

Despite Losing Nike Deal Over Gay Comments, Manny Pacquiao May Still Step Into Senate Role

For all the criticism over his anti-gay comment and the loss of a lucrative endorsement deal with Nike Inc., Philippines world boxing champion Manny Pacquiao still looks set to win election to the country's senate in May, according to political analysts.

Nike, the world's largest sportswear maker, canceled its contract on Wednesday with the 37 year-old boxer-turned-politician, who has been the world champion in eight different weight divisions, after he described gays as "worse than animals."

But voters in the mostly Catholic Philippines appear unready to abandon support for the country's biggest sporting hero, who is running for one of 12 vacant senatorial seats up for grabs in the May 9 election.

The fighter has apologized for the comments, and analysts reckoned the controversy has caused limited damage to his campaign.

"Pacquiao has clearly offended the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community with his comments on same-sex marriage, but this group represents a minority and this will not affect the boxer's popularity among the voters," Benito Lim, political science professor at the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila University, told *Reuters*.

"He may still win in the elections."

Many ordinary Filipinos believe Pacquiao made a mistake in his remarks on same-sex marriage because he hurt some sensibilities.

Many are more interested in what happens in April, when Pacquiao tries to win back the WBO welterweight title he lost last year to Floyd Mayweather.

Billed as his final fight, Pacquiao is going up against American Timothy Bradley.

"The criticism against Pacquiao has no effect on us," said Annabelle Magsipoc, a government employee, told Reuters Television, adding that the boxer retains popular support in the community.

"Actually, many people really wanted to say what Pacquiao said about same-sex marriage, but some people are trying to make this an election issue," she said.

Independent opinion polls showed Pacquiao, a two-term congressman, consistently ranked eighth with 35 percent support in a field of four dozen candidates vying for one of the 12 vacant seats in the upper house of Congress.

Gay and lesbian groups have called on Filipinos not to vote for the boxing icon for his television comment on same-sex marriage, almost a repeat of what had happened in 2012 when he quoted from the Bible to warn against homosexual activities.

Same-sex marriage is not allowed in the Philippines where more than 80 percent of the 100 million population is Roman Catholic.

Pacquiao has converted from being a Roman Catholic to a more conservative evangelical Protestant, voting against bills in the lower house of Congress on divorce, same-sex marriage and birth control through use of artificial contraceptives.

Ramon Casiple of the Institute of Political and Electoral

Reforms said it is too early to say if the latest controversy will hamper Pacquiao's chances of becoming a senator.

"He stirred a hornet's nest, so there's danger that he could lose support, but, so far, we don't see any indication of that."

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