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## Divorce may soon be legal

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**I**t appears that divorce may soon be legal in the Philippines. Recently the House committee on population and family approved the consolidation of four pending bills in the chamber for divorce and the dissolution of marriage. The goal is to consolidate these bills in the most efficient and effective way possible to provide a less expensive and legal way for couples to end their marriages.

For many this is something that they feel has been a long time coming. The Philippines is one of the few countries in the world that has not legalized divorce in some form. It's because we are a predominantly Catholic and religious country and most, if not all, of the opposition is of a religious nature. After all, people believe that marriage means "until death do you part - in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad..." and the whole kit and caboodle.

Personally, I understand that viewpoint. I believe in the forever aspect of marriage. However, times have changed for many over the past few decades and while divorce is definitely not a religious option, it may be time for it to become a legal one. When you look at the age-old separation of church and state argument, marriage - as far as the state is concerned at least - is a contract just like every other contract, and all contracts have a legal way out.

Divorce has been a hot button topic in the Philippines for a long time. And I do see both sides of the coin - especially for the underprivileged. While annulment is an option, it is extremely costly and lengthy and many couples either can't afford to do it or just opt not to finish the process and go on with their lives. This is a problem because instead of legally resolving their situation they just pretend that separation is the same thing and end up with new partners and new families.

That is actually more of the problem in the Philippines I would think. Multiple partners and families have become so much part of the norm that

it's no longer taboo or surprising for a couple to have parted ways, remain married, but live their lives with someone else. It's all over mainstream media and every single other new Filipino movie is about the mistress or the second family or the other child or children.

Not to mention, divorce is something that women's groups in the country are clamoring for as an option to help women who are trapped in abusive relationships with men who either refuse to let them go or "hold them hostage" in terms of supporting them and the children. It's an understandable concern in a patriarchal society but it's just one facet. I'm sure there are just as many men who have issues with their wives as well.

Would divorce solve all these marital problems? Or would it create a host of all

new ones? There's no right answer I suppose. I would like to think that, if given the option, people would do the right and legal thing if it were the best choice for everyone. And I don't think divorce is something that should be taken lightly. It should be the last resort and not the first. But do I see a need for this legal option? I think I do - if utilized properly.

According to Surigao del Norte Representative Robert Ace Barbers - who authored one of the consolidated bills - a stipulation of legal divorce will be at least five years proven separation. This is to ensure that people won't jump to divorce immediately when things get tough but instead - at the very least - give their marriage five years to see if reconciliation is not at all a possibility.

Additionally, the court is looking to appoint counselors or indigent litigants as well as social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists as needed for families going through the divorce process. Understandably it is the children who will need the most attention when a family is potentially breaking apart, but we have to ask ourselves if it is kinder to be honest with children and show them a mature and open approach to a relationship failing or to lie to them and go behind their backs and pretend that everything is fine when it is not?

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I guess in the end we'll all have to wait and see what will happen with the divorce bill – in terms of limitations, stipulations, and application. Whether or not the country is prepared, it might truly be time.

To borrow from pop culture – the kids are definitely not all right. And nor should they be. In the United States, school shootings have become an epidemic and students are rightfully afraid to go to school for fear of being gunned down with a semi-automatic weapon. It's gotten so ridiculous that bullet-proof backpacks and school shooter drills are becoming a norm in American schools and parents send their children to classes with the terror of knowing that they could be part of the next school shooting statistic.

The latest shooting happened at Stoneman Douglas in Florida last Feb 14 where 17 students and staff members were killed by a 19-year-old Caucasian former student of the school. It's a given that the shooter had mental health issues but at the same time the incident has, once again, proven that gun control is a subject that desperately needs a conversation and action and change in the United States.

Since January 2018 there have already been over a dozen school shooting incidents in the United States – that number is no joke. And many are demanding that stricter gun control finally be implemented in the country. Gun lovers and NRA supporters are quick to try to place the blame on anything else but this time, finally, it seems that the people won't take "no" or "thoughts and prayers" for an answer. This time, they want, they demand, change.

And it is the kids who are leading the charge. Survivors of the Stoneman Douglas incident have become political activists advocating for safer schools and shunning the states "thoughts and prayers." They want "action and plans." I completely understand – these children are stepping into a role they should never have had to play – and are advocating for a safer world for them and their classmates after the adults who were supposed to protect them and their interests, let them down. I hope that this is the straw that finally breaks the camel's back. Children deserve to feel safe and not worry that they'll go to school and get shot.