

The Global LGBT Rights Kaleidoscope

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Every year on May 17, the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO) is marked around the world by scenes of celebration and reflection. Last Friday, in towns and cities from Tirana to Toronto, thousands of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and their allies joined pride marches and festivals and asserted their rights to freedom and equality before the law. Many of these marches were taking place for only the first or second time through streets that, until recently, LGBT people feared to tread, and where, even now, police protection is needed to guard against attacks from hostile onlookers.

In the weeks preceding this year's IDAHO, there has been an almost palpable sense of the turning of history's page with three more countries (France, New Zealand and Uruguay) and three more U.S. states (Rhode Island, Delaware and Minnesota) embracing marriage equality for gay, lesbian and straight couples. At least two more nations (Brazil and the United Kingdom) appear poised to take the same step.

Over the past year, important progress has unfolded in other areas too, including adoption of new laws strengthening protection from discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and measures to combat hate crimes. Trans and intersex activists, who have sometimes felt left out of a debate focused on the rights of gay and lesbian people, have secured important advances in several countries. In Argentina, Australia, Sweden, Nepal and the Netherlands, for example, it is now or soon will be easier for people to obtain identity papers that reflect their gender identity.

But if IDAHO is a day to celebrate, in some countries it is the setting for an increasingly tense standoff. In Russia, for example, the authorities once again moved to prevent pride marches from taking place. The restrictions did not stop activists in a number of cities from staging public protests, including in Saint Petersburg, where local lawmakers have adopted a measure banning so-called "homosexual propaganda" on the false pretext of protecting minors. In Tbilisi, Georgia, where a march went ahead with the backing of the authorities, an angry mob reportedly led by orthodox priests attacked a bus carrying LGBT activists, smashing windows and causing multiple casualties. In the Moldovan capital, Chişinău, more than 100 people joined the city's first pride march, which went ahead in spite of a last-minute attempt by the city's mayor to reroute the march away from the city center in favor of an isolated location on the fringes of the city.

Elsewhere too, prejudice prevails. In Zambia, a leading LGBT equality activist was arrested last month hours after appearing on national television to call for the decriminalization of homosexuality. Several days later, a gay couple was arrested and charged with homosexuality-related offences after their neighbors tipped off the police. Cameroon has witnessed a wave of arrests of individuals believed to be gay, among them Jean-Claude Roger Mbédé, who is currently serving three years in prison for sending a text message to another man containing the words "I am very much in love with you." In Belize, where a colonial-era law criminalizing

same-sex relationships is being challenged in the courts, the media last week aired a series of highly inflammatory, homophobic advertisements, prompting the country's first lady to speak out against homophobia. The LGBT activist in the country has been forced to hire private security guards following death threats.

In retrospect, the events of recent months resemble a kaleidoscope that depicts a world in flux. For several hundred millions of LGBT people living in a wide swath of territory spanning Western and Central Europe; North, Central and South America; and pockets of Asia and Africa, the world is becoming incrementally safer and fairer. Within these areas, serious problems persist, notably a high incidence of hate crimes against LGBT people and continued discriminatory treatment, but the trend lines are mostly positive. To varying degrees, governments are becoming more sensitive to the concerns of members of the LGBT community. Legal protection against discrimination is being put in place or strengthened. Disapproval of LGBT people is being replaced by broader public acceptance.

But whereas one part of the world -- fully half, perhaps more -- is witnessing the early signs of spring, large expanses remain frozen in various stages of winter. In at least 76 countries it remains a crime to have a partner of the same sex. Draft laws before the parliaments of Uganda, Nigeria and Liberia and several other countries would actually strengthen existing criminal sanctions. Even where homosexuality is not criminalized, hostile social attitudes combined with a lack of legal protection from discrimination compel many LGBT people to live in hiding.

Grassroots activists, often at great personal risk, are playing a critical role in raising awareness, challenging negative stereotypes and pressing for change. Their courage cannot be overstated. Those who speak out are stigmatized, harassed and sometimes silenced. In some places, but for them, LGBT equality really would be the human rights cause that dare not speak its name.

So where does this leave us? In a world whose parts are moving not just at different speeds but in different directions. The improvement in the human rights situation of LGBT people is real, but millions have yet to feel its touch. If human rights are to be universal, the status quo cannot stand. Extending the reach of progress and guaranteeing the rights of every LGBT individual, no matter where they live, is emerging as a vital, if contested, objective of human rights activism around the world -- and, increasingly, a subject of lively debate at the United Nations.

On the eve of the International Day against Homophobia 2013, the United Nations human rights office (OHCHR) issued a 2-minute video, "The Riddle," aimed at raising public awareness of the impact of homophobia and transphobia on LGBT people. In the first four days after its release, more than 200,000 people viewed the video across several platforms. Please watch it and help spread a message of tolerance and respect by sharing it with your friends and family.