



Homosexuality around the World Today

Just over a dozen years after the Netherlands became the world's first country to legalize gay nuptials, the global trend toward giving homosexuals full marriage rights seems to have gained unstoppable momentum.

Gay marriage is now legal in 21 countries around the world:

- the Netherlands (2001)
- Belgium (2003)
- Spain (2005)
- Canada (2005)
- South Africa (2006)
- Norway (2009)
- Sweden (2009)
- Portugal (2010)
- Iceland (2010)
- Argentina (2010)
- Denmark (2012)
- Uruguay (2013)
- New Zealand (2013)
- France (2013)
- Brazil (2013)
- England (2013)
- Wales (2013)
- Scotland (2014)
- Luxembourg (2014)
- Ireland (2015)
- United States of America (2015)

But much of the world has laws that prohibit not only gay marriage, but also homosexuality.

Fewer than 1 billion of the world's population live in countries where same-sex marriage or civil unions are recognized, compared to almost 2.8 billion living in countries which criminalize gay people and impose severe punishments on homosexuality, such as imprisonment, lashings and even death sentences.

Eighty countries around the world criminalize homosexuality, mostly in the Muslim world, Africa and other developing states. A majority are former European colonies, particularly of Britain, which exported its anti-gay laws. Often called sodomy laws left

over from British colonialism, some statutes regulate specific sexual acts (for example anal sex) regardless of gender or sexual orientation while others prohibit a range of same-sex sexual activities. Many laws are quite broad in their scope, for example prohibiting any "unnatural" or "indecent" sexual act.

Punishments for being a homosexual include everything from prison sentences and fines to death sentence in some cultures and nations.

In Trinidad and Tobago gay people can be jailed for up to 25 years; in Malaysia the punishment for being gay is 20 years plus an additional sentence of lashing. Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Pakistan, Uganda, Bangladesh and Guyana all impose life imprisonment for homosexuality.

Homosexual acts are punishable by death in six countries: Iran, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, and Brunei (as of 2014), along with the areas of northern Nigeria and southern Somalia.

According to Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, the intensifying backlash in the world is partly due to the greater visibility of the LGBT community in societies that have begun to recognize their rights.

“LGBT people are also convenient scapegoats for embattled leaders, who are trying to rally support from more conservative sectors of their society. Whether it’s Uganda, Nigeria or Russia, the decision to scapegoat the LGBT community is an outcome of serious challenges to the regime, for widespread corruption or abusive authoritarianism,” he said, according to HRW’s website.

“The status of the LGBT community is a good litmus test for the status of human rights in society more broadly, precisely because it is such a vulnerable minority – similar to the proverbial canary in the coal mine. Where the rights of LGBT people are undermined, you can be sure that the rights of other minorities and critical members of civil society will soon also be in jeopardy.”

Middle East

Egypt

The event in the Arab world that started to bring the discussion of homosexuality at least into the public sphere took place in Egypt in 2001. If Stonewall changed the landscape of the gay rights movement in America, then the case of the “Cairo 52” in Egypt changed the landscape of the movement in the world.

In May 2001, police raided a discotheque on a boat anchored in the Nile River, the Queen Boat, in Cairo. The Queen Boat was a well-known gay bar, but on this night, 52 gay men were arrested on the spot.

These men were charged with “immoral behavior,” as well as contempt of the Islamic faith, sparking civil strife, spreading extremist ideas, and forming a suspected illegal cult in Cairo.

According to some interpretations, Islam prohibits homosexuality and, though not referred to explicitly in the Egyptian penal code, a wide range of laws covering obscenity, prostitution and debauchery are applied to homosexuals.

The trial of these men, who were kept in a cage at their trial, was a landmark case not just in Egypt, but throughout the world. The hearing came before an Emergency State Security Court, convened under 1981 laws designed to protect national security in Egypt.

The defendants, who pleaded not guilty, say they were forced to undergo internal examinations to see if they had had anal sex.

The verdict was delivered amidst a heavy security presence with scores of policemen armed with batons stationed inside and outside the courtroom. There was also constant banging on the doors of the courtroom by a large crowd of people who were not allowed in, including most of the defendant’s lawyers and their relatives.

Twenty-three of the defendants were found guilty and sentenced to prison sentences ranging from 1-5 years hard labor, followed by at least two years probation. The other 29 defendants were acquitted.

The case had drawn criticism from international human rights groups who said the men were being tried for their sexual orientation.

In 2002, Sir Elton John and several actors signed a petition protesting Egypt's treatment of homosexuals in reaction to hearing about the case of the “Cairo 52.”

Hussein Derar, deputy-assistant foreign minister for human rights in Egypt, described attitudes toward homosexuality as a difference between Middle Eastern and Western culture.

"They have their Western culture and we have our Islamic culture," he said. "We are a religious society... Homosexuality is rejected by all people."

Iran

Homosexuality in Iran is punishable by death, according to fatwas issued by almost all Iranian clerics.

Iranian human rights campaigners believe more than 4,000 gay men and lesbians have been executed since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Local psychologists and psychiatrists in Iran who still deem homosexuality as a mental illness allegedly have prescribed cures.

Because homosexuality is such a taboo topic, a 2012 study by Small Media, a non-profit group based in London, declared that "Even if Iran decriminalized homosexuality, it could take decades for it to become socially acceptable in the Islamic Republic of Iran."

Africa

The issue of homosexuality has excited deep and often extreme reactions in Africa.

Many Africans view homosexuality as an immoral Western import, and the continent is full of harsh homophobic laws.

As of January 2014, 38 African nations criminalize homosexuality, which constitutes about 70% of the continent. In four of those nations — Mauritania, northern Nigeria, southern Somalia and Sudan — the punishment is death. These laws appear to have broad public support. A June 2013 Pew Research Center survey found at least nine of 10 respondents in Senegal, Kenya, Ghana, Uganda and Nigeria believe homosexuality should not be accepted by society.

Some of these nations are opposed to homosexuality for religious reasons, while others oppose it for cultural or historical reasons.

Many anti-gay laws appeal to populist notions of culture that frame homosexuality as an "un-African", alien behavior foisted on the continent by western imperialists. Seen through this prism, a strike against gay and lesbian people is a strike against colonialism and in favor of African nationalism and self-worth.

Yet as a 2014 scientists' report to the Ugandan president noted, homosexuality has existed throughout human history. Anthropologists found an ethnic group in central Africa where it was customary for a male warrior to marry a teenage boy and celebrate victory in battle by having sexual intercourse. In many cases, the very laws being imposed so zealously were introduced by the European empires that carved up and plundered Africa.

"Prior to western colonization, there are no records of any African laws against homosexuality," said Peter Tatchell, the veteran human rights and gay rights campaigner. "The real import into Africa was not homosexuality but homophobia." It was enforced legally by colonial administrators and ideologically by Christian missionaries.

