

Israel to Allow Civil Marriages

JERUSALEM (RNS) For the first time in its 62-year history, Israel will soon allow a limited number of couples to marry in civil ceremonies.

The Civil Union Law, which received final parliamentary approval this week, applies only to couples who have no legal affiliation with an organized religion.

Until now, all Israeli marriages had to be performed as religious unions in order to be recognized by the state. Jews, Muslims, Christians and others wishing to marry first had to register with their respective religious authorities.

There has never been a provision for religiously unaffiliated couples, mixed-faith couples or Jews wishing to be married by a non-Orthodox rabbi.

While hundreds of couples without a religion are expected to take advantage of the new law, it does not provide a solution for intermarriage or couples where one partner has an identifiable religion and the other does not.

There are religious leaders in Israel who will perform marriages for such couples, but the marriages are not recognized by the state.

David Rotem, the lawmaker who proposed the new law, sees it as a first step that solves one problem, but said he'll push for provisions to extend civil unions to all citizens, not just those without an officially defined religion.

Ultra-Orthodox politicians have repeatedly blocked a law that would permit civil marriage for any couple that wanted it, believing such a law would weaken religion and encourage intermarriage.

Opponents to the current bill say it will stigmatize couples who opt for civil marriage. "I think it's a terrible precedent," said Rabbi Uri Regev, director of Hiddush, an organization that promotes religious freedom and equality.

"At best this measure may assist a couple hundred couples a year and by listing their civil status in their ID cards, everyone from the shopkeeper to the secretary in their child's school will know their business," Regev said.