

French Parliament Approves Gay Marriage Law

French parliament approved a law allowing same-sex couples to marry and to adopt children on Tuesday, a flagship reform pledge by President Francois Hollande that sparked often violent street protests and a rise in homophobic attacks.

Hollande's "marriage for all" law is the biggest social reform in France since his left-wing mentor and predecessor Francois Mitterrand abolished the death penalty in 1981, a move which also split the nation.

Lawmakers in the lower house National Assembly, where Hollande's Socialists have an absolute majority, passed the bill by 331 votes for and 225 against, making France the 14th country in the world to allow same-sex couples to wed.

"Many French people will be proud this job is done," Justice Minister Christiane Taubira told parliament. "Those protesting today will find themselves moved by the joy of the newly-weds."

Yet the episode has carried a political price for an already unpopular president. Critics said Hollande should focus on fixing the moribund economy while opponents have demanded a referendum and protests against it descended into violence.

The debate is also blamed for fanning a spate of homophobic attacks, including the beating up of a 24-year-old in the southern city of Nice on Saturday. Interior Minister Manuel Valls warned this week of "zero tolerance" for such violence.

Socialist and conservative lawmakers had come close to blows more than once during lengthy parliament debates on the law, which authorises adoption and marriage but will not let gay couples use medically assisted procreation.

France, a mainly Catholic country, follows 13 others including Canada, Denmark, Sweden and most recently Uruguay and New Zealand in letting gay and lesbian couples tie the knot. In the United States, Washington, D.C., and nine states have legalized **same-sex marriage**.

Unlike Mitterrand's abolition of the death penalty, which most French people opposed at the time, polls showed more than half the country backed Hollande's gay marriage law.

The gay community greeted the news with fanfare, with some rights groups dubbing April 23 the "Day of Love." But opponents gathered outside parliament for a new demonstration.

The leader of the "anti" movement, a feisty female comedian who goes by her stage name Frigide Barjot, has said protests will continue, however, and conservatives have vowed to appeal to the Constitutional Council to have it struck down.

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