Religion also plays an important role in a new attack on homosexuality throughout much of the African continent.

The share of the sub-Saharan Africa population that is Christian climbed from 9% in 1910 to 63% in 2010, says the Pew Research Centre.

Kapya Kaoma, an Episcopal priest from Zambia, said: "Religious fundamentalism is strong in these countries. That provides the militant reaction to LGBT rights. One of the fears for fundamentalists is losing grip of the country; they are told they have lost grip because of the gays. They say, 'We don't want to lose Nigeria or Uganda just as our brothers lost America to the gays. If it means killing, we will kill.'" He said homosexuality is a rare point of convergence for Christian and Islamic hardliners.

US evangelicals have been accused of turning their attention to Africa and whipping up homophobia with lurid stories about child molestation, bestiality, rape and deadly diseases. This has certainly been the case recently in Uganda where American evangelicals have been active on the ground in preaching and campaigning against homosexuality. Kaoma reflected: "In America the conservatives are losing. In Africa they are winning and the progressives are on the retreat," says Kaoma.

President Obama, during a visit to Senegal in June 2013, said that while he respected the diversity of cultures and religions in Africa, he called for steps to make homosexuals equal before the law. He compared gay rights in Africa to racial struggles in the United States.

Obama urged African nations that treat homosexuality as a crime to make sure that gays and lesbians were not discriminated against by the government.

"My basic view is that regardless of race, regardless of religion, regardless of gender, regardless of sexual orientation, when it comes to how the state treats people, how the law treats people, I believe that everybody has to be treated equally. I don't believe in discrimination of any sort," Obama said.

Uganda

In Uganda, the practice - referred to as "carnal knowledge of another against the order of nature" - has been outlawed by President Museveni and is currently illegal.

President Museveni of Uganda has ordered that homosexuals in Uganda be arrested and imprisoned, a state-owned newspaper has reported.

"I have told the Criminal Investigations Department to look for homosexuals, lock them up and charge them," the New Vision quoted the president as saying.

"God created Adam and Eve," he said in 1999. "I did not see God creating man and man."

The gay community in Uganda is estimated by activists to number 500,000, but they face much discrimination.

Ethics Minister James Nsaba Buturo said in 2007, "Uganda will not give equal rights to gays and lesbians nor has it plans to legalize homosexuality."

Starting in 2009, though, there was a move towards enacting the death penalty to gay people in Uganda, and it includes their family and friends, too, who could be prosecuted if they fail to report them to authorities.

Anyone who "aids, abets, counsels or procures another to engage of acts of homosexuality" faces seven years in prison if convicted. Landlords who rent rooms or homes to homosexuals also could get seven years and anyone with "religious, political, economic or social authority" who fails to report anyone violating the act faces three years.

It also would have criminalized the public promotion of homosexuality --including discussions by rights groups -- with a sentence of up to seven years in prison for anyone convicted. Therefore it would have been illegal to promote homosexuality by talking or writing about it, and it would be law that people would have to tell the authorities about anyone they know who is gay.

ANTI-HOMOSEXUALITY BILL
Death penalty For "serial offenders", HIV-positive "offenders", or those engaging in homosexual activity with a minor or disabled person
Life in prison For homosexual acts
Seven years in prison For helping, counselling, or encouraging a person to engage in a homosexual act

The proposed law would even have introduced the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality" - involving a minor, if the perpetrator is HIV-positive and for "serial offenders".

The Ugandan Parliament member who wrote the proposed bill, David Bahati, said, "Learned behavior can be unlearned. You can't tell me that people are born gays. It is foreign influence that is at work."

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8406602.stm> (Baahati audio interview)

Investigative journalist Jeff Sharlet, who interviewed Bahati in Uganda in 2010, said that Bahati told him he wanted "to kill every last gay person." Sharlet's interview with Bahati appeared in a September 2010 *Harper's Magazine* article, "Straight Man's Burden." Sharlet said, "It was a very chilling moment, because I'm sitting there with this man who's talking about his plans for genocide..."

But many suspect that it was outsiders who inspired this bill in the first place, particularly American evangelicals and missionaries.

Pentecostalism arrived in Uganda more than fifty years ago and is now one of the country's fastest growing religions. Many congregations, orphanages, clinics, and schools

are sponsored or funded by evangelical churches in the U.S. To these evangelical missionaries, Uganda offers a new opportunity for a Christianized nation.

There are a number of specific ties between American evangelicals and the Ugandan homosexuality bill.

Bahati has said that the idea for the bill grew out of a conversation he had in 2008 with members of an American organization known as the Fellowship. The Fellowship wants governments to act in accord with Christian principles. Bahati, first elected to Parliament in 2006, had attended a conservative leadership course outside Washington, DC just one year earlier. He now helps lead the Ugandan branch of the Fellowship, which, by his estimate, counts about one-third of parliament among its members.

American evangelical pastor Rick Warren and American members of the Fellowship have visited Uganda repeatedly to speak to political and church leaders, and homosexuality is one of their topics.

In one of these visits, in March 2009, three American evangelical Christians arrived in Uganda's capital to give a series of talks. The theme of the event was "the gay agenda — that whole hidden and dark agenda" — and the threat homosexuals posed to Bible-based values and the traditional African family.

For three days, thousands of Ugandans, including police officers, teachers and national politicians, listened raptly to the Americans, who were presented as experts on homosexuality. The visitors discussed how to make gay people straight, how gay men often sodomized teenage boys and how "the gay movement is an evil institution" whose goal is "to defeat the marriage-based society and replace it with a culture of sexual promiscuity."

The three Americans who spoke at the conference — Scott Lively, an evangelical pastor and president of California's anti-gay Abiding Truth Ministries who has written several books against homosexuality, including "7 Steps to Recruit-Proof Your Child"; Caleb Lee Brundidge, a self-described former gay man who leads "healing seminars" and who believes that psychotherapy can "cure" homosexuality; and Don Schmierer, a board member of Exodus International, which promotes the "ex-gay" movement, believing people can change their sexuality and be redeemed, and whose mission is "mobilizing the body of Christ to minister grace and truth to a world impacted by homosexuality."

Bahati's bill was drawn up just five months after this conference.

"God has given us different freedoms, our democracy is giving us different freedoms, but I don't think anyone has the freedom to commit a crime," Bahati says. "And homosexuality in our country is a crime, it's criminal."

American pastor Lou Engle, who leads the Christian right group called The Call, sees the importance of Bahati's fight in Uganda. He said, "This is ground zero of the great war with homosexuality."

