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OVER THE RAINBOW



Ugandan Gays Risk All in Pride March



After the striking down of a notorious anti-gay bill, Ugandan gays celebrate — even if it's only short-lived.



AMY FALLON 08.09.14 10:52 AM ET

ENTEBBE, Uganda — They came, they marched, they wrapped themselves in the rainbow flag and they celebrated like there was no tomorrow or, better yet, no yesterday.

Just a little more than a week ago the landscape was looking bleak for the activists who planned to take part in Saturday's gay pride parade here on the shores of Lake Victoria. But a court ruling on Aug. 1 declared a draconian anti-gay law "null and void" and suddenly this turned into the Post Anti-Homosexuality Act Pride Uganda event, even if the sense of relief and celebration may be short lived.

"I'm so excited because the bill is no more," said a trans woman known as Bad Black, one of more than 50 campaigners who gathered on the beach behind Entebbe's Botanical Gardens.

The 24-year-old sported a yellow bra, Ethiopian sarong and skyscraper orange stilettos. A sticker on her chest read "some Ugandans are gay, get over it." She said she was celebrating more than the court ruling, which merely declared that the infamous law passed by Uganda's parliament in December 2013 lacked the required quorum. She was also celebrating her homecoming.

“I was in Cape Town. I went to seek asylum in South Africa in May because I was not safe here after I appeared in the media,” said Bad Black, who carried a pink lipstick in one hand and a bottle of Club, a local beer, in another. “I came back on the last day of the court case. It was obvious we were going to win.”

But despite that decision by five Constitutional Court judges, homosexual acts remain illegal under the Ugandan penal code. The Attorney General reportedly will appeal the ruling, and at least 91 members of parliament have signed a document supporting the reintroduction of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, according to The Daily Monitor, a local newspaper.

But Saturday’s festivities appeared to go off without a hitch. Just after 2:00 p.m., activists and their supporters drove and marched about half a kilometer up a muddy dirt road to traditional Ugandan music and an African chant.

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Participants sat on the back of an open white SUV, a rainbow flag draped over the bonnet, and one marcher standing on top of the car with another flag. It was followed by more activists in a grey Toyota van, some wearing masks to show that not all people who are gay in God-fearing Uganda can reveal their faces.

“Next year we shall be marching on the streets of Kampala,” yelled activist Jacqueline Kasha, who was dressed as a butterfly and brought her dog, who was also wearing a rainbow scarf.

Prominent human rights activist Frank Mugisha, 33, led the way. Just weeks earlier he’d marched openly in World Pride in Toronto, carrying a banner. On Saturday he was dressed as a pirate in a white top and white trousers, with a black hat and rainbow scarf.

“There are good pirates — but people say pirates are always bad,” said Mugisha. “You shouldn’t stereotype people.”

He added: “People are still conservative here, so we’re trying to do everything the Ugandan way. We have not reached the stage where we will go onto the streets, but that time will come.”

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There was also a church minister in the crowd.

Patrick Leuben, 37, wore a white shirt bearing the words "Straight, Christian and gay rights." He also wore a badge that said "kuchu"

(meant to represent "gay" in a Ugandan language) and carried a rainbow flag.

As a pastor with Affirming Pentecostal Ministries Uganda based in Rubaga, Kampala, Leuben said he was one of only two openly gay ministers in Uganda, but was proof that one could be Godly and homosexual.

"It's hard but I'm here because I'm celebrating being a gay, I'm proud of it," said the winner of the Makwan Prize 2013, who has been out for ten years but was ordained nearly two years ago.

"We've started a mission to help others hurting because Jesus didn't hurt people."

Leuben added: "They can challenge us in the Supreme Court, but they won't stop us fighting for equality and justice for all."

Leilah Babirye, 28, a visual artist, attended the Pride event with her girlfriend of a year.

"I've been looking at pain in my work," she said. "Now it's time to start creating art works to celebrate and rejoice, so it will bring out who we are at the end of the day."

She said she was now "very openly gay."

"At first I wanted to hide a lot, but after the passing of the bill and being published all over the Red Pepper (a notorious Ugandan tabloid) and my family denouncing me, I don't have any reason why I should keep hiding.

"I should rejoice."