

India moves to open nuclear power sector to private firms

By Rajesh Roy
Associated Press

NEW DELHI — India's Parliament approved new legislation Thursday that enables opening the tightly controlled civil nuclear power sector to private companies.

The government called it a major policy shift to speed up clean energy expansion while the opposition political parties argued that it dilutes safety and liability safeguards.

The lower house of parliament passed the legislation Wednesday and the upper house Thursday. It now needs the assent from the Indian president, which is a formality, to come into force.

The move carries global significance as India seeks to position itself as a major player in the next wave of nuclear energy, including with small modular reactors at a time many nations are reassessing nuclear power to meet climate targets and reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

Supporters argue the legislation marks a decisive break from decades of state dominance in nuclear energy while critics say it opens the door to risks, mainly health hazards, that could have long-term consequences.

"It marks a momentous milestone for India and signals capable private sector players that the country is open for business in the nuclear energy space," said Karthik Ganesan, director of strategic partnerships at the Council on Energy, Environment and Water, a think tank.

Junior Minister Jitendra Singh, who oversees the department of atomic energy, told lawmakers that the bill — which has been dubbed Sustainable



A temple is seen in the foreground of a nuclear power station Feb. 10 in Kalpakkam, India. R. PARTHIBHAN/AP

Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India — seeks to modernize India's nuclear framework in line with technological, economic and energy realities. It also retains and strengthens core safety, security and regulatory safeguards.

"India's role in geopolitics is increasing. And if we have to be a global player effectively, we have to live up to global benchmarks, follow global parameters and adopt global strategies," Singh said in the

lower house, adding that the legislation was necessary to address the country's growing energy needs.

India wants more nuclear power and has pledged over \$2 billion in recent months toward research and allied activities. Nuclear power is a way to make electricity that doesn't emit planet-warming gases, although it does create radioactive waste.

India is one of the world's biggest emitters of planet-heating gases, and over 75% of its power is still generated by burning fossil fuels,

mostly coal. India wants to install 100 gigawatts of nuclear power by 2047 — enough to power nearly 60 million Indian homes a year.

Energy experts say that for the world to move away from carbon-polluting fuels like coal, oil and gas, sources like nuclear that don't rely on the sun and the wind — which aren't always available — are needed. But some are skeptical about India's ambitions as the country's nuclear sector is still small, and negative public perceptions about the industry

remain.

Opposition parties flagged concerns related to several provisions of the bill and urged the government to refer it to a parliamentary panel for examination. The government didn't adhere to the request.

"The bill doesn't have sufficient safeguards when it comes to mitigating the bad health of those impacted by living in areas closer to nuclear plants," Ashok Mittal, a lawmaker from the opposition Aam Admi Party, told The Associated Press.

G. Sundarajan, an anti-

nuclear energy activist, called the bill a "disastrous law," saying it takes away essential safeguards that are needed to make sure companies invest in safety and reduce the chances of a major disaster that can impact millions from occurring.

"It also provides little recourse for any Indian citizen to claim damages from nuclear companies even if they are affected by radiation leaks or suffer from any other health impact as a result of a nuclear plant in their region," he said.