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The Global North's approach to LGBTI rights in Africa doesn't work

LGBTI people are discriminated against in many African countries. But pressure from the North only makes things worse

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Many countries have seen legal <link kolumne artikel durchbruch-bei-den-lgbt-rechten-1573>progress for LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex) people in recent years – especially in Western Europe, the US and Latin America. Homosexuality has been decriminalised and same-sex marriage legalised. Things have also changed at a global level: The World Health Organization, which still classified homosexuality as an illness as recently as the 1990s, has recognised that LGBTI people are a part of normal life. And in 2016, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution calling for an end to violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Despite this, many countries do not recognise LGBTI rights. Resistance is particularly strong in sub-Saharan Africa. Although constitutional progress has been made in some countries in the south of the continent (including Botswana, South Africa and Mozambique), other nations – like Nigeria and Uganda – have adopted new legislation against homosexuality or tightened existing laws. Even advocating for LGBTI rights, for instance for equal access to healthcare services, is criminalised in some cases.

This repression is mostly supported by society. Homophobic attitudes in Africa are persistent and there are few champions of LGBTI rights. Even urban youth movements that raise political grievances, like rap musicians, are seen to make homophobic statements in public.

Acts of defiance

Motivated by the progress that has been made in their own countries,

progressive politicians from the North often believe they can promote LGBTI rights in Africa and help them achieve a global breakthrough. But international pressure tends to make little difference. Quite the opposite, in fact. For example, when the British government threatened to cut development aid to Nigeria unless it halted a law against same-sex marriage, the entire political establishment adopted a 'we'll show you' attitude and the act was passed in next to no time. And following a visit to Dakar by the Canadian prime minister at which the topic was addressed in passing, Senegal's government newspaper 'Le Soleil' triumphantly announced: 'Our society does not accept homosexuality.' This was followed up with messages of congratulation to the president from the religious and political establishment.

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In other words, the standard political arsenal – discourse, pressure, resolutions – are doing little to advance LGBTI rights in Africa. And LGBTI people in Africa gain nothing from the entrenched positions that emerge as a result. If anything, they end up suffering the consequences. So what can be done? First of all, the phenomenon needs to be understood.

Three connected tendencies make this a particularly hot social topic in Africa. Firstly, African societies are often conservative and extremely religious societies that are undergoing rapid transformation. The delayed – and hence all the more dramatic – process of urbanisation is sweeping away the old order of the village structure. There is a widespread impression of a society that is falling apart, not least because high GDP growth rates in some countries appear to be doing little to change the widespread poverty. In this scenario, the weight of tradition – whether real or imagined – is all the stronger.

Fundamentally different than in the North

Moreover, very few people pin any hopes on the state given their deep-seated disillusionment about the meagre results of political decolonisation, the lost decades for the economy and the still tangible impact of past structural adjustment programmes. Progressive political movements have been marginalised or corrupted almost everywhere they have arisen and any sense of political optimism is sporadic at best, such as when a president is prevented from serving an unconstitutional third term of office. For many, the answer lies in a retreat to the spiritual. The

result is that religious elites have a power that is almost inconceivable in Europe – they can mobilise the masses, put politicians under pressure and shape social discourse. And they frequently do this with a reactionary impetus, gladly accepting foreign support from the likes of American evangelicals or Saudi-backed imams.

Secondly, this is closely linked to the historically absurd claim that homosexuality and a diversity of gender identities are an un-African concept imported from and disseminated by the Global North. Homosexuality and queer elements in pre-colonial African societies are well documented. But claims like these are politically useful because they allow African politicians to paint themselves as men of the people. The more these politicians have to (or feel they have to) orient themselves towards the North economically, perhaps having studied and built up connections there, the keener they are to underline their African identity. No one wants to be seen as a puppet of the rich North, not least since the latter's image has not improved since China came onto the scene as an alternative donor. Many politicians have discovered this secular variant of the aforementioned trend as a means of making themselves popular: 'We Africans are different to you Europeans and refuse to have your way of living imposed on us.'

Anyone placing a particular emphasis on LGBTI rights at the expense of the rights of economically marginalised people, prisoners, children or women, for instance, ought to ask themselves where this focus comes from and whether it is legitimate.

As a result, the matter of LGBTI rights in Africa must be seen in a fundamentally different light to Europe, where it has become a question of human rights following a lengthy struggle. Whereas churches and village structures had lost their relevance in Germany before the breakthrough took place, the same development in Africa would mean a direct loss of influence for the Christian and Muslim elites. It would no longer be as easy to fall back on supposed traditions and the good old days as a political tool. In other words, LGBTI rights are a question of social (dis)order and political power structures that would remove the elites' ability to control how people should live their lives and how society should be structured in direct contrast to the allegedly decadent North. Religious authorities in particular see themselves in the role of defenders – not only against modernisation, but also against a would-be 'gay lobby' operating with the

financial backing of the North and aiming to undermine their power.

A radically different approach

Ironically, then, discussing the topic with reference to universal human rights only serves to highlight the very things that divide Africa and Europe, not the things they have in common. In many parts of Africa, the abbreviation 'LGBTI', which was coined in the North, is synonymous not with the positive connotations of diversity, but with gay pride parades (images of which are difficult to accept in societies that are often somewhat prudish), anti-religiousness and the destruction of traditions – an attitude that is shared in some, mostly rural, areas of Central and Eastern Europe.

In other words, anyone seeking to turn the tide of opinion simply by persuading politicians is wasting their energy. Any politician deemed to be supporting these rights excessively would soon find their career at an end. In countries where LGBTI rights are almost unimaginable, a more successful approach could be to start by discussing the basic prerequisites of such rights. Given the violence the continent has experienced (in Rwanda or Liberia, for example), almost no African politician would dare to question the right to physical integrity. Banning violence, including violent language, would already be helpful for LGBTI people who are frequently the victims of harassment. Anyone who publicly wishes death on homosexuals, as is documented among religious leaders in West Africa, is a hate preacher and should be excluded from the social establishment. And anyone who commits violence against gays or lesbians should be placed behind bars. Making this a reality is a responsibility that African politicians should be willing to take on.

Secondly, if the human rights argument is to be made (and it should be), there must be room for an honest discourse that respects the holistic nature of human rights. After all, human rights are not hierarchical; rather, they are interconnected and must be realised as a whole. Anyone placing a particular emphasis on LGBTI rights at the expense of the rights of economically marginalised people, prisoners, children or women, for instance, ought to ask themselves where this focus comes from and whether it is legitimate. And, of course, any dialogue of this nature also goes in two directions. This means the North must be accepting of critical comment on aspects such as the situation of African migrants in Europe or the human rights record of European commodity conglomerates.

Ultimately, even scientific arguments (namely that there is nothing

abnormal about homosexuality and a diversity of gender identities) will make headway in Africa only if modernisation is viewed in a positive light and the religious elites become less influential. This requires the continent to develop a real economic perspective so that it can liberate itself from its role as a supplier of raw materials. There are things the North can do to make this happen, too. For example, it could take a firm stand against tax evasion and money laundering that robs the continent of more money each year than it receives in development aid – with the friendly assistance of lawyers, financial advisers and banks from the North (where the funds often end up). In turn, this would enable investments in education that would reduce the influence of radical Koran schools, for example. If this could be achieved, the problem of LGBTI rights might even largely solve itself.

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