

# Uganda's gays see progress in public opinion war



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KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) — Four years ago Frank Mugisha begged his colleagues to join him for his first demonstration in support of gay rights in Uganda. Only four came along.

This week, during a march against gender-based violence led by the gay advocacy group Sexual Minorities Uganda, the Ugandan activist saw more than 30 colleagues walk the streets of Kampala holding pro-gay posters.

"For us, this is a sign of progress," Mugisha said, pointing to the white tarpaulin under which his group assembled after Monday's hour-long march. "We are no longer afraid of anything. We even have a banner."

Uganda's homosexuals have been in the spotlight since a parliamentarian introduced a tough anti-gay bill in October 2009. World leaders condemned the proposed legislation, though many in Uganda applauded it.

Still, Mugisha carries a sense of optimism that is slowly germinating within the tightly knit gay community. The mere fact, Mugisha said, that Ugandans are now having a national conversation on gay rights is itself an achievement. In the past, the subject was taboo.

"We see a shift in public opinion, and I guess it's because many Ugandans are talking about homosexuality a lot," he said. "There are some local leaders who are now willing to meet and talk to us. The only problem we have is the belief people have that we are promoting homosexuality and recruiting children."

Activists believe the controversial law will never pass, and now they are pursuing legal action they expect will make it too costly for people to be hostile to gays.

Sexual Minorities Uganda, with help from the New York-based advocacy group Center for Constitutional Rights, filed suit last week against a Massachusetts pastor in U.S. federal court. The suit accuses Scott Lively of being the intellectual force behind the anti-gay bill.

The complaint claims Lively issued a call in Uganda to fight against a "genocidal" and "pedophilic" gay movement, "which he likened to the Nazis and Rwandan murderers." The suit asks for a judgment that his actions are illegal and violate international law and human rights.

## Map



Lively says his words were taken out of context and denies any wrongdoing.

Sexual Minorities Uganda believes that if it wins the suit, other American evangelicals it accuses of spreading anti-gay propaganda would stay away from Uganda.

"It's been a long journey," said Pepe Julian Onziema, a gay activist who works with Mugisha. "The suit against Lively is something we had been brainstorming about since he came here in March 2009. We felt, 'How can someone come from someplace and tell our people that we homosexuals are lesser citizens?' We felt really insulted."

The suit against Lively is part of wide-ranging legal action that local gay groups are considering against individuals they consider hostile to the rights of homosexuals. A similar suit is about to be filed at home against Simon Lokodo, the Ugandan ethics minister who personally broke up a gay conference recently, saying they were not authorized to meet.

Sexual Minorities Uganda also wants to bring to court David Bahati, the parliamentarian who introduced the anti-gay bill; three local pastors who championed the bill; and Lokodo's predecessor.

Bahati's original legislation proposed the death penalty for some gay acts. Bahati has said he has since dropped the death penalty provision, though the latest version of the bill has not been made public.

Gays in Uganda won a big victory in January 2011, when a Ugandan judge ruled that the unauthorized outing of homosexuals by a tabloid newspaper violated their right to privacy. The tabloid had published a list of what it called Uganda's "top homos," including the name of a gay activist who was later killed in what some suspect was a hate crime.

The offending tabloid was ordered to pay damages but has since folded.

Ladislaus Rwakafuuzi, a Ugandan lawyer who has represented homosexuals in court, said the only recourse for the gay community is to sue individuals whose actions are blatantly unlawful or misguided.

"We want to show that he breached the law — that he behaved criminally," he said of Lokodo, who insists homosexuals are not authorized to meet. "Everybody has the right to assemble."

Bahati's anti-gay bill is highly popular in Uganda, and he claims there is not a single legislator who would dare vote against it. The bill has languished in parliament apparently because it lacks the blessing of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who says the bill hurts Uganda's image abroad.

The bill's supporters, Pentecostal clerics especially, say a tough new law is needed in a country where family values are threatened by European and American gays who have the money to lure young Ugandans into gay culture.

"It is now approaching three years since we first raised an alarm and made public the molesting, defilement and recruitment of our children into homosexuality in schools and institutions of higher learning," said Stephen Langa, a pastor among those targeted by Mugisha's group for possible legal action. "To date, our children are still vulnerable and no tangible deterrent action has been put in place to safeguard them and the nation from the vice of homosexuality."

For Mugisha, who won the 2011 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, charges that homosexuals are out to defile Ugandan children are especially harmful, and this week's march against gender-based violence is a crucial part of his group's effort to soften the community's image in this conservative East Africa country.

"We want to show Uganda that we are campaigning not just for gay rights but for all human rights," he said.