

Talaq Bill in a cliffhanger in Rajya Sabha

While numbers favour the NDA, allies have expressed unease over the criminality clause

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With the arithmetic in Rajya Sabha slowly shifting in favour of the ruling NDA alliance, voting on the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill 2019, popularly known as the Triple Talaq Bill, is expected to go down to the wire.

The legislation was introduced in Lok Sabha on June 21 and the government is keen on passing it in both Houses in this very session. It was the first legislation introduced by the Modi government in its second term.

The legislation makes it illegal for a Muslim man to divorce his wife by uttering the word "talaq" three times and provides for a jail term of

three years for violators.

In its last outing, the Bill could not pass the muster in the Upper House as the opposition had a stronger presence and lapsed along with 16th Lok Sabha. In February the government brought in the Bill via an ordinance to keep it alive.

In Rajya Sabha, the BJP alone now has 78 members, and together with its allies, it

Game of numbers

The situation is fluid with neither the NDA nor the UPA in a commanding position in the Upper House.

BJP: 78

NDA: 115*

Congress: 48

UPA: 107

Non-allied bloc (TRS, YSRCP and BJD): 13

* JD (U) with six members and AIADMK with 13 members have questioned the 'criminality clause' in the Bill

has 115. Broadly, the Opposition bloc led by the Congress's 48 members has a total of 107 votes.

Abstention option

At first glance the NDA is well ahead of the opposition in terms of numbers. However two of its allies - JD (U) which has six members and AIADMK with 13 members, have questioned the "crimi-

nality clause". "We can't vote in favour of the Bill but at the same time we can't be seen opposing the BJP either. So in all likelihood we shall abstain if it comes down to voting," a senior AIADMK leader said.

It's the neutral bloc of parties that include the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, Biju Janata Dal and YSR Congress Party that will decide the fate of the vote. Together these parties have 13 members. The three parties maintain that they are against the criminality clause in the legislation. However, they remain uncertain on the course of action in case of a vote.

"We are opposed to the criminality clause that the

government has retained. We haven't decided what to do in case of voting," BJD's Rajya Sabha floor leader Prasanna Acharya said. The party has seven members.

TRS yet to decide

The TRS is also equally circumspect. "We oppose the criminality clause but as far as voting is concerned, we will make up our mind when the legislation reaches Rajya Sabha," TRS's Keshav Rao said.

The YSR Congress Party with its two members does not want to be seen openly opposing the BJP. A senior leader hinted that it might also take the AIADMK route of abstaining in the event of a vote.