

Kenyan church leaders say laws would weaken marriage

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NAIROBI, Kenya (RNS) Kenyan church leaders are lining up in opposition to proposed new marriage bills, which they say will weaken marriage by allowing cohabitating couples to register as married.

One bill would bring Christian, Hindu, Muslim, civil and customary marriages under one law, and another would give spouses and children more rights to property. The twin bills were approved by the cabinet on Nov. 9 and are scheduled to be debated by Parliament before Christmas.

"It is the worst law we have had as churches in Kenya. It compromises the standards of Christian marriage and divorce. Instead of three grounds for divorce, we now have nine," said the Rev. Wellington Mutiso, the general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya.

Under current law, Christian marriages in Kenya can be dissolved on grounds of infidelity, abandonment and cruelty, but the new bill introduces others, such as chronic illness, irreversible brokenness and mutual consent, according to Mutiso.

"We shall no longer be saying 'for better or worse, for sickness and health, and for rich or poor' when marrying a couple," he said.

Under one of the proposed laws, couples who have lived together for six months can be recognized as married, which would undermine the sanctity of marriage, according to the Rev. Vincent Wambugu, general secretary of the Kenya Episcopal Conference, an umbrella group of Catholic bishops.

"This (cohabitation) is likely to be abused with the underage being taken advantage of. It will be violated," said Anglican Bishop Julius Kalu of Mombasa.

Churches have sought additional time to study the bill and offer changes, but some are concerned the government is not listening after earlier proposals were

overlooked, according to Mutiso.