

## International

# Catholics and evangelicals unite against Argentina's abortion bill

## Catholic Church wielding more political than religious clout

**BUENOS AIRES:** At the entrance to Argentina's Congress is a plaque reminding legislators that Our Lady of Lujan is the patron saint of the country's political parties - a not-so-subtle nod to religion in a nation considering whether to allow abortions. As Argentina's Senate prepares to vote on a bill that would legalize the practice, the Catholic Church has joined forces with evangelical Christians to fight the measure tooth and nail.

The bill, which aims to legalize voluntary abortions at up to 14 weeks, was passed by the Chamber of Deputies on December 11 and will be debated and voted on in the Senate on Tuesday. Two years ago a similar bill passed the lower house but was defeated in the Senate following a determined campaign by both Catholics and evangelicals.

Argentina's constitution guarantees freedom of religion and a 1994 reform removed the requirement that the president be Catholic. However it retains a reference to God in its preamble and its second article guarantees government support for the Catholic Church.

"The Catholic Church in Argentina has great sway. There's a very strong Catholic culture in the political world," sociologist Fortunato Mallimaci, who wrote a book on what he says is the myth of Argentine secularism, told AFP.

"Religious groups look for state support and the state, when it feels weak, looks for support from religious groups. Today the Catholic Church wields more political than religious clout," he said. Catholicism is a strong force in Argentina, the homeland of Pope Francis. The state pays a salary to archbishops and subsidizes Catholic schooling, which accounts for 36 percent of education in

Argentina, according to Mallimaci.

### Francis stays silent

However, Catholicism has been losing influence as evangelical Christianity gains ground. According to a 2019 poll by a government agency, 62.0 percent of Argentines identify as Catholic, 18.9 percent as non-religious and 15.3 percent as evangelical. The Catholic Church's sway can be seen in Argentina's delay compared to other countries in adopting a number of laws: divorce was legalized only in 1987, sex education introduced in 2006, gay marriage approved in 2010 and a gender identity law passed in 2012. Abortion is currently only allowed in two cases: rape and a danger to the mother's life. "There is an opposition and huge rejection from the Catholic Church, which weighs heavily" on the chances of the law passing, constitutional lawyer Alfonso Santiago told AFP.

However, Santiago believes the relationship between the government of President Alberto

Fernandez, who sponsored the abortion bill, and the Catholic Church will remain strong regardless of which way the vote goes. "I don't think there will be a break in collaboration on other issues. It didn't happen before" when, for example, same-sex marriage was approved, he said.

While Francis has in the past likened abortion to hiring an assassin, he's remained silent over the current debate.

### Protest strength

"The problem for the Catholic Church if abortion is legalized is that it will be up to it, and not the



### Bill aims to legalize abortions



**BUENOS AIRES:** Demonstrators celebrate with green headscarves - the symbol of abortion rights activists - outside the Argentine Congress on Dec 11, 2020, after legislators passed a bill to legalize abortion. —AFP

state, to ensure that its faithful comply with a prohibition that will be only religious," said Mallimaci. A 2020 government poll found that 22.3 percent of Catholics in Argentina believe that a woman should have the right to an abortion if she wants one. Meanwhile 55.7 percent said it should be permitted only in certain situations while just 17.2 percent supported a blanket ban. Since 2018, evangelicals have come to the fore in protesting legalization.

"They have the momentum of the reborn," said Mallimaci, pointing to the light blue handkerchiefs

brandished by evangelicals at their protests, as a counterweight to the green ones sported by abortion rights activists. "Catholics don't mobilize in that way." Despite their constant growth, evangelical churches in Argentina "don't have the same political weight as in other countries, such as Brazil where they can count on a parliamentary bloc." Their strength, however, lies in street protests and they will be out in force Tuesday in front of Congress, face-to-face with abortion rights demonstrators.—AFP

## With Biden, Britain's Brexiteers lose their cheerleader

**WASHINGTON:** Promoters of Britain's divorce from the European Union had said they would revitalize bonds with the United States, where President Donald Trump, with his shared disdain for multinational bodies, seemed the perfect partner. Come January, Britain both definitively leaves the 27-nation bloc and will deal with a new US president, Joe Biden, who prioritizes the EU and shares none of the Brexiteers' romanticism about going it alone. Biden, an Irish-American who will be the second Catholic president, had already warned Prime Minister Boris Johnson not to jeopardize peace in Northern Ireland by erecting a hard border between the British-ruled province and EU member Ireland.

Even as trade talks dragged on, Britain reached a deal with Brussels on special arrangements for Northern Ireland - a sign to observers that Biden's election had already made an impact. "It was recognized in London that if you messed up the Northern Irish border, it would have been absolutely poisonous for the US-UK relationship," said Jacob Kirkegaard, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

Johnson's Conservative government has emphasized issues on which it enjoys common ground with Biden, including fighting climate change, and announced a historic boost in military spending. Kirkegaard said Britain was hoping to punch above its weight as a strategic security partner of the United States, especially at a time of high tension with China, but said Biden could find similar capabilities in the much larger EU, where France is a major military player. "Brexit Britain has made itself nice to have but no longer strictly necessary to have onboard for the US," he said.

