

From Uganda to Russia, homophobia spreading worldwide

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Uganda's new law, which for the first time criminalizes homosexual relations between women and includes provisions that could put convicted homosexuals in prison for life, has been on the table since 2009. But its passage now comes amid a rising tide of aggressive homophobia.

And not just in Uganda.

Last month Nigeria passed a law that, among other restrictions on homosexual behavior, bans same-sex public displays of affection. Last year Russia introduced laws outlawing "homosexual propaganda." And India's Supreme Court last month reinstated a law banning gay sex in a move that outraged rights advocates who had been celebrating gains made over the past five years.

International LGBT-rights activists fear similarly homophobic legislation is on the rise around the world.

(LGBT = *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender*)

What accounts for this? A confluence of international and domestic forces have created a perfect storm for anti-gay legislation. It is common for weak governments to demonize a minority community to shore up domestic support. Meanwhile, United States evangelical groups export American culture wars to territories more amenable to intolerance towards gays than can be found in America, where progress is fast being made towards ensuring equality irrespective of sexual orientation as can be seen by the rush in one state after the next to legalize same-sex marriage.

Anti-LGBT laws in Uganda, Nigeria and Russia have created international firestorms, with human rights groups and U.S. and European governments quick to offer condemnation. But they remain popular on the home front.

With inflation at 14 percent and GDP growth at a weak 3.4 percent, according to the most recent World Bank data, Uganda's President Museveni certainly has incentive to deflect attention onto social issues. He hopes to be re-elected in 2016 thanks to the popularity of the anti-gay bill into the next elections.

"Even opposition leaders who once criticized the bill have become silent since the bill was passed by Parliament," says Kalende, an LGBT activist. "This will effectively get him votes, even from those who oppose his politics."

Similarly, in Nigeria, where corruption is endemic and sectarianism divides the country, many Muslim and Christians are able to find common ground by rallying around persecution of LGBT people – enhancing the fortunes of the embattled president Goodluck Jonathan.

From Uganda to Russia, politicians frame the issue as one of defending "traditional values". Museveni describes homosexuality as "un-African." Russian president Vladimir Putin says "traditional values" are a foundation of Russia's greatness. Zimbabwe's 89-year-old Marxist president for life Robert Mugabe claims homosexuality "destroys nations." "It's the classic tactic of the moral panic that unites people around a perceived enemy that is seen as threatening but is actually vulnerable," says Graeme Reid, director of the LGBT rights program at Human Rights Watch. And moral panic can also be a cover for other forms of repression, according to Reid, who says the LGBT issue is just one part of a broader clampdown on rights under Museveni, who has held power since 1986.

For Africa's strongmen, homophobic laws and rhetoric have helped replace other ways of maintaining power. When African states emerged from colonialism, patronage was the key to building support for the new states. But, says Scott Long, a longtime international activist for LGBT human rights, the fiscal crises and economic retrenchment of the early 1990s destroyed that political gambit.

"So they started looking around for other ways to drum up support and get previously apolitical organizations like the churches on their side," Long says. Anti-LGBT laws are helping to keep these authoritarian states strong.

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