

Thailand passes same-sex marriage bill in historic vote hailed as ‘victory’ by LGBTQ advocates

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Thailand will become only the third place in Asia where same-sex couples can get hitched, after Taiwan and Nepal, and activists are hoping the first weddings could be celebrated as early as October.

Thailand on Tuesday became the first country in Southeast Asia to legalise same-sex marriage, in a historic parliamentary vote hailed as a “victory” by campaigners.

The senate upper house gave final approval — by 130 votes to four, with 18 abstentions — to changes to the marriage law allowing same-sex couples to tie the knot.

The new legislation will now go to King Maha Vajiralongkorn for royal assent and come into force 120 days after publication in the official Royal Gazette.

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“Today is the day that Thai people will smile. It is a victory for the people,” Tunyawaj Kamolwongwat, an MP with the progressive Move Forward Party, told reporters ahead of the vote.

“Today it finally is happening in Thailand.”

The new legislation changes references to “men”, “women”, “husbands” and “wives” in marriage laws to gender-neutral terms.

It also gives same-sex couples the same rights as heterosexual ones when it comes to adoption and inheritance.

Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, who has been vocal in his support for the LGBTQ community and the bill, will open his official residence to activists and supporters for celebrations later.

Activists also plan an evening rally featuring a drag show in central Bangkok, where giant shopping malls have been flying the rainbow flag in a show of support since the start of Pride Month in June.

Long struggle

Thailand has long enjoyed a reputation for tolerance of the LGBTQ community, and opinion polls reported in local media show overwhelming public support for equal marriage.

More than 30 countries around the world have legalised marriage for all since the Netherlands became the first to celebrate same-sex unions in 2001.

But in Asia only Taiwan and Nepal recognise marriage equality. India came close in October, but the Supreme Court referred the decision back to parliament.

"I am so happy to see how far we have come," said Chotika Hlengpeng, a participant in the Pride march that drew thousands of enthusiasts in Bangkok early in June.

Tuesday's vote is the culmination of years of campaigning and thwarted attempts to pass equal marriage laws.

While the move enjoys popular support, much of Buddhist-majority Thailand still retains traditional and conservative values.

LGBTQ people, while highly visible, say they still face barriers and discrimination in everyday life.

And some activists have criticised the new laws for failing to recognise transgender and non-binary people, who will still not be allowed to change their gender on official identity documents.

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