

Press Release



South African Institute of Race Relations
The power of ideas

14 November 2019

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Mabuza doesn't care about the fate of gays in Africa – IRR

South Africa's reluctance to defend LGBTQ rights in Africa is tragic. The prevailing notion throughout much of Africa that same-sex activity is considered a Western phenomenon is precisely the reason why South Africa – a prominent member of the African Union and the most progressive country when it comes to LGBTQ rights – should actively work to change that narrative.

It is therefore particularly concerning that South Africa's Vice President, David Mabuza, has refused to condemn the Ugandan government's considering introducing an Anti-Homosexuality Bill that will include the death penalty for anyone "guilty" homosexuality. His comments reinforce South Africa's longstanding silence on the atrocities committed against Africa's LGBTQ populace.

During a question session in the National Council of Provinces, KwaZulu-Natal DA MP, Tim Brauteseth, asked Mr Mabuza "how the South African constitutional imperatives to protect marginalised persons and communities are aligned with the silence on the part of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) on the developments in Uganda whose parliament is considering an Anti-Homosexuality Bill that intends to impose sentences ranging from seven years in prison to death for either being gay or supporting anyone who is"?

Mr Mabuza replied by reiterating South Africa's commitment to the clauses of the Constitution making it illegal to discriminate against anyone based on sexual orientation. Yet, in the same breath, Mr Mabuza went on to say that South Africa is a signatory to international law which prevents her from interfering with other countries'

affairs and to respect their independence and sovereignty. Doing so, he says, would be arrogant and would place South Africa morally above its continental peers, including Uganda.

Uganda is one of the most hostile countries for LGBTQ people. The country's penal code already carries a potential penalty of up to life imprisonment for anyone guilty of same-sex activity.

The newly proposed Anti-Homosexuality Bill will also expand its targets to include heterosexual people who openly support the LGBTQ community.

Uganda's Minister of Ethics and Integrity Simon Lokodo prevented a local LGBTQ NGO from celebrating International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia. Lokodo further took action to prevent Uganda's Health Ministry from having a ground-breaking conference on Key and Priority Populations, which he feared would promote homosexuality. The Speaker in Uganda's Parliament, Rebecca Kadaga, threatened to withdraw her country from the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) if some nations continued to insist on including LGBTQ people in a declaration on migrants and refugees.

Both Kadaga and Lokodo's views are driven by the widely held belief in Uganda that homosexuality is a foreign concept that is alien to the continent and forms part of an agenda driven by Western powers. A global study conducted by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Association (ILGA) determined that the majority of Ugandans (54%) agreed or strongly agreed that homosexuality is a Western phenomenon. This is so despite a wealth of historical evidence showing that homosexuality and same-sex activity were fairly tolerated in many African countries (including Uganda) before the colonial era.

The Institute of Race Relations (IRR) will publish a report this week examining Sub-Saharan Africa's sentiments on homosexuality and how best to enhance LGBTQ rights on the continent.

The report collates the views and opinions of a wide range of LGBTQ people and activists across Africa.

One interviewee from Eswatini notes that homosexuality is also considered to be a foreign concept in the country, as is true of attitudes in countries such as Uganda. He points out that attempts from international human rights organisations to encourage tolerance towards the LGBTQ community is typically met with suspicion from the government and many citizens, and is interpreted as a form of neo-colonialism. The interviewee emphasises the importance of local advocacy for LGBTQ rights on the grounds that Eswatini citizens would likely be more amenable to the idea of gay rights if promoted by a local organisation rather than an international one.

This underscores the importance of South Africa's role in promoting changed attitudes on the continent. South Africa has a critical role to play, given its

progressive Constitution that includes extensive LGBTQ rights. It can demonstrate pride in being part of Africa while still embracing and valuing basic human rights for LGBTQ people. In 1996, South Africa became the first country in the world to enshrine in its Constitution freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation.

This is why it is so tragic that in the more than 20 years since, South Africa's efforts to advance the rights and interests of LGBTQ people elsewhere in Africa have been lacklustre. This is pitifully illustrated by the comments of Deputy President Mabuza, who made it clear that if gay people face the death penalty in Uganda and other countries such as Somalia and Nigeria, South Africa will just turn a blind eye. Mr Mabuza stated that South Africa should not intervene in the internal affairs of other African countries and 'mind our own business'.

Would he have adopted the same stance when other African countries supported the struggle against apartheid, and provided shelter to South Africa's liberation movements in our recent dark past?

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