

French Conservatives March Against Government 'Family-Phobia'

More than 100,000 conservative French marched through Paris and Lyon on Sunday accusing the government of "family-phobia" for legalizing gay marriage and other planned policies they say will harm traditional families.

The marchers, expressing growing frustration with the unpopular left-wing government, denounced new sex equality lessons in schools and urged the government not to legalize medical procedures to help same-sex couples have children.

Most demonstrators were middle-class families, some pushing little children in prams, posing no apparent risk of violent confrontation with the police that Interior Minister Manuel Valls had said would be dealt with severely.

The government of President Francois Hollande, suffering poll ratings near record lows, has delayed further social reforms until after next month's municipal elections following massive protests against legalizing same-sex marriage last year.

One Paris protester, Severine Chevrier, said: "Mr. Hollande doesn't listen to us or want to talk to us (and) Mr. Valls ... will do everything to shut us up."

"We have the same message (as last year), we just want it to be heard," said Michel Girard, also marching in the capital. "It's the defense of children and the family."

'Dark Forces'

The protesters, many mobilized by Catholic groups and including some Muslims, warned the government not to legalize assisted reproduction for lesbians or make surrogate

motherhood an option for gay males who want genetically related children.

French law currently allows assisted reproduction for married couples with infertility problems. Lesbian couples who want this option can cross the borders to Belgium or Spain, where it is legal for them.

Government ministers insist those procedures are not in a planned draft law, but the protesters do not believe them.

Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, the Catholic archbishop of Lyon who marched at the head of the protest there alongside Grand Mosque Rector Kamel Kabtane, said they could be included in amendments once the law goes to parliament in a few months.

"We are not naive," he told journalists.

In a tough interview in a Sunday newspaper, Valls spoke of "dark forces" dividing the country and implied the conservative protesters had links to far-right radicals who held a protest last week that ended with violence and anti-Semitic slogans.

He said a "French Tea Party" was being formed, referring to the right-wing U.S. political movement.

Geoffroy Didier, deputy secretary general of the center-right UMP opposition party, accused the government of "pulling the pins on social grenades" during an economic crisis.

But he and most other UMP national leaders stayed away from the marches, in contrast to their wide support last year, and Catholic bishops were split about backing them.

Against Gender Therapy

As at all French demonstrations, police and organizers gave widely varying crowd figures. Paris police estimated 80,000 there while organizers said over 500,000. In Lyon, the totals

were 19,500 from the police and 40,000 from organizers.

The protesters also took aim at new gender equality lessons being tested in some state schools, which they said were covert attempts to teach children the so-called “gender theory” that says sex-related roles are social constructs rather than due to natural differences.

Parents of pupils in about 100 schools kept their children home last Monday in a flash protest against gender theory.

Education Minister Vincent Peillon insisted that the “Equality ABC” program only taught that boys and girls had equal rights, but its critics reject that, with some saying it encouraged children to be homosexual.

Conservatives are also angry that the government eased access to abortion last week and plans to legalize assisted suicide.

Additional reporting by Laurence Frost and Yann Le Guernigou in Paris and Catherine Lagrange in Lyon; Editing by Robin Pomeroy

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