

Armenia: Anti-Gay Law Repealed

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Yerevan may be repealing its anti-gay legislation but few believe the plight of this oppressed minority is likely to improve.

Legislation banning homosexuality is soon to be scrapped in accordance with guidelines laid down by the Council of Europe, CoE, which Armenia joined earlier this year.

Human rights organisations warn, however, that the systematic mistreatment of the gay community will continue and that, furthermore, it will be condoned by the authorities.

Chairman of the Armenian Helsinki Association, an independent human rights group based in Yerevan, Mikael Danielian, said that whatever the legislation, the "society believes homosexuals are criminals".

Campaigners say legalising homosexuality is a mere political gesture, designed to fulfil obligations the country is committed to meeting as part of its membership of the CoE.

A mark of political resistance in Armenia to the overturning of this discriminatory law was displayed during a television interview with the country's European delegate Ohannes Ohannisian last month.

He was repeatedly unable to utter the word "homosexual" or "gay" and started using such awkward circumlocutions that the female journalist struggled to hide her laughter.

But being gay in Armenia is no joking matter. The prevalent attitude is that gays are criminal or, at best, suffering from some debilitating condition. "I do not regard this to be a crime but an illness," stated the national assembly chairman Armen Khachatryan.

The authorities, Danielian believes, will continue the crackdown on what they see as gross deviancy.

Gays have been apprehended and blackmailed by the authorities since Soviet times. Before then, they were imprisoned after summary trials. "At that time, as now," said police lieutenant Sarkis P, "we thought that Armenia is shamed by having homosexuals in its society."

Following the collapse of communism, the security forces started to use homosexuals as informers. Faced with violence and imprisonment, they were putty in police hands.

They are often bullied into owning up to unsolved crimes on police books for which they are duly charged. Officers are encouraged to engineer this practice not only as a means of punishing homosexuals but also to increase the country's crime detection rate.

Police also try to extort money from them. "One fifty-year-old homosexual was brought to the department and they demanded money he didn't have," said Danielian. "So he was charged with a fight that broke out at a discotheque a year and a half ago and sentenced to 15 days in jail."

Others have been scared into informing on wealthy or well-known homosexuals who are then faced with the choice of a scandal and imprisonment or paying bribes of up to 1000 US dollars.

The Helsinki Association says gays are being ignored when they themselves are the target of crimes.

Danielan told journalists on November 15 that seven homosexuals had met violent deaths over the last twelve months. Among the victims was a famous artist who had been stabbed fifty times. Despite the brutality, human rights activists say there have been no attempts to track down the perpetrators.

One police officer told IWPR that it was routine to turn a blind eye to crimes committed against gays.

The hapless homosexual community cannot hope to seek any solace from the President Kocharian's own Human Rights Commission. One of its members, an eminent lawyer, said publicly that he does not wish and does not intend to protect the interests of "such people".

With no alteration in the Armenian mindset, Danielan believes gays will continue to be discriminated against for some time to come. "It'll be two generations before the environment starts to change," he said.

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