

Uganda and the fight for gay rights

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The struggle for gay rights in Uganda and across Africa has been hitting the headlines. Simon Hardy asks why is homophobia still such an issue today?

Uganda is not a nice country to live in if you are a homosexual.

Homosexuality is illegal in the country, punishable by 14 years in prison, but there are moves to increase punishments for people based on their sexuality.

Since 2009 law makers had been debating a new anti-homosexuality bill which would have made some homosexual acts punishable by death and increased others to life imprisonment. Thankfully the bill fell in mid May after lawmakers failed to discuss it during the lifetime of that parliament. But the fact it was even considered at all is proof of how backward and reactionary so many Ugandan politicians are in their views on gay rights.

Sadly it is not just the people in political power who are so reactionary. There is a terrible homophobic sickness in Ugandan society as a whole, which stems from the churches, the media, the business community and extends right down into the shanty towns. Uganda's Rolling Stone magazine published a front page in 2010 of several men it claimed were gay under the headline "Hang Them", along with their addresses. When one man David Kato sued them he was beaten to death by a man in his home. The Rolling Stone editor condemned the killing with the excuse "We want the government to hang people who promote homosexuality, not for the public to attack them."

The homophobic sickness was even present at Kato's funeral when the presiding Anglican pastor Anglican Thomas Musoke called on homosexuals to repent or face punishment by God. The homophobes used every opportunity to attack Uganda's gay community and persecute them.

The campaign in Uganda is directed against homosexual acts but also against the so-called promotion of homosexuality. This is the belief that gay men or women brainwash straight children into becoming gay. This idea has no basis in fact whatsoever - it comes from a belief, usually propagated by the church that all humans are born straight and then somehow become corrupted into being gay. This is why Churches and homophobic business men pour money into campaigns and institutions which claim to cure gay people or help prevent gay people "recruiting".

These attitudes are not just in Uganda, they can be found across the world. However in Africa the struggle for gay rights has a long path to travel as the powerful religious organisations openly call for attacks on homosexuals and harsher legislation against gay people. In some countries, such as Kenya, Muslim and Christian clerics have joined forces to "flush out gays" in several high profile campaigns which can end up with violent gangs roaming the streets looking for gay men.

Homophobia and colonialism

The reactionary views on homosexuality are in many cases a hang-over from colonial rule. When the British wrote legislation for countries like Kenya they included anti-homosexual laws which are still in place today. The conservative British colonial authorities actively promoted a virulently reactionary form of religious evangelicalism to act as a powerful social force against progressive movements, the working class and women.

However, during the struggle against colonialism some began to argue that homosexuality had been introduced to Africa by the Europeans, and that it was an affront to the normal sexual relations of African people. The idea that there had never been homosexuality in Africa before European colonisation is simply untrue ? homosexual relationships have existed in every continent in some form or another. Often pre-modern societies could be incorporative of homosexuality and Africa is no exception to this general trend.

In the wealthy, imperialist countries like Britain important movements emerged in the 1960s and 70s to fight for more rights for gay people, leading to its decriminalisation and equality opportunity legislation. These victories have yet to be won in many other countries.

However, it would be wrong to see the world divided between ?enlightened? first world nations and backward third world nations. Whilst there are many important freedoms in the western world for gay people, there is still widespread homophobia across those societies as well.

Western governments have deported gay refugees back to countries where their sexuality could see them being harassed, beaten, tortured or killed.

Asylum seekers in Britain who faced homophobic discrimination from the governments of their home country were routinely sent back to places like Iran (where you can be flogged for homosexuality) or Cameroon where you can be imprisoned for up to six years.

International solidarity is crucial to this fight. Socialists stand for the emancipation of all people from social oppression and we reject utterly the view that homosexuality is in some way immoral or wrong. Fighting for gay rights is crucial under capitalism, but we can only truly end social oppression when we overthrow capitalism and the social institutions which perpetuate divisions and violence against people based on race, gender or sexuality.

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