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26315908/ns/msnbc_tv-rachel_maddow_show/#34249049
(Rachel Maddow Show video)

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8499798.stm> (BBC video on Uganda's Pastor Martin Ssempe)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129422524> (NPR audio on Uganda's bill)
http://npr.vo.llnwd.net/kip0/pxn=0+pxK=17273/anon.npr-mp3/npr/fa/2010/08/20100825_fa_02.mp3?dl=1

Navi Pillay, the UN's high commissioner for human rights, joined a growing chorus of opposition condemning the bill as discriminatory and called for homosexuality to be decriminalized in the country.

One of the most outspoken critics of this potential piece of legislation was Desmond Tutu, the former South African archbishop and 1984 Nobel Peace Prize winner.

"Uganda's parliament is -- unbelievably -- on the verge of considering a new piece of legislation that would have the effect of legalizing persecution, discrimination, hatred and prejudice in that country," Tutu said in December 2012.

Tutu likened the bill to apartheid-era laws in South Africa banning relationships between blacks and whites and slammed those claim they are protecting African culture or religion to back the proposals.

"God does not say black is better than white, or tall is better than short, or football players are better than basketball players, or Christians are better than Muslims, or gay is better than straight," Tutu said.

Tutu continued: "To those who claim that homosexuality is not part of our African culture, you are conveniently ignoring the fact that LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex) Africans have lived peacefully and productively beside us throughout history," Tutu added.

Aside from this bill being discussed, Uganda has had several other high profile incidents showcasing the country's disapproval and abhorrence of homosexuality.

In October 2010, a Ugandan tabloid named *Rolling Stone* ran a front-page article on "homos" recruiting in the schools, promising to expose 100 of them and calling for them to be hanged. The first time the newspaper did this, it listed 100 of what it called the country's top gays and lesbians, with photos and addresses alongside a yellow banner reading "hang them."

Rolling Stone editor Giles Muhame was unrepentant, saying homosexuality is a virus spreading through the world. He said the aim was to target Ugandan homosexuals who were recruiting "converts in schools."

"We thought, by publishing that story, the police would investigate them, prosecute them, and hang them," says Muhame.

<http://cnn.com/video/?/video/world/2010/10/28/intv.editor.called.gays.hanged.cnn> (tabloid editor explains)

One of the men outed by the tabloid was David Kato, a Ugandan gay rights campaigner who had also campaigned against the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda, who had his picture on the front page of the tabloid.

Kato said he took up the fight for gay rights when he returned from South Africa. In 1998, just back from a few years of teaching in South Africa—where he had seen apartheid fall, and the old anti-sodomy laws with it, and had decided at last to admit his homosexuality—he held a televised press conference to start the push for gay rights in his own country.

In 2004 he co-founded Sexual Minorities Uganda to campaign against the prejudice against homosexuality.

Kato had been campaigning for the right to live openly as himself for years, and many times he suffered the consequences. He had been physically attacked in the past due to his open sexuality. He suffered police beatings and those of others, too, and was arrested three times.

Undeterred, Mr Kato was one of three who sued the *Rolling Stone* magazine. He was the only one who went to court to state his case that homosexuals were born, not made, and therefore could not be recruited.

A judge in November 2010 ordered *Rolling Stone* to stop publishing the photographs of people it said were homosexual, saying it contravened their right to privacy. And on January 3, 2011, a judge ruled against *Rolling Stone* and Mr Kato received compensation of \$640.

But Mr. Kato was bludgeoned to death with a hammer on the afternoon of January 26, 2011 in Uganda.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/9379495.stm> (video on David Kato)

The country's infamous anti-homosexuality bill and the *Rolling Stone* articles are a double-edged sword for Uganda's homosexual community.

Of course they incited a level of hatred not seen before, but it also invigorated their campaign.

The legal battle against *Rolling Stone* was fought with the help of money from gay rights and other interest groups, and demonstrations in support of the campaign were held around the world.

A scaled down version of the original bill was eventually passed by the Ugandan parliament in December 2013. The bill drew wide condemnation when it was first introduced in 2010 and included the death penalty, but that was removed from the revised version passed by parliament.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-12431368> (video of Ugandans after the bill was passed)

President Yoweri Museveni approved the controversial bill and signed it into law in February 2014.

While homosexuality was already illegal in the country, the new law calls for first-time offenders to be sentenced to 14 years in jail. It also sets life imprisonment as the maximum penalty for a category of offences called "aggravated homosexuality," defined as repeated gay sex between consenting adults as well as acts involving a minor, a disabled person or where one partner is infected with HIV. It also outlaws the promotion of homosexuality and requires people to denounce gays.

Minister for Ethics and Integrity Simon Lokodo told reporters, "You cannot have a right to be a sick human being. There is no right in homosexuality. It must be cured."

Uganda is also not the only country in Africa making their laws against homosexuality even more strict. In January 2014, Nigeria's president signed the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, which imposes a 14-year jail sentence for gay couples who marry, and up to 10 years' imprisonment for supporting gay clubs and organizations.

South Africa

Although homosexuality remains a taboo subject in many African societies, South Africa is a very liberal country in terms of gay rights. South Africa is the one country where it is not only legal, but the gay community is thriving.

South Africa has the most permissive gay rights legislation in the whole world, and also hosts several successful Gay Pride marches, its first being in 1995.

South Africa's constitution is one of the most advanced and progressive anywhere in the world.

In an effort to reverse the wrongs of apartheid, it ensures that human rights, gender equality and gay and lesbian rights are all properly protected. The post-apartheid constitution includes a clause making discrimination based on sexual identity illegal.

In December 2005, South Africa's high court said it was unconstitutional to deny gay people the right to marry, and instructed parliament to amend marriage laws to include same-sex unions. As a result, in 2006, same-sex weddings were officially legalized in South Africa - the first country to do so in Africa.

On paper, South Africa's approach to gay rights is admirable.

Yet the townships, where blacks were forced to live under apartheid, remain largely conservative with deep-set notions of masculinity, tradition and religion and little understanding of what it means to be gay.

Lesbians not only face being thrown out by their own families, but even the police, meant to protect them, are said to laugh or to call their fellow officers to listen in when the women report hate crimes.

The first case of homophobic violence to gain national prominence in South Africa was the 2006 murder of Zoliswa Nkonyana, 19, who was clubbed, stoned and beaten to death by a mob of 20 young men.

This brought to public the battle against the South African phenomenon called "corrective rape." "The thinking is, all it takes is one good man to cure you of being a lesbian," Sharon Cox from Triangle - a gay rights organization - says.

One of South Africa's leading sportswomen, openly gay football star Eudy Simelane, was one of the first women to live openly as a lesbian in KwaThema township near Johannesburg. Simelane, a gay activist, was raped and killed in South Africa in 2008.

