remains illegal.

Last week, the latest attempt to introduce a divorce law evaporated as the upper house ended its session without even a hearing.

“They kept passing it around,” Anuran said.

The last time such legislation made its way to the Senate in 2019, she painstakingly detailed her experience for a public hearing. But the bill foundered.

Spouses have a “right to be free”, she told AFP, adding that she would keep pushing for a law.

“Hopefully it will (pass) next year, with new senators coming in.”

— Nullification —

Ending a marriage in the deeply Catholic society of 117 million is possible only via annulment or “nullification”.

But few Filipinos can afford the fee of up to $10,000, and the process does not consider domestic violence, abandonment or infidelity as qualifying grounds.

“I just want to be free from this marriage,” said Anuran, whose estranged husband remains the beneficiary on a life insurance policy she cannot change without his consent.

Campaigners like Anuran believe the tide of public support for divorce is turning, with surveys showing about half of Filipinos now firmly back a change.

Before taking office in 2022, President Ferdinand Marcos said he was open to supporting divorce.

But the latest effort to introduce such a bill still faced strong opposition in the Senate.

The proposed law would have compelled courts to provide free legal and psychological assistance to low-income petitioners, capped lawyers’ fees at 50,000 pesos ($859) and mandated divorce petitions be resolved within a year.

The divorce bill’s co-author, lawmaker Arlene Brosas, said it was “unacceptable” that the Senate had refused to tackle the measure given the “strong public demand”.

She said her Gabriela Women’s Party will refile it when a newly elected Congress convenes in July.

“We will continue fighting for the divorce bill, no matter the composition of the Senate and House of Representatives in the next term,” Brosas told AFP.

– ‘Afraid of backlash’ –

The previous bill was likely influenced by the mid-term elections in May, family lawyer Lorna Kapunan told AFP.

“Because (half of senators) are seeking re-election, they are

afraid of the backlash of the Catholic Church," Kapunan said.

Senate President Francis Escudero had argued the bill would "create divisiveness", suggesting instead that the grounds for nullification could be expanded while avoiding the word "divorce".

Father Jerome Secillano of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, meanwhile said divorce contravenes the Church's teachings on marriage and would ultimately destroy families.

"We will see more couples separating. We will see children who don't know where to go," Secillano told AFP.

He also argued the number of domestic abuse victims would "double" as divorced men would "have another chance to be violent again" to new spouses.

Kapunan called the existing laws "very complicated, very expensive, very anti-woman and anti-child".

Despite the opposition and failed previous attempts to legalise divorce, Anuran remains determined.

"No one's backing down. Win or lose, the fight will continue."

AFP