

Brazil abstains in vote on sexual and reproductive health at UN

Brazil's new position on sexual, reproductive and gender issues creates shock with old allies and, ironically, leaves the country closer to Islamic governments.

By Jamil Chade

GENEVA (Reuters) - Jair Bolsonaro's government abstained on Wednesday in voting on excerpts from a UN resolution calling for "sexual and reproductive health" for people affected by humanitarian crises. The initiative for trying to overturn such references was from Donald Trump's government, to no avail.

The resolution debated by the UN Economic and Social Council concerned a strengthening of the coordination of international humanitarian work. UOL learned that the White House has put significant pressure on Brazil's support and at least prevent Itamaraty from supporting the original proposal.

The vote came on the same day that Folha de S. Paulo newspaper also revealed that Brazilian diplomats have received instructions from the Itamaraty in recent weeks to negotiate in multilateral forums to reiterate "the Brazilian government's understanding that the word gender means the biological sex: female or male. "

The debate comes amid an offensive by the current administration to undo some of the positions traditionally taken by Brazil over the past 18 years. One of the main ones refers to the term gender, considered part of the government as a "social construction".

But the transformation of Brazil's position in international organizations goes further. If for some months a clear debate was held within the Brazilian government on how to behave in votes in the entities, the consolidation of the more conservative position came into force in recent weeks. And it was widely noted by foreign governments and NGOs.

One of the examples was clear in Wednesday's vote. In one part of the resolution, the text spoke of the need to guarantee access to the victims of humanitarian crises for services of "sexual health and reproductive health". At the insistence of the US government, however, an

alternative text was put forward, asking only that "health-saving support" be guaranteed. The Americans' fear was that the original phrase would give way to pro-abortion policies.

The new text also warns that abortion is not part of international law, although it is recognized that there are countries with domestic laws in this regard. "The UN can not promote abortion and neither new reproductive and sexual rights," the US delegation explained, suggesting the amendment to the original text.

In a second passage of the same resolution, again a veto to a reference to the need for UN humanitarian organizations to provide basic services to affected populations, including services to ensure "sexual health and reproductive health."

Instead, references such as "maternal health as well as voluntary family planning and other options to avoid the onboard."

Only two countries voted for the idea. Nine others opted to abstain, including Russia, Egypt, Pakistan, Belarus and Kenya, as well as Brazil. But 30 different countries voted against the proposal, including Uruguay, Venezuela, Korea, Romania, Paraguay, Philippines, Mali, Malta, Mexico, Morocco, Netherlands, Norway, India, Ireland, Japan and Luxembourg.

Explanation

In explaining the vote of abstention, the Brazilian government indicated to the UN that it agreed with the position of the US government that the concepts in the article were not targets of international law and did not have their defined scope. "Our preference, therefore, would be to eliminate these expressions," said the diplomat.

But at the same time, supporting the American text would end up hurting the domestic laws of the country. The proposal would also be contrary to the public policies of access to health in Brazil. "So let us abstain," he said.

Romania, on behalf of the EU, criticized the US initiative. In a speech, the bloc indicated that it "deeply regrets" the American amendment and says it broke a traditional consensus on that

resolution. Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand also insisted on the need for reproductive and sexual rights to be guaranteed.

With the defeat of the American project, Brazil also abstained from being asked if it would accept the original paragraph, which explicitly spoke of reproductive and sexual rights. Once again, Brazil's position was defeated.

In the room, when they saw the hammer hit to approve the final resolution without a vote, many applauded. But the Brazilian representative in the room did not follow the general applause.

After the vote, Brazil again asked to explain its position. Despite alliance with the final consensus of the general resolution on the humanitarian issue, the Bolsonaro government indicated that the paragraphs referring to sexual and reproductive health were "disassociated".

Surprise

The case of the vote left the will. But the case is not isolated. A few days ago, delegates from a country member of the UN Human Rights Council called for Brazil's cooperation to make a joint statement on social issues at one of the seminars at United Nations headquarters.

The diplomats prepared a text and submitted to the Brazilian diplomats for their consideration. But when the text returned, the foreign negotiators were scared. By opening the file in an email, the terms "gender equality" had been cut by Brazil.

Foreign diplomats, who asked not to be identified, refused to accept the proposed changes proposed by Brazil and decided to go ahead with the statement ignoring Brazil's stance.