More than 31 lesbians have been reportedly raped and murdered in homophobic attacks in South Africa since 1998.

But according to Triangle - a gay rights organization - only two cases of "corrective rape" have ever made it to the courts; there has been only one conviction. Triangle says it deals with up to 10 new cases of corrective rape every week.

In 2009 in a township on the edge of Cape Town, Millicent Gaika, a 30-year-old openly gay woman, was beaten and raped for five hours. Gaika later told police that throughout the assault, her attacker repeatedly said, "You think you're a man, but I'm going to show you you're a woman."

In April 2011, lesbian activist Noxolo Nogwaza was brutally stoned, stabbed and gang-raped in the same KwaThema township east of Johannesburg that Eudy Simelane was killed in three years earlier.

In response, Luleki Sizwe started an online petition at Change.org to get the government to take action.

"In less than six months, a tiny group of township activists has mobilized more than 170,000 people from 163 countries and gotten the highest levels of government to address their basic demand, that the sadistic crime of 'corrective rape' be taken seriously," Change.org representative Benjamin Joffe-Walt said.

This online campaign joined with local activists in demanding that the South African government recognize corrective rape as a hate crime. In May 2011, South Africa established a team to finally tackle hate crimes against gay people.

Some say things are slowly opening up, yet the differences with nearby gay-friendly cities like Cape Town are stark.

"They are free. Nobody is telling them what to do. You can grab your girlfriend's hand and kiss in public. So here in the township, you can't do that -- kiss in public. If you do that, you are at risk," said Lindeka Stulo, 25, who spent a month in hospital with a broken leg after the first brutal beating, and has been beaten on three other occasions for being a lesbian.

One sign in 2014 that times might be changing, though, is that internationally acclaimed Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina publicly came out. BBC Africa's Farouk Chothia said that Africa's embattled gay rights movement finally has a public face around which to rally support for equality.

Wainaina is most known for winning the 2002 Caine Prize for African Writing for his short story, *Discovering Home*.

"What he has done is brilliant. He is admired and respected, and the only high-profile [black] African to come out," Nairobi-based gay rights activist Anthony Oluoch said.

"He gives a different face to gay people, breaking the stereotype that they are effeminate, that they don't have jobs, that they are completely different."

Wainaina's decision to reveal his sexuality comes amid growing hostility towards gay people in several African states.

Gay and lesbian people risk a jail-term of up to 10 years if they are convicted of homosexual acts in Kenya.

Also in 2014, in another sign that times might be changing for the LGBT community in Africa, two openly gay South African politicians made history.

In May, Zakhele Mbhele was elected as a Member of Parliament in South Africa, becoming the first openly gay black MP to be elected in the continent of Africa. Mbhele, 29, represents the Democratic Alliance, the country's main opposition. Mbhele is the third gay MP to serve in the African government, following Ian Ollis and Mike Waters, but the first black gay MP in the country's history.

At the time of his election, Mbhele was officially the 203rd openly gay member of parliament worldwide. Coos Huijsen in the Netherlands was the first in 1976.

Mbhele said he was aware of this significance of his election and hopes his victory can inspire young LGBT South Africans.

Also in May, South African president Jacob Zuma appointed the country's first openly gay cabinet minister, Lynne Brown. Brown, 52, who is coloured (of mixed race ancestry), is now the Minister of Public Enterprises in the cabinet.

Brown, who was previously the Premier of the Western Cape province, now holds the highest-profile role for a gay politician in Africa.

China

For much of the Chinese Communist Party's time in power, homosexuals were persecuted - often jailed, or even executed.

Sodomy was decriminalized in 1997, but it was not until 2001 that the Chinese Psychiatric Association ruled homosexuality was not, in fact, a mental illness.

Today urban centers harbor vibrant gay scenes and even hold cautious gay-pride festivals. There are over 100 support groups around the country. But the idea that homosexuality is a curable disease prevails in rural areas and among older generations.

In 2011 Lin Yan attended the Chuanwei Psychological Counselling Centre in Shenzhen, a southern city. Worried that his parents would not accept his homosexuality, Mr Lin, who was then 24, spent \$1,700 on three months of so-called "conversion therapy". He was shown sexualized images of men and induced to vomit by an injected drug. Other techniques included what he describes as "mental torture". A counsellor would repeat that his family would never forgive him and that being gay was immoral. He even endured electric shocks.

Mr Lin's treatment may be abhorrent but it is far from uncommon in China's big cities.

Almost all young people come under pressure to provide an heir, a basic tenet, influenced to a certain extent by Confucianism, that leads some young people to feel their homosexuality must be unfilial. Zhang Beichuan of Qingdao University, in east-central China, reckons that four-fifths of young gay men in China end up marrying women.

But gays in China, mainly through the Internet, are finding ways to fight through the public abhorrence of their sexual orientation. There are now hundreds of gay websites in China and the number is growing all the time.

Through the internet Chinese gays now have unprecedented access to information about developments in gay rights from overseas sources.

But gay websites exist in a grey area, with some official interference.

"Some gay websites are closed by the service provider, and sometimes they'll give you other reasons," said Xiao Xian, a lesbian activist.

"We're still testing the water, like what we can do, what is being allowed. So the government doesn't have a clear rule put down on paper. Rather, it's unwritten rules, so you have to test it, you have to see what you can do," she said.

Cui Ze'en, a professor at Beijing Film Academy who has been forbidden from teaching for 15 years since he came out of the closet, believes that the authorities feel as threatened by sexual dissidents as political dissidents.

"They're the same taboo," he said. "Homosexuality represents a different cultural politics. Being gay is a kind of body politics, which is entirely rejected in our system, because in our country, politics is all about being the same. But gay people are different."

In a sign that mainstream attitudes towards homosexuals are becoming more liberal, Shanghai's Fudan University, one of the country's leading universities, ran a course on homosexuality. The professor was Li Yinhe, a sociologist with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

It was the first of its kind to be offered at a Chinese university and although only one student officially registered to take the course for credits, the lectures were packed.

For many of the students, the lecture was a real eye-opener. There was a gasp when Professor Li cited a study that found 16% of Chinese male university students have had a homosexual experience.

Ms Li is famous in China for her pioneering work on sexuality, and also for an attempt to get China's parliament to pass a law on same-sex marriage.

Li, a sociologist who also serves as a government adviser, has tried to cement gay rights in Chinese law. She submitted proposals to legalize same-sex marriage in 2003, 2005 and 2006. None have succeeded so far - and she admits her goal probably won't be realized anytime soon.

"I drafted a proposal, found a delegate who submitted it to parliament," Ms Li explained, "but the delegate couldn't find the 30 people needed to get it on the agenda."

