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Christian fundamentalism

The political and social influence of radical Christian groups is rapidly growing worldwide

Read this article in German.

The current president of Tanzania, John Magufuli, is a professed and practicing Catholic. When he fought for the country's highest office in 2015 and wanted to win over the Tanzanian public, he campaigned with prayer and made a show of his faith. Magufuli won the election and was sworn in just over three years ago. When, as in this case, a practicing Christian comes to power, no one in Western countries gets nervous. If Magufuli had been praying to Allah as demonstratively as he practices his Catholic faith, the Western world would likely have been less at ease.

After his election, Magafuli was initially considered a ray of hope, both in Tanzania and abroad. His religion-based morality seemed to point to a beneficial political rigour: Magufuli cracked down on corruption and nepotism, and he appeared to be the right person to rehabilitate the ailing public finances. He was praised as a role model for the entire continent.

Over time however the blessing disappeared, and what remained was sheer morality. In September, Magufuli told his listeners to their astonishment that women using birth control were simply too lazy to feed a family. 'I travelled to Europe and other regions where I witnessed the harmful effects of birth control,' he said. 'Some countries are now suffering from a decline in their populations.'

Tanzania has no need to be afraid of that. With a population growth of over three per cent, the country is already overwhelmed with creating enough new jobs for the next generation. Nearly one out of every two Tanzanians is under 15 years of age, and 800,000 young people are entering the labour market each year. According to the World Bank, around one-third of the country's 57 million inhabitants are now living in poverty. Despite all efforts, people can hardly feed their families.

The EU's half-hearted reaction

Magufuli's Catholicism drives him not only to such bizarre expressions of opinion, but also to decrees that are marked by religious zealotry. For example, he has barred pregnant girls and single mothers from attending school. This ban is rigorously enforced. Teachers who oppose this must expect disciplinary measures. Homosexuality is already illegal and can be punished with up to 30 years in prison.

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Since Magufuli's election as president, anti-homosexual rhetoric has increased dramatically. Magufuli's government now wants to go even further. In October 2018, a special unit was formed to persecute homosexuals in the political and commercial capital of Dar es Salaam. The regional commissioner for Dar es Salaam, Paul Makonda, called on the population to report suspected gay men to the authorities. Makonda stated that homosexuality is against the will of God. In the past he has already called for the persecution of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals.

The EU has reacted by announcing that it will reconsider its financial contributions. And the World Bank is holding back a USD 300 million education project. But the outrage would probably be even more massive if the background of this hostile morality was an Islamic.

Death penalty for homosexuals

Magufuli is not the only Christian who, because of his radical attitude, violates human rights, excludes people, and limits their opportunities for the future. On the African continent, the number of revival churches is increasing; many of them are propagating very conservative and also extremely homophobic theories.

However, radical attitudes like these are not confined to these churches – which to a Western observer may just seem like exceptions because there are still comparatively few of them. But members of the larger churches too spread radical theses, calling for the hunting down of homosexuals – just as Magufuli and the new Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro do.

Politically and theologically, the churches in Africa are becoming increasingly more conservative. This is mainly due to the massive influence of conservative religious groups from the US. Criminalisation

and discrimination against homosexuals is now widespread in various African countries. In Kenya, same-sex physical contact can be punished with up to 14 years in prison. In Uganda, a proposed law even carried the threat of the death penalty. The bill came in response to the massive pressure of conservative evangelicals, who were able to win over many influential African pastors and bishops to a campaign against sexual minorities.

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The conservative evangelicals lure people by offering scholarships, loans and other benefits, often under the guise of Christian aid organisations. The emergence of the Holocaust denier Scott Lively, president of the 'Abiding Truth Ministries' in California, had an exceptional impact. Lively was actively involved in the Ugandan campaign against gays and lesbians from 2009 onwards, intervened in legislation, and wanted to establish the death penalty for homosexuals.

Conservative Church representatives from the US often have access to the political elite in African countries. The consequences are dramatic in many African countries: in Uganda, Kenya and other countries, homosexuals are now fearing for their lives, and many have already been murdered.

Latin America's homophobic wave

In Latin America, the situation is equally dire. In January, Javier Corrales wrote in the New York Times that an evangelical church is now found in almost every neighbourhood. Evangelicals now account for 20 per cent of the population, compared to 3 per cent three decades ago.

In Latin America, these religious communities, which claim to interpret the Bible literally, are having a massive influence on politics. The evangelical pastors adhere to different ideologies, but share the same conservative, patriarchal and homophobic values when it comes to gender issues and sexuality. Under their influence, the prosecution of homosexuals has been intensified almost everywhere.

Brazil is a prime example, albeit a disturbing one, and was so even before the October election of extreme right-wing populist Jair Messias Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro was much talked about for his misogynist, anti-gay and racist pronouncements. On 1 January 2019, he took up his new post, and consequently Brazilian society will continue to change.

In Bolsonaro's government, evangelicals will wield great influence. The new president is a Catholic himself, but his closest confidants include ultra-right evangelical preachers. The fundamentalists want to banish sexual and gender-related topics from schools. Everything that violates ‘custom and decency’ should be fought against. This includes homosexuals.

The West is viewing these developments with great concern, especially with regard to Bolsonaro’s Brazil. In the public’s perception, this is mainly about violating human rights, while the Christian zealotry behind it is ignored. In contrast, in the case of Muslims who call for hatred of homosexuals or pursue an extremely conservative social policy, waves of indignation immediately arise. And rightly so – but radical Christianity threatens liberty as well.



Bettina Rühl
Cologne / Nairobi

Bettina Rühl is a freelance journalist based in Nairobi and Cologne who has been writing about Africa for over 20 years. Her reports, which focus on how big political decisions and upheaval on the continent affect ordinary Africans, have been featured on German public TV and radio, as well as in newspapers including the *Berliner Zeitung* and the *Tageszeitung*.