

Polish parliament rejects abortion ban after mass protests

October 6 2016

Poland's parliament on Thursday rejected an abortion ban after women staged massive nationwide protests in the devoutly Catholic nation, where the law is already among the most restrictive in Europe.

Right-wing and liberal parliamentarians in the 450-member lower house joined forces to reject the controversial bill by 352 votes to 58, with 18 abstentions.

The vote came after tens of thousands of black-clad women protested across Poland on Monday, as solidarity demonstrations sprang up in European capitals including Berlin, London and Paris.

Home to 38 million people, Poland sees less than 2,000 legal abortions a year, but women's groups estimate that another 100,000 to 150,000 procedures are performed illegally or abroad.

Jaroslav Kaczynski, leader of the governing right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party told parliament before the vote that his group "would always support protecting the right to life".

But he said the proponents of the ban were "not going about it (protecting the right to life) in the best way."

While the PiS once favoured introducing a near-total ban on abortion, the party is well aware that a strong majority of Poles support existing legislation, which allows terminations in certain cases.

Late last month, PiS lawmakers had pushed ahead with the controversial bill that would allow abortions only if the mother's life was at risk and increase the maximum jail term for practitioners from two years to five.

The citizens' initiative tabled in parliament by the Stop Abortion coalition would have put women who had terminations at risk of jail terms, though judges could waive incarceration.

Poland's influential Roman Catholic Church initially gave the initiative its seal of approval earlier this year, though its bishops since spoke out against jailing women.

'Scared by protests'

A poll published last month by the Newsweek Polska magazine showed that 74 percent of Poles want to keep the existing law.

Passed in 1993, the current legislation bans all abortions unless there was rape or incest, the pregnancy poses a health risk to the mother or the foetus is severely deformed.

Liberal lawmaker and former sports minister Joanna Mucha said PiS lawmakers "panicked" and backtracked on the ban after Monday's massive protests.

"Polish women won't allow you to drive them to the slaughterhouse like sheep," she warned PiS lawmakers during the parliamentary debate.

"The herd will trample you."

Meanwhile Mariusz Dzierzawski, whose group had proposed the near total ban, accused PiS lawmakers of "ridiculing their constituents" for retracting support for the bill.

Further upsetting conservatives, parliament on Thursday also dropped a bill intended to severely limit in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), the so-called "test-tube baby" treatment that involves fertilising an egg outside a woman's body to produce an embryo that can then be implanted in her womb.

The proposed abortion ban had strained relations between Warsaw and Brussels, already at odds in a high-pitched rule of law dispute.

The European Parliament debated the proposed ban on Wednesday.

Barbara Kudrycka, a Polish MEP with the centrist European People's Party, warned PiS lawmakers that "women aren't merchandise you can use to pay off your campaign promises."

But pro-choice supporters insist they still have a long struggle ahead in conservative Poland.

"We still have to fight for a better sex education, for better access to birth control and above all, to remember that the fight is far from over," Zofia Marcinek told AFP outside parliament after Thursday's vote.

© 2016 AFP

Citation: Polish parliament rejects abortion ban after mass protests (2016, October 6) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-10-parliament-abortion.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.