

Conservative Poles rally for near-total ban on abortions

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Anti-abortion groups held marches across Poland Sunday in support of calls for a near total ban on pregnancy terminations in the staunchly Catholic country, where abortions are already heavily restricted.

The current law adopted in 1993 bans all terminations except in cases of pregnancies that result from rape or incest, pose a health risk to the mother, or where the foetus is severely deformed.

Now, anti-[abortion](#) activists backed by the influential Catholic Church want to table a citizen's bill in parliament that would allow abortions only when necessary to save a woman's life.

The proposal would also increase the maximum jail term for people who perform unauthorised abortions from two years to five.

"Today we are calling on our state authorities to guarantee full legal protection of unborn children," Pawel Kwasniak, head of a Warsaw-based anti-abortion NGO that organised the march told upwards of a thousand people at the rally in the capital.

Organisers said similar rallies were held Sunday in 140 cities and towns across the country.

In power since November, Poland's right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) government has endorsed the restrictive citizens' bill, at the risk of alienating voters.

The petition needs 100,000 signatures to be examined by parliament. The organisers have said they will continue their signature-gathering drive until the end of June.

However, an opinion poll published in March found that, far from supporting further restrictions, 51 percent of Poles want access to abortions widened.

Thousands of people have flocked to protests against the proposed tightening of the law, with opponents launching their own plan to garner 100,000 signatures supporting a bill liberalising [pregnancy terminations](#).

Three respected former Polish first ladies have also denounced the citizen's bill, insisting that making it harder to access abortions would only "aggravate women's tragedy".

Under 2,000 legal abortions take place in Poland each year.

There are no hard statistics on the number of illegal abortions performed, or on the number of women who travel abroad for the procedure to countries like Austria, Germany and Slovakia.

Women's rights organisations estimate their number at between 100,000 and 150,000 a year.

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