Chinese society is still traditional when it comes to marriage and relationships. Suicide is high among Chinese homosexuals, Li noted, with some surveys saying as many as 30% of gay youth attempt to take their lives.

In many countries it is religious pressures that make life difficult for homosexuals; in China it is family. Marrying and fathering children, especially sons, are among men's most central duties. By doing so, a man ensures his family is provided for -- something

the country's weak social system doesn't do. As such, men who only have male lovers are seen to be failing their duties to their families -- and feel they are betraying them.

Academics at Qingdao University who study sexuality estimate there are 30 million gay men and women living in China, and that 90% of them are thought to live in marriages of convenience. Some have children. Most also continue to sleep with same-sex partners.

Most gay men in China still succumb to social pressure and marry women. It traditionally meant heterosexual marriages, often with children, Li said. Now, gay community activists say a small but growing number of young gay men in big cities are tying the knot with lesbians to both placate families and maintain their lifestyles.

But an emerging gay community is now busting stereotypes.

"We are intelligent, we're professionals...and we're gay," said Emilio Liu, from Inner Mongolia, in January 2010. "I want the audience to know there are a whole bunch of people like us living in China. It's a wonderful life and it's not hidden any more."

There are gay venues in most major cities; in 2009, the first government-backed gay bar opened in Kunming, in south-western Yunnan province. Shanghai held the first Gay Pride week in China in June 2009 and in Beijing, campaigners called for same-sex marriages.

Shanghai Pride in June 2009 featured seven days of film screenings, plays and panel discussions. But there was no parade.

In 2010, Shanghai Pride grew to a month-long celebration of gay culture in the city.

Wu Youjian, a retired magazine editor who writes a blog on homosexuality that has clocked more than 2.2 million hits in China, was a major part of the event. Her son, Zheng Yuantao, is gay. Wu made a groundbreaking decision when she and her son went on a local television show in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou and discussed his sexuality. She became what state media calls the first Chinese parent to go on television in support of her gay child.

Wu has now launched a hotline and founded the country's first PFLAG - Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays - group in her hometown.

"We have to give them hope," Wu said, quoting iconic gay American politician Harvey Milk.

Wu says she constantly reminds other parents about one basic fact.

"It doesn't matter if our children are gay or straight - just like it doesn't matter if they are left-handed or right-handed," she said. "They are always our children."

Wu has even compiled her stories in a new book - titled "Love Is the Most Beautiful Rainbow."



Wu Youjian, right, chats with another parent of gay child at a recent event at Shanghai Pride

"In today's China you can be gay," explained Bin Xu, a veteran LGBT campaigner. "But you can't be political."

The government's hands-off approach is sometimes called the Triple No Policy: no approval, no disapproval, no promotion. It is the Chinese equivalent of "don't ask don't tell."

Liu said the pressures on gay men in China are different from those elsewhere, not greater, pointing out that there is no religious condemnation and that anti-gay violence is rare.

Wu Youjian organized a gathering in Beijing in October 2010 of gays and lesbians, along with their parents, to call for family acceptance and support for gay people.

She has heard many tragedies from her hotline, which seeks to help families accept their gay children's sexuality. She listens to their confusion, anger and regrets three nights a week.

Tears ran down Wu's cheeks as she recounted the many suicides of people she tried to help -- a senior military officer who dared not seek a boyfriend or even talk about his sexuality and committed suicide during this year's Spring Festival; a mother who did not know about her son's sexuality until she read his will; a man who took his own life after hearing about the suicide of his boyfriend.

In March 2014, nineteen-year-old Xiang Xiaohan, a gay rights activist from Hunan Province, showed that he would stop at nothing to take the government to court over what he perceived as his legal right to officially register his gay rights organization.

His campaign to challenge a decision by the civil affairs department of Hunan government not to register his gay rights organization marks a rare open protest by China's gay and lesbian community and has thrown him into the media spotlight.

He wants the government to reverse its decision not to register his organization. Registering his group as an NGO would enable it to legally receive donations and enjoy tax exemptions.

In China, some NGOs already devote considerable resources to protecting gay rights but they do not openly operate in the name of the gay community. But Mr Xiang's organization, if successfully registered as an NGO, would be the first of its kind in China.

Xiang Xiaohan filed the lawsuit in the provincial capital, Changsha, after the Hunan government turned down his application to register his organization.

"I'm confident that gays and lesbians will be fully accepted in China even though it may take 20, 30 or even 50 years for it to happen," Xiang Xiaohan said.

Analysts say Xiang Xiaohan's high profile protest has offered a rare glimpse into the extent to which attitudes towards homosexuality in China have changed.

But for the majority of China's estimated 30 million homosexuals, discrimination, isolation and stigma persist.

Homosexuality and China: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVfeLeTKeJA>

<http://edition.cnn.com/video/data/2.0/video/world/2013/06/27/intl-sexual-equality-china-jiang-pkg.cnn.html>

Europe

Northern European countries were the first to recognize same-sex unions - a trend that picked up in the 1990s. Currently 18 European countries allow gay marriage or same-sex civil unions, and gay couples in nine countries can adopt children, all of which has largely normalized perceptions of gays.

In 1989, Denmark became the first country to institute legislation granting registered same-sex partners the same rights as married couples.

Norway, Sweden and Iceland all enacted similar legislation in 1996, and Finland followed suit six years later.

The Netherlands became the first country to offer gay marriage, including full civil marriage rights, to gay couples in 2001, defining marriage as between "any two consenting adults."

This trend quickly spread to other European nations.

Spain, too, legalized full marriage for gay couples in June 2005, despite fierce opposition from the Roman Catholic Church. Gay married couples can also adopt children.

By 2013, France and England both passed legislation legalizing same-sex marriage. In France, the bill was met with fierce opposition and massive protest marches in the streets, but it passed in May 2013.

France's "marriage for all" law continues to divide the country, though. Commentators surprised by the outpouring of anger pondered the seeming existence of "two Frances": one the progressive, modern, religiously indifferent France that most of the world tends to see, the other the conservative, traditional, pious France that receives little attention.

"The majority of the French say they are not religious. Nevertheless, in the history and culture of our country, there has always been this religious Catholic anchor," says Anne Muxel, a sociologist at Sciences Po University. "There is a Catholic culture in France with traditions that are well-rooted in the French identity, which were reactivated on this occasion."

In February 2009, Johanna Sigurdardottir became the prime minister of Iceland, which is monumental to the gay rights movement as she became the world's first openly gay leader.

Sigurdardottir, a member of the Social Democratic Alliance, had been a member of Iceland's Parliament for 30 years, and was in her second stint as minister of social affairs. She was named prime minister by the country's coalition political parties after the previous prime minister had resigned.

The 66-year-old's appointment is seen by many as a milestone for the gay and lesbian movement. One year later, in 2010, Iceland legalized same-sex marriage.

