

New Zealand Set to Legalize Gay Marriage

New Zealand lawmakers vote on a bill to allow same sex marriages on Wednesday which, if passed as expected, will make the tiny island nation the first in the Asia-Pacific region to extend marriage rights to gay couples.

The bill to amend the current 1955 Marriage Act to allow same sex couples to marry was widely expected to pass, given overwhelming support in a preliminary vote last month.

If it does pass, the amendment will likely come into effect in August. Australia last year rejected a similar proposal.

The bill was opposed by the Roman Catholic Church and some conservative religious, political and social groups which campaigned that it would undermine the institution of the family.

"This is not about church teachings or philosophy. It never has been," Louisa Wall, the openly gay opposition Labour Party MP who promoted the bill, told parliament.

"It's about the state excluding people from the institution of marriage because of their sex, sexual orientation or gender identity."

New Zealand gave same-sex relationships partial legal recognition in 2005 with the establishment of civil unions.

The nation of 4.4 million people, predominantly of British and Christian heritage, would be the 13th country to legalize gay marriage, following Uruguay's approval last week.

© 2013 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.