

Poland's abortion ban proposal near collapse after mass protests

Wednesday 5 October 2016, by [DAVIES Christian](#) (Date first published: 5 October 2016).

Parliamentary committee urges MPs to vote proposal down as minister says wave of protests 'taught us humility'.

A controversial proposal to ban abortion in [Poland](#) appears to have collapsed after senior politicians from the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) backed away from it after a parliamentary committee urged MPs to vote it down following mass protests.

The justice and human rights committee, which reviews proposed legislation, recommended that parliament reject the bill following a wave of protests earlier in the week that appear to have caught the rightwing government off guard.

In a humiliating climbdown, PiS members who had referred the legislation to the committee less than two weeks ago threw it out.

The Liberal MP and former prime minister Ewa Kopacz told reporters the PiS had "backtracked because it was scared by all the women who hit the streets in protest".

Tens of thousands of people boycotted work and classes on Monday to protest against the proposals, which if enacted would impose a blanket ban on abortion, including in instances of pregnancy as a result of rape or incest.

About 30,000 people, many dressed in black, gathered in wretched weather in Warsaw's Castle Square, chanting "We want doctors, not missionaries!" and carrying placards bearing messages such as "My Uterus, My Opinion" and "Women Just Want to Have FUN-damental Rights."

Jarosław Gowin, the minister of science and higher education, said on Wednesday that the [protests](#) had "caused us to think and taught us humility".

"The protest was bigger than anyone expected. People were astonished," said Agnieszka Graff, a commentator and activist. "Warsaw was swarming with women in black. It was amazing to feel the energy and the anger, the emotional intensity was incredible."

The so-called "black protests" appear to have shifted public opinion on the issue, with recent polls suggesting not only near-overwhelming opposition to the proposed ban, but increasing support for the liberalisation of existing laws.

Polls also suggest that support for the government has dropping to its lowest levels since elections last year.

Parliament will now have the opportunity to throw out the legislation altogether, or to refer it back to committee.

The Liberal broadsheet Gazeta Wyborcza reported dramatic scenes from the Polish parliament on Wednesday evening. There were “screams and chaos” as PiS members submitted a request to reject the legislation, while pro-choice campaigners were prevented from entering the committee room and advocates of the ban complained that the session had been convoked illegally.

Among the PiS committee members to vote to reject the bill was Krystyna Pawłowicz, who before Monday’s protest denounced opponents of the abortion ban as “fans of killing babies” who should be ashamed of themselves.

PiS did not initiate the proposal. It was brought before parliament by a citizens’ initiative – a petition that has received at least 100,000 signatures – submitted by the hardline conservative advocacy group Ordo Iuris and the Stop [Abortion](#) coalition.

Many, however, regard the ruling party as having taken ownership of the proposals once its MPs voted unanimously in favour of passing them to the next stage of the legislative process, scrutiny by a parliamentary committee. PiS MPs also voted down an alternative, liberalising measure proposed by the pro-choice Save [Women](#) coalition.

The prime minister, Beata Szydło, and the PiS leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, had signalled support for the Stop Abortion proposals, but the government appears to have reconsidered its position following the protests.

Szydło had said on Tuesday that the government “has not worked and is not working on any law amending the current legislation on abortion”. She also implied, however, that she had admonished the foreign minister, Witold Waszczykowski, for widely derided remarks on Monday in which he had said of the protesters: “Let them have their fun”, and stated that by “dressing up, screaming silly slogans and vulgarities”, they were “making a mockery of very important issues”.

The senate speaker, Stanisław Karczewski, said on Wednesday that Poland’s upper house would not initiate work on a bill to further restrict Poland’s law, which already outlaws abortion, except in cases of rape, incest, severe foetal abnormalities or the mother’s life being at risk. In practice, though, some doctors refuse to perform even legal abortions, citing moral objections.

Polish women seeking abortions typically go to Germany or other neighbouring countries or order abortion pills online.

Kaczyński has suggested that the government might accept a new compromise whereby terminations carried out because of a congenital foetal disorder would be banned, but those as a result of rape or incest would still be permitted.

Campaigners say that is unlikely to be acceptable, and that protests will continue. “In previous anti-government protests, it was our parents’ generation on the streets,” says Aleksandra Włodarczyk, 28, a bank administrator who participated in Monday’s protest. “But with this, they have managed to mobilise the young, and we are very angry.”

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