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LGBTQ Ugandans live in fear as new law looms

KAMPALA, April 24 (Reuters) - At a shelter for lesbian women in Uganda's capital Kampala, gone are the days when the residents, having fled abuse and stigma at home, could breathe easy and be themselves.

That came to an end a month ago when parliament passed some of the world's strictest anti-LGBTQ legislation, which would criminalise the "promotion" of homosexuality and impose the death penalty for certain crimes involving gay sex.

President Yoweri Museveni [said](#) on Thursday that he supports the legislation but has requested some modifications from parliament, including provisions to "rehabilitate" gay people, before he signs it.

Staff at the shelter, a non-descript building in a busy part of town, now instruct residents to be discreet and blend into their surroundings, even if that means changing their behaviour or physical appearance.

"You won't find people sagging their pants and walking around in the shelter or ... bringing their girlfriends around the shelter and then making out at the gate," said Joan Amek, who runs the foundation that manages the facility.

"All that has been restricted one way or another."

Being LGBTQ in Uganda was not easy before. A British colonial-era law bans gay sex, and members of the community are often victims of violence and discrimination.

But LGBTQ Ugandans say nothing could have prepared them for the past few weeks as the bill's passage sent homophobic abuse into overdrive, unleashing a wave of arrests, evictions, denunciations by family members and mob attacks.

One resident contrasted the current atmosphere with 2013, when parliament passed a bill that strengthened penalties for same-sex relations. The resulting law was struck down by a domestic court several months later on procedural grounds.

"When the (2013) bill came, we had the right to get up and speak," the resident said, asking to remain anonymous. "In 2023, the bill instilled fear. You can't even stand up and say: 'I am human. Don't do this to me.'"



After parliament [passed](#) the bill, she deleted her Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter accounts. When a friend told her that people in the neighbourhood were discussing her sexuality, she left home, fearing being sent to prison, where she would be a target of sexual violence.

Unlike most anti-LGBTQ legislation in Africa, the latest Uganda bill does not just criminalise same-sex acts but openly seeks to silence a community that lawmakers allege, without evidence, is conspiring to recruit children and weaken traditional family and religious values.

It would impose the death penalty for cases of so-called aggravated homosexuality, which include having gay sex when HIV-positive.

Other LGBTQ Ugandans said they were taking security precautions like changing the routes they use to travel between home and work and carrying pepper spray.

"I feel like it's going to be a different environment altogether," said another resident at the shelter, also speaking on condition of anonymity. "It might get so brutal."

Others are looking to leave Uganda altogether. Amek said her organisation has been contacted by at least 14 people asking for help seeking asylum in Western countries.

For LGBTQ Ugandans [living abroad](#), the new reality is also clouding their prospects of coming home.

"There's a lot of stories that I wanted to tell in that place so it really hurts me that I can't go back," said DeLovie Kwagala (Papa De), a queer Ugandan photographer and activist living in South Africa.

Amek faces enormous risks as the director of the foundation under a provision of the bill that punishes the promotion of homosexuality with up to 20 years in prison.

"I am worried about everything, worried about how I will live, how I will access accommodation, how I will access food, how I will access employment," she said.

Editing by Aaron Ross and Christina Fincher

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