Sigurdardottir joins other prominent homosexuals who hold administrative political positions throughout Europe.

Politicians across Western Europe are stepping out of the closet and into their country's highest political offices. As of January 2010, eleven openly gay men and women now serve in the British Parliament, including two in the Cabinet. In June 2009, French President Nicolas Sarkozy appointed Frédéric Mitterrand, an openly gay man, to the post of Minister of Culture. Paris' Mayor Bertrand Delanoë is openly gay. And Guido Westerwelle, chairman of Germany's Free Democratic Party, has just become his country's Foreign Minister, joining a gay elite that includes the mayors of Berlin and Hamburg, Germany's two largest cities.

That's very different that in the United States, where — despite the 2009 election of Annise Parker, a gay woman, as mayor of Houston, America's fourth largest city — honesty can still end a gay politician's career.

Of the 511,000 elected offices in the U.S. — from local school boards way up to President — openly gay men and women occupy just 450 of them as of January 2010,

according to the U.S.-based Victory Fund. No openly gay person has ever sat in the Senate, and only three hold seats in the House of Representatives.

Ireland took another step forward in 2015 when country became the first country in the world to legalize gay marriage by popular mandate. Ireland held a national referendum in May 2015 where citizens were asked whether they wanted to amend the country's constitution to allow gay and lesbian couples to marry. In the end it was a landslide as 62.1% voted "yes"; the affirmative side carried the day in 42 of the country's 43 constituencies.

The fact that the referendum was even being held in Ireland speaks volumes as to how this staunchly conservative Catholic country has come, given that the Irish state only decriminalized homosexuality in 1993, and then only because the European Court of Human Rights upheld a legal challenge brought by a gay Irish Senator, David Norris.

Irish society has become more secular over the past few decades. In the 1980s there was no divorce, all abortion was illegal and condoms could only be obtained with the permission of a doctor. Divorce was only approved by referendum in 1995, by a razor-thin margin (50.28% to 49.72%), reversing a decisive defeat a decade earlier.

The 2015 referendum on same-sex marriage marks the highest point yet in the liberalization of Irish society.

Ireland's situation is unique as all other countries who legalized same-sex marriage up to this point had done so through the court system or through legislature, but not by popular vote.

Leo Vradkar, Ireland's first openly gay minister, said: "We're the first country in the world to enshrine marriage equality in our constitution and do so by popular mandate. That makes us a beacon, a light to the rest of the world of liberty and equality. It's a very proud day to be Irish."

But not all European countries are as tolerant, says Juris Lavrikovs of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) in Brussels.

There is a huge divide between eastern and western Europe, he says. "The countries of the former Soviet Union were cut off from some of the social developments which have brought us this far in the past 50 years."

"A pink curtain divides us. And it will probably take a long time for eastern European countries to reach the same level of tolerance," Mr Lavrikovs says.

Russia

Russia's capital, with its population of some nine million people, is home to a large and thriving gay community. But it largely prefers to remain discreet.

Despite the widespread discrimination, a homosexual subculture has been able to develop in Russia. In both Moscow and St. Petersburg, there are dozens of clubs catering to gays. They are the exception, however, tolerated in the niches of the cosmopolitan metropolises. Attempts to hold gay-pride parades in the two cities regularly end with bans, arrests or brutal neo-Nazi attacks.

Homophobia is deeply entrenched in Russian society. Gay men and women suffered decades of repression under the Soviet Union, in particular under the brutal leadership of Joseph Stalin. Homosexuality was officially illegal in the entire Soviet Union throughout its life, and specifically in Russia up until 1993, with homosexual acts punishable by prison terms of up to five years. Six years later, in 1999, the law that sent gays and lesbians to psychiatric wards was annulled.

Popular social attitudes remain conservative and often very hostile, though. Being openly gay in Moscow and across Russia remains very dangerous.

According to a recent survey by the well-respected Levada Center, fully 62% of Russians condemn homosexuality, calling it "morally unacceptable and worth condemning."

Lawmakers have accused gays of decreasing Russia's already low birth rates and said they should be barred from government jobs, undergo forced medical treatment or be exiled. An executive with a government-run television network said in a nationally televised talk show that gays should be prohibited from donating blood, sperm and organs for transplants, while after death their hearts should be burned or buried.

A columnist for the English language paper *Moscow Times* even commented that "gays are the new Jews."

While it is no longer a crime to be gay in Russia, though, the community now faces another formidable foe - the Orthodox Church.

It has condemned homosexuality as "a sinful injury to human nature" which requires "treatment" including prayer, fasting and repentance.

Mikhail Nalimov, leader of United Orthodox Youth, has said, "The aim of the gay movement is to destabilize the country and society and we will not let this happen."

Conservative Orthodox priest Roman Bratshik used the Bible to argue his point for Russia cracking down on homosexuality: "I would like to point out that God sent angels to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah."

An ever-growing conservative campaign in Russia is aimed at gays and lesbians in the country outside the Orthodox church, as well. In their view, homosexuality isn't merely a sin, but also a symbol of damaging "Westernization," and laws and attacks against homosexuals have significantly increased.

“Until this scum gets off of Russian land, I fully share the views of those who are trying to purge our motherland of it,” Rev. Sergiy Rybko said in the Orthodoxy and World online magazine. “We either become a tolerant Western state where everything is allowed — and lose our Christianity and moral foundations — or we will be a Christian people who live in our God-protected land in purity and godliness.”

Cities throughout Russia started enacting “anti-homosexual propaganda” laws in 2012, and in 2013, it became a national law, passed by the Russian Parliament.

The so-called Gay Propaganda law amended Russia's child protection law with a clause covering "the propagandizing of non-traditional sexual relations among minors". This prescribes fines for providing information about homosexuality to people under 18. These range from 4,000 roubles (\$121) for an individual to 1m roubles for organizations.

Critics say the amendment's loose wording, and its free interpretation by the authorities, effectively make any kind of public gay rights event in Russia impossible.

"Homosexual propaganda aimed at minors will destroy traditional families," Yevgeny Mazepin, a lawyer and leader of a campaign group called Special Battalion in Voronezh, says.

"Gay pride parades and public meetings are examples of deliberate and uncontrolled dissemination of information about homosexuality, creating an impression that perversion is the norm."

Andrei Tanichev, a club owner in the Russian city of Sochi, spoke about the atmosphere of homophobia in Russia in September 2013: “Even back in the USSR, where homosexuality was a criminal offence, gays were treated better than they are now in Russia. Ordinary people see us as criminals. They hate us.”

The new law and Russia’s attacks on homosexuals led many to be concerned about their hosting the 2014 Winter Olympics and whether gay athletes would be safe in the country.

