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Ugandan MPs press for death penalty for homosexual acts

Parliamentarians seek to resubmit bill to introduce capital sentences for gay sex

[Jason Burke](#) and [Samuel Okiror](#) in Kampala

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□ Anti-gay rights protesters in Uganda. On most of the African continent, homosexuality is illegal. Photograph: Benedicte Desrus/Alamy

MPs in [Uganda](#) are to push for new laws to make homosexual acts punishable by death.

James Nsaba Buturo, an MP, said parliamentarians wanted to retable a bill ruled unconstitutional by a court in 2014 that would introduce capital sentences for gay sex.

“We are putting our act [bill] together. Just give us a bit of time ... We need a law that defends and protects our values,” he said.

The proposed new law is the latest setback for LGBTI rights in Africa. In May, Kenya’s high court [rejected an attempt](#) to repeal colonial-era laws criminalising gay sex.

Homosexuality is illegal in most countries on the African continent. In a handful of states, gay people face life imprisonment or the death penalty. In Uganda, a largely conservative Christian country, homosexual sex is punishable by life imprisonment.

After initially indicating it might support the move, the government has backed away from supporting any change to the law after major aid donors expressed their concerns.

Don Wanyama, the senior press secretary of the president, Yoweri Museveni, said: “We have the penal code that already handles issues of unnatural sexual behaviour, so there is no law coming up.”

Simon Lokodo, Uganda’s state minister for ethics and integrity, said the bill had his personal backing. “Certainly I support the bill. We can’t allow the recruitment and promotion of homosexuality in Uganda. It’s [a] principle,” he said.

Lokodo has previously described homosexuality as “not natural to Ugandans” and claimed there was “a massive recruitment [campaign in schools]”.

Backers of the proposed new law say it would target the “promotion” of homosexuality.

Hate crimes against gay people, including physical and sexual assault, blackmail and extortion, are common in Uganda but most victims are too fearful to go to the police, according to rights groups.

Campaigners say existing laws are also used to discriminate against LGBT people, making it harder for them to get a job or promotion, rent housing or access health and education services. Many flee to neighbouring countries where discrimination, though still acute, is less severe.

Earlier this month, Brian Wassa, a gay activist and paralegal, died of injuries sustained in an attack at his home in Jinja, eastern Uganda. Wassa is the fourth LGBTI activist to have been killed in the past three months, say campaigners.

Nicholas Opiyo, a Kampala-based human rights lawyer, said Ugandan politicians were making “careless remarks that have real-life implications for hundreds of Uganda’s LGBTQI community, who are already facing grave societal dangers”.

Amnesty International warned the attempt to change the law would create more hatred in a homophobic environment.

Uganda’s parliament is in recess but those backing new legislation will seek permission to introduce a bill when lawmakers next meet at the end of the month.

Clare Byarugaba, an LGBT activist based in Kampala, the capital, said it would be wrong to underestimate the resilience and strength of the gay community in Uganda. “We fought so hard against legalised homophobia and discrimination [in 2014], and we shall do the same if they introduce another law,” she said.

Claims that homosexuality is un-African are common on the continent, though contradicted by many historians and experts.

In Kenya, judges said existing laws on homosexuality represented the values and views of the country. In Tanzania, authorities in Dar es Salaam, the biggest city, have launched crackdowns on gay people in the past few years. In the most recent, the city’s governor called on citizens to identify gay people so they could be arrested, forcing [hundreds into hiding](#).

However, there has been progress elsewhere, including Angola, which [decriminalised gay sex](#) in January. In March, the high court in Botswana heard a case brought by campaigners challenging the constitutionality of a law punishing same-sex relations.

Earlier this year, Brunei caused an international outcry over plans to [impose the death penalty](#) for gay sex, backtracking only after [intense global criticism](#).