

Civil unions law passes, Renzi triumphant

Judith Harris (May 11, 2016)



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ROME -- "This is an historic day," Premier Matteo Renzi, 41, crowed Wednesday when the long-delayed and controversial law legalizing civil unions passed in the Chamber of Deputies with a healthy majority, 369 to 193, with just two abstentions. Passage came only with Renzi's insistence upon a vote of confidence for the government, the fifty-third such vote during his two years as premier. The second confidence vote on the bill in two years, its failure would have prompted Renzi's government to resign, but the government's majority is strong enough that the Premier in fact faced little risk despite opposition from the Italian Catholic Church and the particularly raucous center-right parties.

The new law's recognition of gay rights in the institution of the family is a first for Italy. In addition,



unmarried heterosexual couples are now assigned rights heretofore available solely to those who are married couples. The successful vote in the lower house was to be echoed later in the day with the Senate vote, whose success if at this point taken for granted. Those favoring the bill had donned rainbow-colored ribbon strips or placed them on their desks in Parliament today.

Successful passage came about partly because the draft law was watered down by removal of the clause in the original bill that would have allowed so-called "stepchild adoption" of children of gay partners. The Italian Catholic Church authorities had vociferously opposed this clause, which they saw as permitting gay couples to have children via surrogate pregnancy, which remains illegal in Italy, and was described today in Parliament by one opponent of the law as "exploitation of poor women." Further delaying tactics were the introduction of some 300 amendments. Indeed, despite today's passage of the law, the opposition is already demanding an abrogative referendum.

A "contract for living together," to be signed in front of a notary public, will permit the couple to elect, if they so choose, joint ownership of assets, until now the prerogative solely of married heterosexual couples. Details of a maintenance agreement between heterosexual couples can be co-signed in front of a notary, and a partner is enabled to take over a rental contract for up to five years rather than to be, as heretofore, automatically evicted upon the death of the original signatory of the contract.

Gay couples can choose a name they share, or add the partner's name to their own. Divorce can be requested and, further raising partnership rights to the equivalent of married couples, public housing can be requested. Other clause legalize the right for couples to share a surname; to tend a partner who is hospitalized and, in case of a long illness, to become his or her legal tutor; and to receive a partner's pension upon his or her death.

"We shall remember this when it comes time to vote on the referendum on reforms," warned one of the promoters of the anti-civil unions bill movement, which promoted a "Family Day" demonstration. The pending referendum in question, which is another of Renzi's long-range political objectives, would revise the present election laws.

The opponents of the law enacted today have been angry and articulate, and not always graceful: one tweet showed the derriere of Constitutional Reforms Minister Maria Elena Boschi, notoriously good looking and prime mover behind the law, with, overwritten, "This is her face." On the other hand, tweeter Matilde Giovani wrote, "just a perfect day #lovewins#loveislove."

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