

# MEXICO - Condoms and sexual tolerance in the hands of a detractor

Diego Cevallos, IPS

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*IPS - Using a condom is not safe, the "morning after" pill is an abortifacient, and campaigns in favour of sexual tolerance promote homosexuality. These are some of the ideas of Mexican Health Minister José Córdova that are alarming social activists and analysts.*

But the Catholic Church and conservative organisations are pleased. They opposed the sexual and reproductive health strategies of the Vicente Fox administration (2000-2006) alongside Córdova, who chaired the Congressional Health Commission from 2003 to 2006.

Calderón, Fox and Córdova are all members of the conservative National Action Party (PAN), in government since 2000 after 71 years of uninterrupted Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) rule.

Córdova's appointment as minister of health in the government of President Felipe Calderón, who took office on Dec. 1, rang alarm bells for activists.

"There are no good signs with this minister, because he has appointed questionable officials and made surprising declarations about sexual health, and his background is highly conservative," Axela Romero, the head of the non-governmental Salud Integral para la Mujer (SIPAM - Holistic Health for Women), told IPS.

"We are worried by the strong possibility that with this government we will go backwards on public health issues," Romero said.

Sexual and reproductive health policies were relatively liberal during the Fox administration.

Condom use was encouraged, there were creative campaigns against homophobia, and the "morning after" pill was made available to women as an emergency contraceptive, among other measures.

In an interview with the local newspaper Excelsior, published Jan. 11, Córdova railed against these tactics.

He said that this government should not promote condom use so much, since in his view it promotes high-risk sexual practices, but instead should encourage sex education by the family itself, to be imparted on the basis of parents' beliefs and values. He also declared that campaigns against homophobia foment homosexuality.

Over 200 social organisations responded to his words with a media spread containing an indignant open letter to Córdova titled "In Health, Obscurantism Kills".

After the wave of criticisms, the Health Ministry press office issued a communiqué saying that sexual health policies designed "on the basis of scientific evidence" would be continued, as would campaigns to prevent HIV infection and unwanted pregnancies, and against sexual discrimination.

But the non-governmental organisations were not satisfied with that apparent ratification. Since then they have been requesting a meeting with officials to obtain explanations of what the Calderón administration's public health strategy will be.

Opposition members of Congress have indicated that they, too, will call Córdova to the legislature to answer questions about his plans.

"The minister has not changed his position, and in addition we see that he's packing the health sector with officials who haven't got the right qualifications or attitudes," SIPAM's Romero said.

As his ministry's director of legal affairs, Córdova appointed a former lawyer for the Catholic Archdiocese of Mexico, Bernardo Fernández, who defended Cardinal Norberto Ribera against charges of alleged complicity in cases of pederasty involving a priest.

Fernández, who has also spoken out against the sex education campaigns, is now responsible for ruling on the legality of any public health strategy or law that is proposed by the Health Ministry.

Another change that has made activists wary was the dismissal of Jorge Saavedra as director of the state National Centre for the Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS and his replacement by a person with no experience whatsoever in the field.

Saavedra was highly appreciated by women's and gay people's organisations.

According to political scientist María Amparo Casar, of the Economics Research and Teaching Centre (CIDE), the new health minister clearly "plans to correct what he sees as excesses committed in the last six years, because in his view Fox's policies weren't about prevention, but rather promoted high-risk sexual practices."

The problem with Córdova is that he plans on imposing his personal conservative convictions in the realm of public policy, Casar said.

When he was a congressman, Córdova declared that "the 'morning after' pill is a contraceptive and abortion method that can also promote licentiousness and promiscuity."

"If indiscriminate use of the emergency contraceptive pill is permitted, it will lead to more sexual licentiousness and increase the risk of contracting AIDS," he said.

He teamed up with the Catholic Church and the anti-abortion Provida ("pro-life") group to fight distribution of the morning after pill and to oppose other Fox administration sexual and reproductive health strategies. But despite their active protests, they did not succeed in preventing these policies from going ahead.

Under the Fox administration, a campaign against homophobia included radio publicity spots portraying gays and lesbians in everyday situations, or talking naturally to their parents about their same-sex partners.

"Equality begins when we acknowledge that we all have the right to be different," was the slogan that was broadcast with each of these ads.

Through hard work, public campaigns and lobbying, "we will keep Mexico from backsliding on its public health policies to do with sexual health and tolerance," said Romero.

During the election campaign, Calderón said he was not in favour of euthanasia, the "morning after" pill, homosexual civil unions or abortion, but he promised that his personal beliefs would not interfere with current legislation, congressional decisions or state policies.

It remains to be seen whether he keeps his word or whether his health minister will make a U-turn towards conservative positions.

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