

Chilean Congress takes first step towards legal abortion

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Chile's Congress took its first step Tuesday toward legalizing abortion in some cases, a practice that has been legally banned for decades in the socially conservative nation.

By a vote of eight to five, a legislative committee agreed to allow debate on the [bill](#), which was submitted to Congress in January by President Michelle Bachelet.

The bill would allow abortion in cases of rape, risk to the mother or deadly birth defects.

Since the final days of the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship, abortion of any type has been strictly outlawed in Chile, and under current law is punishable by up to five years in prison.

"My vote is in favor of the bill because, in tragic situations, it lets women decide what will happen," said Cristina Girardi, a deputy for the Party for Democracy (PPD).

In introducing the bill, Bachelet, 63, said it was time for change.

"Facts have shown that completely banning abortion and making it illegal, has not stopped the practice," said Bachelet, a physician who returned to office in March 2014 after serving as Chile's first woman president from 2006 to 2010.

Lawmakers from Bachelet's Socialist party have tried in the past to introduce abortion bills, but they have always been voted down by the legislature.

Pinochet outlawed all abortion in 1989, as one of the final acts of his 17-year rule.

Prior to that, for more than 50 years, Chile permitted [abortion](#) if the mother's life was in danger or if the fetus was not viable.

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