

# Jindal enacts 'religious freedom' order despite firms' discrimination concerns

Governor and 2016 hopeful's executive action bypasses state lawmakers who shelved an RFRA-like bill amid push for LGBT rights

**Amanda Holpuch in New York**

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Ignoring corporate pressure over “divisive” and potentially outright anti-LGBT discrimination, Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal has enacted another of the controversial “religious freedom” measures that have been sweeping conservative states.

Earlier this year in Indiana and Arkansas, governors have amended so-called RFRA laws - or abandoned them all together - in response to concerns from companies as huge as Apple and as locally dominant as Walmart that they would effectively allow businesses to shut out gay customers.

But Jindal, who announced this week that he had launched a presidential exploratory committee, signed an executive order after the Louisiana state legislature shelved an RFRA-like bill that is opposed by major businesses across the country and vital to the New Orleans economy.

“In Louisiana, the state should not be able to take adverse action against a person for their belief in traditional marriage,” Jindal said in a statement.

On Tuesday, the Louisiana house effectively killed HB 707, which would prevent the state from penalizing companies that take actions in accordance with their beliefs about same-sex marriage. Hours later, Jindal announced that he would force through the executive action, which grants similar protections to people with deeply held religious beliefs, as well as the organizations and companies they own.

But critics call such protections state-sanctioned discrimination, with huge corporations - including Dow Chemical, Marriott and IBM, which is expanding its operations in the state - using the force of their local economic footprint to testify against the measure.

“A bill that legally protects discrimination based on same-sex marriage status will create a hostile environment for our current and prospective employees, and is antithetical to our company’s values,” said IBM’s senior state executive, Jason Driesse, in a statement.

Jindal responded by saying the bill “will absolutely not ‘protect discrimination’”. But he

failed to ease the concerns of other major businesses, such as Dow Chemical, which employs more than 6,000 people in the state.

“We call upon our legislative leaders to focus on making our state more competitive and economically sound instead of taking actions that divide us as citizens,” Earl Shipp, vice-president of Dow Gulf Coast operations, said in a statement.

The New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau also opposed HB 707, citing concerns for the city’s tourism industry, which powers the Louisiana economy.

“The adoption of certain types of overreaching, problematic and divisive legislation in Louisiana has the possibility of threatening our state’s third largest industry and creating economic losses pushing past a billion dollars a year and costing us tens of thousands of jobs,” said NOCVB president Stephen Perry.

Jindal said that his order will remain in place for months - beyond the end of his administration - unless it is rescinded by the next governor.

“This is a deeply political action guised in a light legal film,” said Adam Talbot, a spokesperson for the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), which has long opposed such measures.

Louisiana is one of 13 states that still bans same-sex marriage, but state lawmakers across the US have been pushing so-called “religious freedom” legislation in anticipation of a US supreme court ruling next month on whether states are allowed to have such bans.

Talbot said HRC is optimistic that business pressure will continue to help stop such legislation from becoming law in other states.

The sponsor of Louisiana’s bill, Republican representative Mike Johnson, said he supports Jindal’s executive order, but would push for the religious freedom legislation to be heard in the next legislative session.

“As was just mentioned a few weeks ago in oral arguments at the US supreme court, it is incumbent upon every state to address this important issue as soon as possible,” Johnson said. “This is a good resolution for our state for now and we intend to bring this legislation again at the earliest opportunity.”

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