In August 2013, British broadcaster Stephen Fry urged the British Prime Minister to support moves to strip Russia of the 2014 Winter Olympics because of their anti-gay laws. Fry, who was just one of many gay-rights advocates who called for a ban, compared the situation to the decision to hold the 1936 games in Nazi Germany.

Putin said that gay athletes were welcome in the country, but that they needed to “leave the children alone please.”

There were a number of openly gay athletes that represented their countries at the Olympics in Sochi, and President Obama decided to send a delegation representing the United States, in place of himself and Vice President Joe Biden, that included a number of openly gay athletes.

The US delegation to the opening ceremony of the Sochi Olympics was led by tennis legend Billie Jean King and figure skater Brian Boitano, both of whom are openly gay. The delegation for the closing ceremony included Caitlin Cahow, a two-time Olympic medalist in ice hockey, who is also openly gay.

"I think it's a huge moment for the United States – sending openly gay athletes as the representatives of our country," Cahow said.

Latin America

In 2007, Uruguay's Congress legalized civil unions for homosexual couples in the first nationwide law of its kind in Latin America.

Under the law, gay and straight couples were eligible to form civil unions after living together for five years. They had rights similar to those granted to married couples on such matters as inheritance, pensions and child custody.

Several cities, including Buenos Aires and Mexico City, already had gay civil union laws on the books. Uruguay's law was the first nationwide measure in Latin America, which is home to about half the world's Roman Catholics.

In December 2009, provincial lawmakers in Mexico City became the first in Latin America to legalize gay marriage.

Lawmaker David Razu had proposed the change to give same-sex couples the same rights as heterosexual couples regarding social security and other benefits.

Cardinal Norberto Rivera, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Mexico City, described the law as immoral and abhorrent: "It has opened the doors to the perverse possibility that these couples will adopt innocent children and not respect their right to a mother and father with the consequent psychological damaged provoked by this injustice."

In the neighboring city of Ecatepec, Bishop Onesimo Cespeda said bluntly that the idea of gay marriage was "stupidity." And Armando Martinez, head of Mexico's Catholic Lawyers College said the law would provoke a backlash against gays that the assembly would be responsible for. "The promoters of this law are promoters of homophobia," he said. "Why? Because Mexican culture is not ready for these things and they can release a level of homophobia that no one will be able to stop."

The southern Mexican state of Quintana Roo, home to the city of Cancun, has also legalized same-sex marriage, as well.

Argentina has gone even further. In July 2010, the country's Senate voted in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage – making it the first nation in Latin America to do so. The law, which also allows same-sex couples to adopt, had met with fierce opposition from the Catholic Church and other religious groups.

In signing the law, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner made Argentina the first nation in Latin America to legalize gay marriage.

Uruguay followed suit in April 2013 when its Congress voted to legalize same-sex marriage in the country, making it the second country in Latin America and the third in all the Americas to do so.

In Uruguay, a nation of about 3.3 million people, critics of the bill included the Catholic Church and other Christian organizations, which said it would endanger the institution of the family.

"We are opposed to this bill because we understand it distorts and changes the nature of the institution of marriage," said opposition lawmaker Gerardo Amarilla.

"I agree that family is the basis of society but I also believe that love is the basis of family. And love is neither homosexual nor heterosexual," opposition lawmaker Fernando Amado, though, said.

In 2011, Brazil's Supreme Court voted overwhelmingly in favor of allowing same-sex couples the same legal rights as married heterosexuals. The landmark ruling stopped short of recognizing gay marriage, but gave gay couples in "stable" partnerships the same financial and social rights enjoyed by those in heterosexual relationships.

Just two years later, in 2013, the Justice's National Council of Brazil legalized same-sex marriage in the entire country in a 14-1 vote by issuing a ruling that ordered all civil registers of the country to perform same-sex marriages and convert any existing civil unions into marriages if such a couple desires.

Brazil is the world's most populous Roman Catholic nation and has an estimated 60,000 gay couples.

"The freedom to pursue one's own sexuality is part of an individual's freedom of expression," said Justice Carlos Ayres Britto.

"The degree of civilization of a country can be measured by the way people in a nation treat their homosexual community," Claudio Nascimento, head of Rio de Janeiro state's Gay, Lesbian and Transsexuals Committee said.

What about other nations around the world?

South Korea

Homosexuality is not illegal in South Korea (or expressly legal), but before the late 1980s the country was ruled by dictatorial regimes and citizens enjoyed few civil liberties, never mind sexual rights. A small and tentative LGBT movement emerged in the 1990s, but even in the year 2000, when prominent actor Hong Seok-chun came out as gay — the first Korean entertainer to do so — he lost all his TV, film and radio contracts.

As recently as 2007, a Pew Research Center Attitudes Survey found that just 18 percent of South Koreans felt that homosexuality should be tolerated.

But there is starting to be a push to move the country forward in terms of gay rights.

In September 2013, two men held South Korea's first same-sex wedding on a bridge in Seoul, to the applause of hundreds of guests and the soaring voices of a choir. The ceremony carried no legal weight — same-sex unions are not recognized in South Korea — but the couple and their legal advisers are now moving forward with a legal challenge that they hope will put South Korea in the vanguard of same-sex equality in Asia.

The cause is being helped by the fact that the Kims are high-profile professionals from South Korea's glamorous film industry. Kim Jho Gwang-su, 48, is a prominent director, while producer Kim Seung-hwan, 29, is CEO of Rainbow Factory, a production house known for its LGBT output. "We realized we could be an example to others and that it was selfish not to use our positions as public figures to push for change," Kim Seung-hwan said.

Article 11 of South Korea's constitution states "there shall be no discrimination in political, economic, social or cultural life on account of sex, religion or social status."

However, conservatives and religious groups say that this equality was never meant to extend to same-sex marriage.

Africa

In Nigeria in 2007, eighteen men were imprisoned following their arrest for alleged sodomy in northern Nigeria.

The men were arrested in a hotel in north-eastern Bauchi State, which is governed by the Islamic Sharia law. The Sharia punishment for sodomy is death by stoning.

The men, reportedly wearing women's clothes, are said to have gone to Bauchi town from neighboring states to celebrate a "gay wedding".

Prosecuting police officer Tadius Boboi said the men's actions had contravened Sharia law, adopted in Bauchi and a dozen other states in Muslim northern Nigeria in 2000.

In another case in Nigeria in March 2009, Nigerian lawmakers introduced a bill that would mean prison sentences for gay people who live together, as well as anyone who "aids and abets" them.

Under the new law any gay people living together and anyone who "witnesses, assists and aids" those of a same gender relationship would be liable to be jailed for a minimum of three years.

