

Anti-gay marriage protesters march in Paris



Several hundred thousand people massed at the Eiffel Tower in Paris on Sunday to protest against President François Hollande's plan to legalise gay marriage and adoption by June.

Hollande has pledged to push through the law with his Socialists' parliamentary majority but the opponents' campaign has dented public support and forced deputies to put off a plan to allow lesbian couples access to artificial insemination.

Champ de Mars park at the Eiffel Tower was packed, but turnout estimates varied widely. Organisers claimed 800,000 had protested, while police put the number at 340,000.

"Nobody expected this two or three months ago," said Frigide Barjot, a flamboyant comedian leading the "demo for all". At the rally, she read out a letter to Hollande asking him to withdraw the draft bill and hold an extended public debate on the issue.

Strongly backed by the Catholic church hierarchy, Barjot and groups working with her mobilised church-going families and political conservatives as well as some Muslims, evangelicals and even gay people opposed to gay marriage to protest.

Hollande's office said the turnout was "substantial" but would not change his determination to pass the reform.

"The French are tolerant, but they are deeply attached to the family and the defence of children," said Daniel Liechti, vice-president of the National Council of French Evangelicals, which urged its members to join the march.

Opponents of gay marriage and adoption, including most faith leaders in France, have argued that the reform would create psychological and social problems for children, which they believe should trump the desire for equal rights for gay adults.

Hollande has angered those opposed to same-sex marriage by trying to avoid public debate on the reform, which justice minister Christiane Taubira described as "a change of civilisation", and then wavering about some of its details.

His handling of other promises, such as a 75% tax on the rich that was ruled unconstitutional, and a faltering struggle against rising unemployment, have dented his popularity in recent opinion polls.

Support for gay marriage in France has slipped by about 10 percentage points to under 55% since opponents began speaking out, according to surveys, and fewer than half of those polled recently wanted gay people to win adoption rights.

Under this pressure, legislators dropped a plan to also allow lesbians access to artificial insemination.

Organisers insist they are not against gay and lesbian people but for the rights of children to have a father and mother.

Slogans on the posters and banners approved by the organisers included "marriagophile, not homophobe," "all born of a father and mother" and "paternity, maternity, equality".

Civitas, a far-right Catholic group that sees homosexuality as a sin, staged a much smaller march along another route.

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