### 'I'm Irish'

Biden is surrounded by Barack Obama's former aides who have not forgotten Johnson's 2016 quip, in line with thinking on the US far-right, that the then US president had an "ancestral dislike" of Britain because of his "part-Kenyan" heritage. While the racial undertones differ markedly, Biden has himself said, at least partly in jest, that his Irish ancestry soured him on Britain.

In footage that went viral after his election, Biden is seen walking on as a BBC journalist tries to ask him a question, responding, "The BBC? I'm Irish!" before flashing a friendly smile. "Clearly I think there is a sense among some people in Biden's orbit that Brexit was a completely misguided policy and Prime Minister Johnson has been too close to Trump and therefore there's a need to downplay this relationship a little bit," said Erik Brattberg, director of the Europe program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.—AFP

## AstraZeneca COVID vaccine has 'winning formula'

**LONDON:** The COVID-19 vaccine developed by the British drugs group AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford has achieved a "winning formula" for efficacy, the company's chief executive said yesterday. The vaccine, currently being evaluated by Britain's independent medicines regulator, provides "100 percent protection" against severe COVID disease requiring hospitalization, Pascal Soriot said in an interview with the Sunday Times newspaper.

He added he believes trials will show his firm has achieved a vaccine efficacy equal to Pfizer-BioNTech at 95 percent and Moderna at 94.5 percent. "We think we have figured out the winning formula and how to get efficacy that, after two doses, is up there with everybody else," the chief executive said, while saying only that data would be published at "some point". The UK government announced on December 23 that the developers of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine had submitted their data to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).

Approval is expected to be granted to roll out the jab on Jan 4. The Sunday Telegraph newspaper reported. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was the first coronavirus shot to be authorized for use by the UK's independent medicines regulator and has been given to 600,000 of the country's most vulnerable people since last month. Earlier trials had shown varying outcomes in the AstraZeneca shot's efficacy. The vaccine initially showed an average 70 percent effectiveness but that

## Fly south or roost? 'Snowbirds' weigh Florida pandemic

**MONTREAL:** Birds of a feather normally flock together, but the pandemic has divided Canada's "snowbird" warm weather migrants into two camps: those staying home this winter and those heading to Florida no matter the cost. Nearly a million Canadians make the annual pilgrimage, fleeing to the southern United States to pass what would otherwise be gray and snowy months with their toes tucked in the sand and ocean breeze in their hair. The coronavirus has led a majority to forgo the trip this year - but for those flouting Canada's repeated calls to stay put, the price tag on winter at the beach has skyrocketed.

With the land border between the US and Canada closed for non-essential travel since March, Canada has implored its citizens to stay home.

"Now is not the right time for a vacation abroad," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday, as the country's second coronavirus wave surges with no sign of slowing. About 900,000 Canadians spend a large portion of the winter in Florida and in other southern US states, Johanne Blain, director of the Canadian Snowbird Association for the French-speaking province of Quebec, told AFP.

She estimates that only 30 percent of that number are doing so this year, however. That said, rules on the US side are fairly welcoming to sun-starved northerners: The country is allowing in Canadians who fly even for non-essential travel. Canada, on the other hand, is not admitting Americans under the same circumstances. And while Canadians do not have to respect quarantine rules in Florida, they must do so for 14 days upon return home.

Those who want to make the trip by car or motorhome, meanwhile, simply take advantage of a legal loophole to circumvent the closed land border. Michael Couturier, CEO of Quebec-based Transport KMC, leads the way.



**MONTREAL:** People make their way to St-Hubert airport to drop off their motor home to be driven across the border by a commercial company on Dec 18, 2020. —AFP

His clients board a plane in the Montreal suburbs and arrive 12 minutes later in Plattsburgh, New York, where a KMC employee meets them with their vehicle, transported across the border. The experience does not come cheap: Each

plane ticket costs Can\$500 (around \$390) and hauling the vehicle 55 miles (90 kilometers) across the border sets customers back \$1,000. Around 2,000 people have so far used the service, according to Couturier.—AFP

## Blocking pandemic relief: Biden warns of 'consequences'

**WASHINGTON:** US President-elect Joe Biden warned Saturday of "devastating consequences" if

President Donald Trump continues to delay signing a COVID-19 economic relief bill passed by Congress. Biden spoke out as millions of Americans saw their jobless benefits expire after Trump threw a long-awaited pandemic aid package into doubt - demanding lawmakers more than triple the \$600 direct payments to US taxpayers.

"This abdication of responsibility has devastating consequences. Today, about 10 million Americans will lose unemployment insurance bene-

fits," Biden said in a statement. The stimulus measure is wrapped up with a \$1.4 trillion funding bill, without which the government will be forced to shut down at midnight Monday. "In just a few days, government funding will expire, putting vital services and paychecks for military personnel at risk," Biden added.

"In less than a week, a moratorium on evictions expires, putting millions at risk of being forced from their homes over the holidays." In a video late

Tuesday, Trump, who is due to leave office in less than a month, called the \$900 million bill "a disgrace" - despite it being passed Monday with a large bipartisan majority after months of negotiation. The legislation was designed to throw a lifeline to businesses and people struggling to keep their heads above water. But in a pre-recorded statement made in the White House, Trump said he would refuse to accept the bill without changes increasing the checks to taxpayers to \$2,000.—AFP