

Irish lawmakers back bill on life-saving abortions

2 July 2013, by Shawn Pogatchnik



In this Saturday, Nov. 17, 2012 file photo abortion rights protesters holding pictures of Savita Halappanavar march through central Dublin, demanding that Ireland's government ensures that abortions can be performed to save a woman's life. Ireland appeared on course to legalize abortion in extremely restricted circumstances as lawmakers voted Tuesday July 2, 2013 to support a bill that would permit pregnancies to be terminated when deemed necessary to save the woman's life. (AP Photo/Shawn Pogatchnik, File)

(AP)—Ireland appeared on course to legalize abortion in limited circumstances as lawmakers voted Tuesday to support a bill that would permit a pregnancy to be terminated when deemed necessary to save a woman's life.

Catholic leaders warned that the proposed law, which faces potential amendments this week and a final vote next week, was a "Trojan horse" designed to permit widespread [abortion](#) access in Ireland. But Prime Minister Enda Kenny insisted Ireland's constitutional ban on abortion would remain unaffected, and his government's Protection of Life During Pregnancy Bill won overwhelming backing in a 138-24 vote.

Ireland's 1986 constitutional ban on abortion commits the government to defend the life of the unborn and the mother equally. Ireland's abortion law has been muddled since 1992, when the Supreme Court ruled that this "ban" actually meant that terminations should be legal if doctors deem one essential to safeguard the life of the woman—including, most controversially, from her own suicide threats.

Six previous governments refused to pass a law in support of the Supreme Court judgment, citing its suicide-threat rule as open to abuse. This left Irish hospitals hesitant to provide any abortions except for the most clear-cut emergencies and spurred many [pregnant women](#) in medical or psychological crises to seek abortions in neighboring England, where the practice has been legal since 1967.

Kenny's government had been under pressure to pass a law on life-saving abortions ever since the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2011 that Ireland's inaction forced women to face unnecessary medical dangers.

But the catalyst for change was Savita Halappanavar, a 31-year-old Indian dentist who died last year in a western Ireland hospital one week after being admitted in [severe pain](#) at the start of a miscarriage. Doctors cited Ireland's ill-defined and Catholic-influenced laws when denying her pleas for an abortion, even though her [uterus](#) had ruptured and exposed her to increased risk of blood poisoning.



This Thursday Nov. 15, 2012 file photo shows a woman holding a picture of Savita Halappanava during a candlelit vigil outside Belfast City Hall, Northern Ireland, for Savita Halappanavar, the 31-year old Indian woman who was 17-weeks pregnant when she died of blood poisoning after suffering a miscarriage in Galway, Ireland, on 28 October. Ireland appeared on course to legalize abortion in extremely restricted circumstances as lawmakers voted Tuesday July 2, 2013 to support a bill that would permit pregnancies to be terminated when deemed necessary to save the woman's life. (AP Photo/Peter Morrison, File)

By the time doctors authorized an abortion, Halappanavar had already been hospitalized for four days and the 17-week-old fetus was stillborn. She fell into a state of toxic shock, then into a coma, and died from massive organ failures three days later. Two fact-finding investigations since have found that an abortion one or two days before the fetus' death would have increased Halappanavar's chance of survival, but said the hospital was guilty of many other failures in her care.

In years past, a government that took on Catholic orthodoxy in Ireland would have feared damaging splits and electoral annihilation. But Tuesday's vote illustrates changed social mores and widespread disenchantment with Catholic leaders following two decades of revelations of the Irish church's role in protecting pedophile priests from public exposure and prosecution.

The most recent opinion poll found that 89 percent

want abortions to be granted in cases where a woman's life is endangered by continued pregnancy. Some 83 percent also want abortion legalized in cases where the fetus could not survive at birth, 81 percent for cases of pregnancy caused by rape or incest, and 78 percent where a woman's health—not simply her life—was undermined by pregnancy. The government bill excludes those three scenarios. The June 13 poll in the Irish Times had an error margin of three percentage points.

Four anti-abortion lawmakers from Kenny's socially conservative Fine Gael party did vote against the bill, fewer than expected given the strong Catholic traditionalist wing in his party. They particularly opposed the bill's section authorizing abortions in cases where a panel of three doctors, including two psychiatrists, unanimously rules that a woman is likely to try to kill herself if denied one.

But Kenny, who since rising to power in 2011 has repeatedly clashed with Catholic Church attitudes, emphasized beforehand that he would tolerate no dissent and pointedly described himself as a prime minister "who happens to be Catholic" but has a public duty to separate church and state.

The four rebels were expected to be expelled from Fine Gael's voting group in parliament and, much more damagingly, be barred from seeking re-election as Fine Gael candidates. The move would not affect Kenny's commanding parliamentary majority.

Ireland's other traditional center-ground party, the opposition Fianna Fail, did not attempt to impose such discipline because it risked tearing apart the party. Thirteen Fianna Fail lawmakers voted against the bill, while only six supported it.

Kenny won strong support from the left-wing side of the house, both from his Labour Party coalition partners and opposition lawmakers including the Irish nationalist Sinn Fein. Only one of Sinn Fein's 14 lawmakers voted against the bill and he, too, faces expulsion from his voting bloc.

Hours before the vote, Cardinal Sean Brady, leader of Ireland's 4 million Catholics—two thirds of the island's population—appealed to Fine Gael

lawmakers to rebel against Kenny. Previously some Catholic bishops have hinted that Kenny and other Catholic lawmakers who vote for the bill should be barred from receiving Communion at Mass, a traditional method of public shaming.

"In practice, the right to life of the unborn child will no longer be treated as equal. The wording of this bill is so vague that ever wider access to abortion can be easily facilitated," Brady said in a statement. "This bill represents a legislative and political Trojan horse which heralds a much more liberal and aggressive abortion regime in Ireland."

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