

Portuguese vote narrowly against legalising euthanasia

Portugal

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A bill that would have made Portugal the sixth country to legalise euthanasia narrowly failed last night. MPs voted against four similar bills introduced by left-leaning parties after years of hugely divisive debate.

Although Portugal is one of the more conservative European countries, it has had a series of left-leaning governments, so it was thought **there could be** enough momentum to see the bill through. As it was, the ruling Socialist party's bill was defeated by 110 votes in favour, 115 against and four abstentions.

Right-to-die activists started a campaign two years ago and gathered 8,000 signatures for a petition, more than enough for a parliamentary debate.

They had argued that liberalising euthanasia would be an expression of an individual's rights to autonomy, to religious freedom and conscience, which are enshrined in the constitution. "It is of the utmost importance to end pointless and useless suffering, imposed by the convictions of others," they said. Four parties — the Socialists, the Left Bloc, the Green Party and the

People, Animals, Nature party — had tabled bills on the issue. The result means that inciting or assisting euthanasia will remain punishable by up to three years in prison.

Portugal's Episcopal Conference and the Federation for Life had opposed legalising doctor-assisted suicide. Their supporters staged demonstrations across the country. Hundreds of thousands of pamphlets distributed by the church read: "Life cannot be regarded as an object for personal use."

A poll for *Jornal de Notícias* found that 73 per cent of student doctors supported legalising euthanasia, directly opposed to the view of the profession's ruling body.

A series of governments have in recent years begun modernising the country as the influence of the Catholic Church has waned. Abortion on demand was legalised in 2007 and same-sex marriage allowed three years later.

Heloísa Apolónia, of the Green Party, said about the defeat: "The debate has become strengthened. The Green Party will push for this again but we do not know when." Euthanasia is legal in Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

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