

French Senate Starts Gay-Marriage Debate Amid Protests

The French Senate took its first look on Thursday at President Francois Hollande's **gay marriage** bill, which has passed in the lower house but divided society as opponents clamored for a referendum.

The bill, which gives homosexual couples the right to marry and adopt children, was designed to be Hollande's first historic social reform, on par with former Socialist President Francois Mitterrand's abolition of the death penalty in 1981.

But it has divided French society, pitting Catholics and conservatives against social reformers, left-wingers and gay people.

Several large demonstrations against it have caught the Socialist government off guard. On Thursday hundreds of protesters waving flags with the words "Jobs, not **gay marriage**" gathered near the Senate under drizzling rain, surrounded by riot police trucks.

Despite loud opposition and street protests last month that became violent, the gay marriage bill is expected to pass in the Senate thanks to backing by Socialists and allies supporting the bill. The debate is due to conclude on April 13.

"There is one solution to find a way out of this political and social tension ... and that's for the Senate to reject the law," Frigide Barjot, a comedian and flamboyant spokeswoman for opponents to the gay marriage bill, told iTele news channel.

Hollande is struggling to shake off accusations of weak leadership 10 months into his term, having lost his budget minister in a scandal over hidden bank accounts and failed so

far to reverse rising unemployment.

Economic troubles have led many French people, notably on the right, to argue that the government is wrong to focus on gay marriage at a time when factories are closing and unemployment is at its highest level in more than 13 years.

Division over the gay marriage issue, in a majority Catholic country, has contributed to Hollande's low popularity scores. A poll by TNS Sofres published on Thursday showed only 27 percent of the French supported his policies.

The National Assembly adopted the bill on Feb 12 in a 329-229 vote after 110 hours of debate. But the winning margin is expected to be narrower in the Senate where the Left is less dominant.

A BFM-TV poll published on Thursday found that while 53 percent of the French are favorable to gay marriage, only 41 percent support homosexual couples adopting children.

Support for adoption by gay couples has eroded since December when 48 percent of French voters backed it, as controversy has grown around the question of children's role in the gay marriage bill.

A plan by Socialist deputies, which foresaw an amendment permitting assisted reproduction techniques for lesbians, was scrapped after others in the same camp deemed that opposition on the point could block the marriage reform.

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