But for the governments of other countries, the case has widened the swing taken by the government of Jair Bolsonaro behind the scenes of international diplomacy. Today, as part of the results of the Brazilian position, Latin America no longer has a common position on issues of equality and even reproductive health.

Instead of "gender equality," all discourses and resolutions supported by Brazil must now change the term to "equality between men and women." In essence, this is a guideline on biological determinations, which has not been supported by other Western governments.

Recently, in New York, human rights ministry teams gave speeches in debates, but did not mention the term "gender equality." The new format: "equality between men and women".

At the World Health Organization in May, Brazil has also aligned itself with the most conservative group of countries, and many of them Islamic, when speaking about reproductive rights.

Test

But another great test of the new Brazilian position will occur in the coming weeks. At the UN Human Rights Council, two resolutions have been proposed that cite broad gender issues. Canada has tabbed a text on violence against women, while Mexico is leading a resolution to combat discrimination against women. The problem: the two texts are full of mentions considered undesirable by the Brazilian government.

In the Canadian text, for example, there are several references to "gender equality." There are also passages that open up gaps for abortion. "Human rights include the right to have control and decide freely and responsibly on issues related to sexuality, sexual and reproductive health free of coercion, violence, and integrity of the body and autonomy," says the draft text obtained by UOL .

In another section, another polemic. The text cites the need to defend "sexual rights." But for Brazil, there are only "reproductive rights."

Consulted by UOL, diplomats from European countries lamented the Brazilian turn. The fear is that, by the weight of the country, the new position will begin to influence other smaller countries to vote the same way, undermining a tendency of the last 20 years of extending rights, not reducing them.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, Western diplomats also warned how Brazil's new position could ultimately give decisive support to the group of Islamic countries.

For years, these countries have tried to find more support to stem a more progressive agenda on sexual rights and the status of women. But they did not have enough votes.

Now, without an active voice from Brazil in this sense, the fear is that a silence from the Itamaraty leaves the space open for the Islamists to prevail with their vision and that, in some points, there is an "ironic coincidence of positions."

In the case of the Mexican resolution, foreign diplomats have confirmed that, for the time being, Brazil has not ruled. But the Latin American country has confirmed that, in the only mention of the term "gender" in the text, governments such as Egypt, Bahrain and Russia have already called for its removal from the resolution as a condition for its unanimous approval.

Different Views

UOL was in the debates on each of the articles of the resolution and witnessed a deep split between different world views.

In an interview disputed by Pakistan, the Muslim-majority diplomat explained that in their culture, men always let women get on a bus first. "I do not want to miss it," he said.

But it was rebutted by a Mexican delegate, contrary to the idea that such measures mean that there is equality between men and women in society. For the Latin American, such a gesture may be a sign or that men consider women to be more fragile or simply do so in order to look maliciously at women climbing the stairs of the vehicle.

In another section of the debate, the governments of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt and Iran called on Canada to withdraw from its resolution on violence against women a reference to the need for comprehensive sex education.

Bahrain also spoke out. "We do not see moti Europeans and other countries surprised by the Brazilian position to put this into a resolution of violence against women," he said.

In response, the government of Argentina came out to support sex education as a way to stop violence against women. "Many do not even know what consensual sex is," said the Buenos Aires diplomat during the meeting.

Reactions

Brazil's position is also a concern of NGOs and activists. "If Brazil was once seen as a serious negotiator whose positions played a role in the debates in spheres like the UN and OAS, seeing our diplomats defending backward positions as linking gender to biological sex will greatly reduce the international relevance of our diplomacy," said Camila Asano, Conectas's program coordinator.

Minister Damares Alves announced at the beginning of the year that Brazil is a candidate for re-election to the UN Human Rights Council, a position such as that of the Itamaraty goes to against what is expected of a country with such aspirations, "Camila Asano added.

Gustavo Coutinho, lawyer and secretary of Policy on Drugs of ABGLT (Brazilian Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transvestite, Transsexual and Intersex) also criticizes the Brazilian position. "The position of understanding gender as biological sex goes against the Federal Constitution and to the understanding of the Federal Supreme Court in ADI 4275," he said. "The STF has already recognized the right to self-determination of gender, deconstructing a biologizing and pathological paradigm," he said.

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