

Latin American voters not seen toeing Catholic line

By Hilary Burke | June 6, 2006

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (Reuters) –

The Roman Catholic Church holds great weight in Latin America, but voters plagued by economic worries are largely tuning out the church's moral messages during elections this year.

Scholars say priests and bishops have no direct impact on how people vote in Latin America, home to half the world's Catholics. But the church has ties to many political leaders and played a crucial role -- as friend and foe -- during the region's military dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s.

Since democracy returned, the Catholic church mostly has limited its activism to criticizing libertine sexual mores and free-market economic policies that hurt the poor in the region, where four out of every 10 people are poor.

But many voters have opted to tackle poverty by electing left-leaning governments. And most ignore church teachings on issues like premarital sex, birth control and abortion without engaging in a U.S.-style "family values" debate.

"People are more concerned with other things. Life is harder, so questions like that come a lot lower down the scale," said Paul Freston, a sociology professor and Brazil specialist at Calvin College in Michigan. The Catholic church "wants to have a moral influence and wants to give guidance on what people should take into account in deciding how to vote. But whether anybody listens varies from place to place," Freston added.

The world's two largest Catholic nations, Brazil and Mexico, both have presidential elections this year. Mexican church leaders have met with the country's top three candidates in an unprecedented show of political clout.

During much of the last century, the ruling party was staunchly anticlerical; priests were banned from voting, mentioning politics in sermons and even wearing their collars in public.

Since 1992, when Mexico established diplomatic ties with the Vatican, the climate has been changing. President Vicente Fox, a devout Catholic, was the first leader to attend a papal mass and caused an uproar when he knelt to kiss the pope's ring.

But Catholic church leaders could not keep his government from putting "morning-after" contraceptive pills in public clinics.

This year's political contest is so tight, though, that some observers say Catholic activism could affect the July 2 vote.

"The Catholic church is saying [to candidates], 'I know people will vote for you but I could say you are not a good option and this could make you lose two or three points, which in a highly competitive vote may mean you've lost your shirt,'" said Elio Masferrer, a researcher at Mexico's National School of Anthropology and History.

NEITHER LEFT NOR RIGHT

Catholic leaders generally do not back specific candidates or parties. And the church doesn't have a stance on the recent shift leftward in many Latin American countries, partly because the church's cries for economic justice seem leftist but its conservative morals often resonate more with the political right.

And in a region where the Catholic church still has a sizable majority despite Protestant advances, Catholics come in every political stripe.

In Brazil, the Catholic church has sent mixed signals on the October presidential election. Following corruption scandals involving the government, the Brazilian National Bishop's Conference (CNBB) said the scandals undermined confidence in politicians.

But it stopped short of criticizing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who has denied knowledge of any wrongdoing in his administration and is likely to run for re-election.

In its most recent statement earlier this month, the CNBB criticized "unfair" neoliberal economic policies associated mostly with the party of Lula's rival, Geraldo Alckmin. It said Lula had showed that he wanted to improve the lot of the poor but asked him to adopt more active policies to achieve that.

Cesar Jacob, a political scientist with the Pontifical Catholic University in Rio de Janeiro, said Catholic bishops would be divided in their preferences.

"A more left-wing part of the church traditionally supports Lula, but the more conservative part may this time rally around Alckmin, who is a Catholic and rumored to be part of [conservative Catholic group] Opus Dei," he said. "But the padres have very little control over the electorate."

The Catholic church's influence is also limited by politically active evangelical congregations, which sometimes field their own candidates in Brazil.

In Venezuela, where a presidential election is set for December, some Catholic church leaders have publicly sparred with leftist President Hugo Chavez, questioning his democratic credentials and the efficacy of his antipoverty measures.

Chavez, a self-styled revolutionary, lashed out at a cardinal who had criticized the president's "despotic" ways, saying the comments were part of a coup conspiracy.

But the Catholic church's sway over voters is seen as minimal, and Chavez has a clear electoral advantage thanks to his popular social projects and divisions among the opposition.

"These days, no party wants to be seen as being against the Church, but neither do they want to be seen as buying the Church's messages. That's why parties have such a pragmatic and ambiguous attitude toward the Church," said Cristian Parker, a sociologist at the University of Santiago de Chile.

(Additional reporting by Andrei Khalip in Rio de Janeiro)