Church groups spoke in favor of the bill, saying that gay marriage risked "tearing the fabric of society". "In the Bible it says homosexuals are criminals," Pius Akubo of the Daughters of Sarah church told lawmakers.

Rev Patrick Alumake told the National Assembly the top leadership of the Catholic church in Nigeria supported the bill wholeheartedly.

"There are wild, weird, ways of life that are affecting our own culture very negatively, we have people who either by way of the media or traveling around the world have allowed new ideas which are harmful to our nation and our belief," he said.

Children wearing T-shirts that said "Same sex marriage is un-natural and un-African", and "same sex marriage is an abomination" stood in the aisles of the committee room while the bill was debated.

In January 2014, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan signed a law that bans same-sex marriage and criminalizes homosexual associations, societies and meetings, with penalties of up to 14 years in jail.

It is now a crime for two gay people to meet, to operate or go to a gay club, or other gay organization.

Nigeria already had a law inherited from British colonization that makes homosexual sex illegal, while in the areas in Nigeria's north, where Islamic Shariah law is enforced, gays and lesbians can face death by stoning.

India

In July 2009, Delhi's High Court ruled that homosexual intercourse between consenting adults is not a criminal act.

The ruling overturns a 148-year-old colonial law which described a same-sex relationship as an "unnatural offence".

Homosexual acts were punishable by a 10-year prison sentence.

Delhi's High Court ruled that the law outlawing homosexual acts was discriminatory and a "violation of fundamental rights".

The ruling is historic in a country where homosexuals face discrimination and persecution on a daily basis. Gay rights activists all over the country welcomed the ruling and said it was "India's Stonewall".

"Indian society, by and large, disapproves of homosexuality and justifies it being treated as a criminal offence even when adults indulge in private," said a government lawyer in Delhi.

In a largely patriarchal society, lesbians bear the brunt of social ostracization and the law more than gay men. In many states, lesbians have taken their lives after facing harassment at home and outside.

In 2000, Malobika, a 41-year-old lesbian from Calcutta, along with five other lesbians started up a support group called Sappho.

They run a helpline, publish a magazine and take up cases of human rights abuses.

The helpline has become their window to the dark world of Indian lesbians.

Most of the women who call in say they have been forcibly married off by their parents.

When they tell the truth, they are thrown out of their homes by their spouses, parents and relatives.

Malobika says when parents find out - or the girl tells them - the truth, they run to the doctor.

"The doctor typically tells the girl to swim, cook and knit. 'That way she will become a girl again,' they say.

"The parents then usually take the girl home and shut her up, cutting her off from the outside world."

Many girls from the villages escape to the big city after being thrown out of their homes.

In big cities like Calcutta, there is slightly more acceptance of same sex relationships these days. As in other parts of the world, India has seen a growing gay and lesbian movement.

"These days, there is a greater openness about the gay community in the big cities. But homophobia is still pretty rampant," says Rafiquel Haque, 31, a theatre actor and gay rights activist.

In 2003, he organized a same sex mardi gras in Calcutta. Since then it has become a regular yearly event.

Plays on gay issues are staged, members debate community issues, and books and journals are sold at this merry fortnight-long carnival.

Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe portrays homosexuality as "un-African," an import from Europe to be despised and rejected.

Mugabe has described homosexuals as sodomists and sexual perverts who had no rights. "We don't believe they have any rights at all." Mugabe also described them as "worse

than dogs and pigs”; they were “beasts,” he said, “guilty of sub-human behavior.” He also asked people to help the police “to root the evil out.”

Government Minister Makumbe in Zimbabwe added, “I am saying that any man who is convicted of homosexuality or rape must be castrated.”

Gambia

Yahya Jammeh, president of Gambia for 20 years, said in a televised speech in February 2014: “As far as I am concerned, LGBT can only stand for leprosy, gonorrhoea, bacteria and tuberculosis.” He compared gay people to vermin, and said his government would fight them as it does malaria-bearing mosquitoes, “if not more aggressively”.

Ukraine

In 1991, Ukraine was the first former Soviet republic to decriminalize homosexuality. It has sprouted its own gay rights movement, and gay night clubs operate freely in central Kiev.

But in 2012, a bill before the Ukrainian parliament that was highly critical of homosexuality was openly debated. The bill aimed to outlaw "pro-homosexual propaganda" - any "positive depiction" of gay people, gay pride marches, or even the screening of a certain films. The legislation would impose indeterminate fines and up to five years in prison for repeat offenders.

If passed, the bill would prevent anyone sending out a message that there is nothing wrong with being gay - whether in a newspaper editorial, a public speech or parade. This bill's authors have cited films like *Brokeback Mountain* as an example. The new bill could even be so interpreted as to outlaw any public display of single-sex affection, such as kissing and hand-holding.

One of the legislation's incubators is the Christian Hope evangelical church in Kiev. Christian Hope provides a wide array of educational and charity services, and has established a network of some 150 churches throughout Ukraine. It has also helped collect thousands of signatures in support of three anti-gay bills put forward in parliament in 2012.

For chief pastor Valery Reshetinsky, the fight against homosexuality is a matter of "national security" upon which the survival of the nation depends.

The bill coincides with the recent attack of a number of gay activists. The first ever Gay Pride march planned in Kiev was called off at the last minute in May 2012 after threats of violence from far-right groups.

Immediately after a news conference announcing the decision, masked assailants kicked and jumped on Svyatoslav Sheremet, head of Gay Forum of Ukraine. A month later,

unknown muggers shouting "Faggot!" assaulted another of the parade organizers, Taras Karasiychuk, on the street as he was coming home at night.

The bill unleashed a deluge of condemnation from human rights organizations, both inside and outside Ukraine, who have christened it a "gay gag law". The ban would be a gross violation of European and international conventions, they say, leading to further marginalization of Ukraine's LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community.

Peru

In Peru, the issue of gay marriage became a hot button issue in the April 2011 presidential elections. Presidential front-runner Alejandro Toledo, trying to win back the office he held between 2001 and 2006, got things going after his party announced that it supported civil unions for same-sex couples.

Toledo's vice-presidential candidate, Congressman Carlos Bruce, is the author of a bill in Congress that would authorize couples, heterosexual or homosexual, to establish unions similar to corporations in order to share assets, get joint loans and transfer benefits, like social security.

One Peruvian political party, Fuerza Social, has taken the idea a step further and called for gay marriage.

But by and large, however, Peruvians are not sold on the idea. An early February 2011 survey found that 74.7% oppose same-sex marriage. And there is no ambiguity in the influential Catholic Church.

Peru, however, would not be the first country in the region with civil unions or gay marriage. Argentina approved gay marriage in 2010 and Colombia and Uruguay have different versions of civil-union laws in place. Mexico City recognizes gay marriage, but the country as a whole does not.