

France Determined to Legalize Gay Marriage Despite Huge Demo

A huge weekend protest against the legalization of **same-sex marriage** and adoption has not dented the French government's determination to pass the planned reform into law soon, leading cabinet ministers said on Monday.

In one of the largest protests in decades, roughly half a million people marched through Paris on Sunday demanding that President Francois Hollande withdraw the reform bill and hold a national debate before any change in the definition of marriage.

Many protesters told journalists the government's drive to push through the reform, especially the adoption rights for gays that a slight majority of French reject, and its refusal to hold a wider debate helped bring out the crowds on a cold winter day.

Government spokeswoman Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, who is also women's affairs minister, said nothing had changed. The plan to submit the reform bill in parliament late this month and pass it by June would go ahead undisturbed, she told Europe 1 radio.

"The government is totally determined to achieve this reform, this historic progress that is not the victory of one camp over another but progress for the whole society," she said.

"We take note of the demonstration (but) this will be discussed in parliament and not in the street."

Interior Minister Manuel Valls told the daily Le Monde: "We always thought the turnout would be strong and it was ... All

the more reason to stay focused on the goal of passing the law.”

Opposition Looks to Next Law

Ifop pollster Jerome Fourquet said that, while the protest was a success for the opposition camp, Hollande could not afford to give in, especially after showing unexpected resolve the same weekend by ordering French troops to fight Islamists in Mali.

“On the other hand, (the protest) may signal further problems for the government with the next law that will deal with assisted reproduction,” he said.

Socialist deputies had originally planned to amend the **marriage bill** to include access to assisted reproduction techniques for lesbians, but pulled back when it seemed this was more controversial and could hinder the marriage reform.

The government now plans to include this issue in a family law bill due to be approved by the cabinet in March. Tugdual Derville, a co-leader of Sunday’s protest, said that could be another occasion for opposition pressure and maybe a protest.

Daniel Liechti, one of the few faith leaders who marched in the protest, said the protest showed a new role for religion in public life in highly secularised France.

“We’re not naive, we see that religion’s influence in society is diminishing,” said Liechti, vice president of the National Council of French Evangelicals. “But as it diminishes, this leads to increased commitment among believers.”

Noting the key role played by the **Catholic Church**, which has lost much of its power in France in recent decades, he said: “The Catholic Church is now more like a church of converts ... when you’re in a minority, this activism can grow.”

While the Catholic hierarchy kept a low profile, about 30 lay

associations—including large ones representing Catholic families and right-to-life activists—and local parishes provided crucial logistical backbone for the protest.

Support from some Muslims, **evangelicals** and even gays opposed to same-sex marriage also helped to widen the protest beyond the hard core of Catholic participants, organizers said.

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