

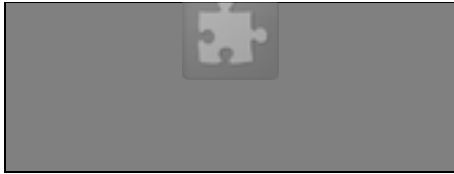
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Uruguay MPs back marijuana legalisation bill

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Members of Uruguay's House of Representatives have passed a bill to legalise marijuana.

If it goes on to be approved by the Senate, Uruguay will become the first country to regulate the production, distribution and sale of marijuana.



The measure is backed by the government of President Jose Mujica, who says it will remove profits from drug dealers and divert users from harder drugs.

Under the bill, only the government would be allowed to sell marijuana.

The state would assume "the control and regulation of the importation, exportation, plantation, cultivation, the harvest, the production, the acquisition, the storage, the commercialisation and the distribution of cannabis and its by-products".

Buyers would have to be registered on a database and be over the age of 18. They would be able to buy up to 40g (1.4oz) per month in specially licensed pharmacies or grow up to six plants at home.

Foreigners would be excluded from the measure.

Political tussle

The bill was approved by 50 of the 96 MPs present in the lower house following a fierce 13-hour debate in the capital, Montevideo.

The supporters of the measure argued that the fight against drugs and drug trafficking had failed, and the country needed "new alternatives".

"The regulation is not to promote consumption; consumption already exists," said Sebastian Sabini of the governing centre-left Frente Amplio (Broad Front) coalition, which has a majority of one in the lower house.

Marijuana use has reportedly doubled in Uruguay over the past year. An estimated 22 tonnes of marijuana are being sold in the country annually, according to Uruguay's National Drugs Committee.

But Gerardo Amarilla of the opposition National Party said the government was "playing with fire" given the health risks he said were linked to marijuana use.

All eyes were on Dario Perez, a member of the governing coalition but a strong opponent of the bill, whose vote could have scuppered the bill.

During his 20-minute speech, Mr Perez reiterated his belief that the issue should be put to a referendum and not have been "imposed" by the government.

But to applause by supporters of the bill in the public gallery, he finally concluded that as long as he was a member of the coalition, he would vote with it, despite his personal misgivings.

The bill is now expected to be approved by the Senate, where the left-wing government has a bigger majority.

But opposition politicians said that even if the law made it through the senate, they would launch a petition to have it overturned.

A survey carried out before the vote by polling organisation Cifra suggested 63% of Uruguayans opposed the bill.

Papal opposition

The progress of the bill is being watched closely across the region, says BBC Mundo correspondent in the region Ignacio de los Reyes.

For decades, drug trafficking has caused tens of thousands of deaths throughout Latin America.

Uruguay may have not experienced the bloodshed caused by drug trafficking, but the proposal could be seen as a test for violence-torn nations looking for an end to their drug wars, our correspondent adds.

The vote also comes just days after Pope Francis criticised drug legalisation plans during a visit to neighbouring Brazil.

The pontiff said it was "necessary to tackle the problems which are at the root of drug abuse, promoting more justice, educating the youth with the values that live in society, standing by those who face hardship and giving them hope for the future".

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810. Soundchaser

1 HOUR AGO

-6

All of you who think this is a good idea should attend any NA/CA meeting that's close to you - and you will find one close to you. Speak to the people there and ask them about the effects cannabis has had on their lives - and their families. Alcohol is very harmful too and it's probably more harmful because it's legal, but don't cloud the debate with that comparison.

722. Opondo

2 HOURS AGO

+14

A government with sense..? Well that's one then.

Cannabis is less harmful than tobacco, and it's social effect is far less damaging than alcohol, both of which are legal.

Sell it, tax it, fill in that deficit a bit; only people who object are the naive and those brainwashed by generations of politicians slaved to tobacco and alcohol industry lobbyists, who stand to lose a fortune.

721. beammeup

2 HOURS AGO

+6

Back on subject...good for Uruguay! I hope this goes well and shows the rest of the so called civilised West how silly, stupid, controlling & hypocritical they are. There is a flip side to everything we do, as most of us are aware. The world will still rotate but maybe the ride will be better!! Well, someone had to say it!!

545. firemunky

4 HOURS AGO

+31

Good for Uruguay. I used to be a very regular user but in recent years I have relatively curbed the habit for "financial" reasons. I feel from my own past experience that this drug is far less dangerous than alcohol. Never have I seen someone high on pot shouting at street corners, vomiting outside take-aways or fighting strangers on the streets in a drug fuelled rage.

540. sean

5 HOURS AGO

+24

I hope they and we legalise soon, huge amounts of people from all backgrounds smoke and do it sensibly. I resent working hard and seeing dealers and growers living extravagant lives and having more money than id ever have through the production and selling of a plant. If made legal then this unsavoury element would be eliminated as a 6 plant grow limit is enough for anyone. Please think government

Comments 5 of 14

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