

## The LGBT community: Youngest stepchild?

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A LGBT beauty queen stands with members of the Rainbow Sky Association during the opening session of a conference in Bangkok, Thailand, Nov. 30, 2016. Vitit Muntarbhorn, the first-ever UN independent expert selected to investigate violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people vowed to forge ahead with a sweeping mandate despite formidable opposition to his appointment at a UN vote. (AP/Dake Kang)

In late November 2016, rainbow colors broke through the black of mourning found everywhere in Bangkok after King Bhumibol Adulyadej's death, as 700 activists and allies from around the world arrived to participate in the largest ever world conference of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA).

Some notable achievements of the last two years were celebrated, including: the Supreme Court's decision on marriage equality in the United States; the possibility of not immediately determining the sex of intersex babies in Germany, and the creation of the post of United Nations Independent Expert on the Protection Against Violence Discrimination on the Basis of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (UNIESOGI).

The appointment of Vitit Muntaborn of Thailand to the post does credit to the ASEAN region, as do important breakthroughs like the Gender Equality Act in Thailand, the possible legal gender recognition in Vietnam, and in the Philippines the election of the first transgender member of congress and the issuing of anti-discrimination local ordinances in some cities.

But, as Muntarhorn stated in his keynote speech, more effective action is needed to address the persistent “penumbra of negativity” consisting of direct violence and discrimination, stigmatization and stereotyping, pathologization, denial of legal gender recognition and, significantly, “narrow interpretations of religions and beliefs [that] aggravate the situation as part of the politicalcum-cultural challenge”. He decried the misconstruction of religions grounded in peace and tolerance to justify violence and discrimination and to oppose a pluralistic society inclusive of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people, and denounced authorities’ overuse of national security and public morality for their political agenda.

For LGBT people in Indonesia, these remarks are particularly salient given the intense attacks on them in the first quarter of 2016, which not yet have fully subsided. In an unprecedented barrage of homophobic and transphobic statements — all carefully documented in a recent Human Rights Watch report with the telling title of “Indonesia’s LGBT Community Under Threat” — government officials, politicians, Islamic leaders and psychiatric experts called for criminalization of homosexuality, forced rehabilitation or to “cure” LGBT people and the banning of “gay propaganda”.

These prejudiced statements and the homophobic climate they created have had far-reaching consequences, fostering an environment where LGBT people are more likely to face abuse and curtailment of their basic freedoms. Among the most visible, an Islamist organization forced the closing of an Islamic boarding school for transgender women in Yogyakarta and, also in the same city, the police connived the brutal

repression of a pro-pluralism rally. Many events planned by LGBT organizations or like-minded allied organizations, have been threatened and the state has failed to protect them.

In a public side event to the ILGA conference, SEA Junction, APCOM and the Heinrich Böll Foundation, organized a discussion centered around possible explanations for such attacks. The vaunted liberalization and democratization after the fall of Soeharto that emboldened LGBT people to be more open about their identity and let their voices be heard have proven shortlived. Increased organization by the LGBT community eventually have encountered opposition in a context wherein religion and militant religious groups have come to play a greater political role. Conservatives paint LGBT demands for legitimacy as a threat to the existing hetero-normative social order. The wider acceptance of same-sex marriage globally only serves to boost local anxiety about a more visible LGBT population and the presumed likelihood of similar moves in Indonesia.

The rise of religious fundamentalism is contributing to a renewed emphasis on the view that “Islam does not allow an LGBT lifestyle” and so do other religions. Christian churches have started to organize anti-LGBT revival retreats. In Bali, Hindu leaders and authorities have pledged not to tolerate marriage celebrations for same-sex and mixed tourist couples.

Many have pointed out that LGBT people have become an easy scapegoat to provide distraction from more serious economic and political matters or as a way for aspiring politicians to gain support from more conservative constituencies. A few months before the first wave of attacks against LGBT people, there had been efforts to revive the fear of “communists” as a security threat to the nation — a powerful accusation in a country shadowed by the killings in 1965 of a million suspected communists, and where communism is still banned as an ideology — and thus halt the growing demand for accountability of past abuses.

However, since such charges seemed outdated to the general public, LGBT people have become the new bogeymen. Of late, the new target are ethnic and religious minorities. The ethnic Chinese, non-Muslim frontrunner in the Jakarta gubernatorial election race, Governor Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama, has been named a suspect in a blasphemy case many believe is aimed to end his candidacy before the election in February, which he had hitherto been expected to win. No wonder then, that one survey put the three most despised groups in Indonesia as the

LGBT, communists and ethnic Chinese.

They are not the only groups however. The Ahmadiyah and Shia communities have been shunned for insisting they are Muslims, too. And women's rights groups are often challenged by those promoting a moralist agenda. For instance, the judicial review initiated by two conservative organizations, the Aliansi Cinta Keluarga (Love Family Alliance [AILA]) and Gerakan Indonesia Beradab (Civilized Indonesia Movement), if approved would criminalize all sexual relations outside marriage, consensual or not, irrespective of gender.

The attack on LGBT people should thus not be seen in isolation, but as part of a concerted attack on the pluralism and inclusiveness at the core of the Indonesian Constitution and its principle of "Unity in Diversity". Now that LGBT issues are on the table, as are the rights of other minorities, it may be time to build crosssectoral alliances and overcome diffidence and prejudice among minority groups themselves to counter the radicalization of the country. Joining forces will be essential to compel the state to embrace all its citizens so that in the New Year neither LGBT nor other discriminated groups become its stepchildren.

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