

Mississippi passes sweeping religious freedom law

by [Christina Beck](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant (R) signed a controversial bill into law on Tuesday that allows businesses to refuse service to LGBT individuals based on religious convictions, the latest episode in the ongoing tug-of-war between conservative legislatures and the LGBT community.

Civil rights activists have condemned the bill saying that it sanctions discrimination based on to sexual orientation, but Governor Bryant defended it on the basis of religious freedom.

"This bill merely reinforces the rights which currently exist to the exercise of religious freedom as stated in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution," Bryant wrote in a Twitter statement.

Both public and private businesses, as well as individual government employees, will be allowed to refuse service to LGBT individuals.

Many states have weighed similar religious freedom bills in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court landmark decision last June to legalize same-sex marriage in all 50 states. Many religious conservatives have found recent societal shifts and extensions of minority protections to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals to be in conflict with their religious beliefs. Several states, particularly in the South, have taken steps to carve out a legal path for the devout to abstain from conducting business with LGBT people.

Religious objections provisions have been fraught with controversy, as civil rights groups have condemned them as thinly veiled bigotry while religious conservatives have maintained that they are about preserving religious freedoms enshrined in the U.S. Constitution.

States that have passed such laws have faced considerable backlash from LGBT advocates and sympathetic corporations. The governor of Georgia recently vetoed a

similar bill to avoid such backlash, despite widespread approval among voters.

In Mississippi, Bryant sought to head off critics, saying the new law does not violate existing rights guaranteed by the Constitution or laws at the federal or state level.

"This bill does not limit any constitutionally protected rights or actions of any citizen of this state under federal or state laws," said Bryant, according to the Associated Press. "It does not attempt to challenge federal laws, even those which are in conflict with the Mississippi Constitution, as the Legislature recognizes the prominence of federal law in such limited circumstances."

Other supporters, including Rep. Andy Gipson, say that the bill is popular within the state, and should be honored as representative of the peoples' wishes.

"It's time that we stand up and do the work of the people and protect the freedoms that they enjoy," Gipson said, according to Reuters.

Nevertheless, opponents of the bill say that it violates liberties and principles of fairness and freedom.

"This bill flies in the face of the basic American principles of fairness, justice and equality and will not protect anyone's religious liberty," said Jennifer Riley-Collins, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Mississippi, in a statement. "Far from protecting anyone from 'government discrimination' as the bill claims, it is an attack on the citizens of our state, and it will serve as the Magnolia State's badge of shame."

Citizens of Mississippi can now be denied services, from marriage licenses to service at a business, based on their gender identity or sexual orientation, according to Riley-Collins.

The ACLU now said that it is considering pursuing legal action in Mississippi.

*This report contains material from Reuters and the Associated Press.*