

Germany approves bill to protect male circumcision

December 12 2012, by Frank Jordans



In this Oct. 29, 2012 file picture mohel doctor Yacov Gassinovitch, center, is surround by other Rabbis and relatives as he holds eight days old Jonathan during the boy's circumcision at synagogue in Berlin. German Parliament is expected to vote on legislation clarifying the legality of infant male circumcision for religious reasons. The government drew up the legislation after a court in June ruled the practice could amount to criminal bodily harm—prompting outrage in Germany's Jewish and Muslim communities. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

(AP)—German lawmakers approved a bill Wednesday that explicitly

permits male infant circumcision, ending months of legal uncertainty after a court ruling that the practice amounts to bodily harm led to an outcry from Jewish and Muslim groups.

Germany's government moved swiftly to draft a law following the Cologne regional court decision in June. The ruling didn't amount to a ban but raised fears of possible prosecutions.

The head of Germany's main Jewish group expressed relief at the vote, which passed with 434 lawmakers in favor, 100 against and 46 abstaining.

"The circumcision law finally restores legal certainty," said Dieter Graumann, the head of Germany's Central Council of Jews. "What's important for us is the political message of this law, which is that Jewish and Muslim life is still welcome here."

Restrictions on religiously motivated circumcision would have been particularly sensitive in Germany because of the country's persecution of Jews and other minorities during the Nazi period.

Proponents of the law, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, noted that failure to protect circumcision would have risked making Germany the only country in the world to ban a practice that Jews and some Muslims consider an ancient and essential part of their religious traditions.

The new law grants parents the right to have their sons circumcised by a trained practitioner. Once the boy reaches six months of age, the procedure needs to be performed by a doctor.

Some critics of circumcision in Germany have argued that the right of the child to bodily integrity trumped a parent's right to make a decision on his behalf.

A minority of left-wing lawmakers in Parliament proposed that parents should have to wait until the boy is 14 so he can give informed consent, noting the procedure is irreversible.

Such a delay would have contravened Jewish religious law, which requires that boys are circumcised on the eighth day after birth in a ceremony seen as their entrance into a covenant with God. Muslims also usually perform the procedure early in a boy's life.

Germany, a country of some 82 million people, has a population of about 250,000 Jews and about 4 million Muslims.

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