

Jamaica Senate starts debate on pot decriminalization bill

January 30 2015, by David Mcfadden

Jamaica's Senate on Friday started debating a bill that would decriminalize possession of small amounts of pot and establish a licensing agency to regulate a lawful medical marijuana industry on the island where the drug has long been pervasive but prohibited.

Justice Minister Mark Golding, who introduced the legislation to the upper house, said it would establish a "cannabis licensing authority" to deal with regulations on cultivation and distribution of [marijuana](#) and [industrial hemp](#) for medical, scientific and therapeutic purposes.

The various drug law amendments would make possession of up to 2 ounces a petty offense that would not result in a criminal record. Cultivation of five or fewer plants on any premises would be permitted. Tourists who are prescribed [medical marijuana](#) abroad could apply for permits authorizing them to legally buy small amounts of Jamaican ganja.

"It is time that Jamaica capitalizes on the plant that has been part of our culture for generations," said Deputy Senate President Angela Brown Burke, a legalization advocate who is also the mayor of Jamaica's capital of Kingston.

Rastafarians who use marijuana as a sacrament could also legally use cannabis for religious purposes for the first time in Jamaica, where the spiritual movement was founded in the 1930s. It would also give adherents special privileges to use, cultivate and transport the drug for

sacramental purposes on the island.

Sen. Tom Tavares-Finson said the opposition supports the government's marijuana reform bill overall, which was recently authorized by the Cabinet, and is "happy with the progress that is being made." But he says the sections dealing with Rastafarians are muddled.

The legislation's "fundamental flaw," according to Tavares-Finson, would essentially give Jamaica's justice minister the authority to determine who is a Rasta and who is not when reviewing applications to use and grow pot for spiritual reasons. He described it as "an onerous responsibility that has evaded sociologists for the last 50 years."

Experts in the faith agree that determining religious use will not be clear-cut. Rastafarians essentially have no formal church or doctrine, organized conversion process and few places of communal gathering. An individual Rasta's personal relationship with "Jah," or God, is considered central to the belief system.

"Most ritual smoking does not take place in official places of worship but in people's yards and on street corners," Ennis Edmonds, an associate professor of religious studies at Ohio's Kenyon College who studies Rastafari, said by email.

Debate in the Senate is expected to continue in coming days before being sent to the lower house. Legislation to decriminalized marijuana is expected to pass both chambers, where the ruling party holds the majority.

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