

# Amid protests, Portugal lawmakers vote to allow euthanasia

February 20 2020, by Barry Hatton

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Demonstrators protest outside the Portuguese parliament in Lisbon, Thursday, Feb. 20, 2020. Protesters gathered Thursday outside Portugal's where lawmakers were due to debate proposals that would allow euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide. Groups which oppose the procedures waved banners and chanted "Sim a vida!" ("Yes to life!") in bright sunshine outside the parliament building in Lisbon. One banner said, "Euthanasia doesn't end suffering, it ends life." (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

Portugal's parliament voted Thursday in favor of allowing euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide for terminally ill people.

The landmark vote left Portugal poised to become one of the few countries in the world permitting the procedures. However, the country's president could still attempt to block the legislation.

The 230-seat Republican Assembly, Portugal's parliament, approved five right-to-die bills, each by a comfortable margin. Left-of-center parties introduced the bills, which had no substantial differences.

Before lawmakers voted, hundreds of people outside parliament building protested the measures. One banner said, "Euthanasia doesn't end suffering, it ends life." Some protesters chanted "Sim a vida!" ("Yes to life!") and others held up crucifixes and religious effigies.

Inside the parliament building, underlining the historical weight of the moment, each lawmaker was called, in alphabetical order, to state their vote on each [bill](#), instead of voting electronically. Such a lengthy method is usually used only for landmark votes, such as a declaration of war or impeachment.

After the five bills passed, some lawmakers took photographs with their smartphone of the electronic screen on the wall announcing the results. The bills were approved by margins of between 28 and 41 votes.



A demonstrator shouts slogans during a protest outside the Portuguese parliament in Lisbon, Thursday, Feb. 20, 2020. Protesters gathered Thursday outside Portugal's where lawmakers were due to debate proposals that would allow euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide. Groups which oppose the procedures waved banners and chanted "Sim a vida!" ("Yes to life!") in bright sunshine outside the parliament building in Lisbon. One banner said, "Euthanasia doesn't end suffering, it ends life." (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, who is known to be reluctant about [euthanasia](#), could veto the new law, but parliament can override his veto by voting a second time for approval. The Portuguese president doesn't have executive powers.

The head of state also could ask the Constitutional Court to review the

legislation; Portugal's Constitution states that human life is "sacrosanct," though abortion has been legal in the country since 2007.

Euthanasia—when a doctor directly administers fatal drugs to a patient—is legal in Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland. In some U.S. states, medically-assisted suicide—where patients administer the lethal drug themselves, under medical supervision—is permitted.

Ana Figueiredo, a math teacher, became a supporter of euthanasia after her 70-year-old father with terminal cancer killed himself with a gun almost six years ago.

"He was conscious, in deep pain and ... he went on begging his doctors to take his pain away because he was in such a terminal state," Figueiredo said. "It was very sad to see him begging for a dignified death without pain."





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The Catholic church in Portugal has led opposition to the procedures, which currently are illegal and carry prison sentences of up to three years. Church leaders have urged lawmakers in vain to hold a referendum on the issue.

In a similar debate two years ago, lawmakers rejected euthanasia by five

votes.

Most parties allowed their lawmakers to vote their conscience, with some diverging from their party line.

Socialist lawmaker Isabel Moreira said the aim of the bills was to let people "make intimate choices, without breaking the law."

In recent years, the Socialist Party has also led successful efforts to permit same-sex marriages and abortion in Portugal.

"Everyone can be the architect of their own destiny, as long they don't harm others," Moreira said during the debate.

Telmo Correia, a [lawmaker](#) from the conservative Popular Party, described euthanasia as "a sinister step backward for civilization." He said none of the parties presenting the legalization proposals mentioned euthanasia in their platforms for October's [general election](#).



A demonstrator holds a crucifix during a protest outside the Portuguese parliament in Lisbon, Thursday, Feb. 20, 2020. Protesters gathered Thursday outside Portugal's where lawmakers were due to debate proposals that would allow euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)



Demonstrators, some of them holding statues of saints, protest outside the Portuguese parliament in Lisbon, Thursday, Feb. 20, 2020. Protesters gathered Thursday outside Portugal's where lawmakers were due to debate proposals that would allow euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide. Groups which oppose the procedures waved banners and chanted "Sim a vida!" ("Yes to life!") in bright sunshine outside the parliament building in Lisbon. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

The governing Socialist Party's bill, similar to the others, covers patients over 18 years of age who are "in a situation of extreme suffering, with an untreatable injury or a fatal and incurable disease."

Two doctors, at least one of them a specialist in the relevant illness, and a psychiatrist would need to sign off on the patient's request to die. The case would then go to a Verification and Evaluation Committee, which



could approve or turn down the procedure.

The process is postponed if it is legally challenged, or if the patient loses consciousness, and health practitioners can refuse to perform the procedure on moral grounds. Oversight is provided by the General-Inspectorate for Health.

To discourage people from traveling to Portugal to end their life, the bills all stipulate that patients must either be Portuguese citizens or [legal residents](#).

The Socialist-led coalition government in Portugal's neighbor Spain has also set in motion the legislative steps needed to allow euthanasia.

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